

The shadowy realm of news avoidance

Exploring public service news avoidance as negative social action

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ABSTRACT

Studies on news avoidance rely on a range of theories to explain why news avoidance takes place and its potential consequences, and the debates on different ways of measuring news avoidance have been lively. Despite the numerous approaches and conceptualisations, there is room to theorise what news avoidance entails as a social phenomenon. In this study, we posit that news avoidance can fruitfully be approached as a form of negative social action embedded in a negative social space – a realm of the lifeworld filled with non-doings and non-appearance. We apply this approach, which opens up new questions in the field of news avoidance studies, to a case study of Swedes who opted out of national public service news in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings suggest that avoiders of public service news occupy relatively precarious social positions, and that news avoidance is embedded in a broader negative social space.

KEYWORDS: news avoidance, negative social action, non-use, negative social space, disconnection, public service media

Introduction

During the last decade, journalism scholars have become increasingly occupied with researching the growing inclination to opt out of the news. Much effort has gone into empirically charting the prevalence of news avoidance and its

antecedents. This fast-growing body of work also includes lively discussions on how to conceptualise news avoidance, particularly from a methodological point of view (Palmer et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, 2022). These discussions notwithstanding, we remain at a deficit in terms of theorising news avoidance as a distinct social action. A range of theories have been applied to understand why news avoidance occurs, including media systemic theory (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), approaches to mental health and well-being (Mannell & Meese, 2022), the OMA (Opportunity, Motivation, Ability) model (Strömbäck et al., 2013), and social inequality models (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023). Further, journalism scholars also frequently resort to democratic theory to discuss the potential detrimental *consequences* of news avoidance, stressing the strain of news avoidance on the quality and liveliness of the public sphere (e.g., Blekesaune et al., 2012; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). There is, however, room to theorise news avoidance in and of itself and invoke questions regarding what news avoidance entails as a social phenomenon and how it can be understood as a broader lifestyle.

Drawing on recent works in sociology (Scott, 2018, 2022), we suggest that news avoidance, like other non-practices or “non-doings”, can fruitfully be approached as a particular form of negative social action – absence of action that is nonetheless socially meaningful – embedded in a broader space of non-doing, or “negative social space”. In this theory, “negative” denotes *absence* of practice (or, non-doing) separating it from “positive” social action (doing something). Accordingly, in the context of this study, the word does not carry implicit normative understandings on the moral worth of a specific (non-)practice. Having said this, the literature on cultural participation in general (Heikkilä, 2021) and news avoidance in particular is – perhaps for good reasons – ridden with implicit moral standpoints on the *negative* (here: detrimental) consequences of non-doings and non-participation.

This view, we show, opens up new questions and conceptual approaches in the study of news avoidance. Following this avenue, we draw on a large-scale nation-wide survey ($N = 11,128$) and present an empirical case study of Swedes who completely opted out of news produced by public service media in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and how this particular type of negative social action relates to the “lifeworld of apparent non-appearance” (Scott, 2022: 200). We thus set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What share of the Swedish population fully avoided national public service news during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2. What demographic traits were linked to the avoidance of national public service news during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ3. How did the avoidance of national public service news connect to other negative social actions?

The next section presents existing conceptual approaches and how news avoidance has been theorised in extant research. The subsequent section outlines a theory of news avoidance as negative social action. We then turn to our case study and conclude by discussing the implications of our approach.

How news avoidance is theorised

Despite the growing interest in news avoidance within journalism studies, a central definition has remained elusive. News avoidance is commonly identified as the low consumption of news over a continuous long period (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), but the level of consumption that constitutes “low” differs between studies. For instance, while Kim and Webster (2012) operationalised news avoiders as those who did not watch any news show during a week, Palmer and Toff (2024) identified news avoiders as individuals who consume news “less than once-a-month” or “never”. As a direct consequence, the operationalisation of news avoidance is also blurred (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

Among the various attempts to disambiguate the concept of news avoidance, two overarching and interconnected theoretical approaches can be identified. In what we label the affective approach – offered by Woodstock (2014) and supported by others such as Vandenplas and colleagues (2021), Song and colleagues (2017), and Tandoc and Kim (2023) – news avoidance is approached as a strategy to limit information overload and emotional drain. By contrast, in the democratic theory interpretation provided by a range of scholars, including Skovsgaard and Andersen’s (2020) overview of the concept, news avoidance is framed as a growing threat to journalism and democracy. Research in both these ideal typical strands is characterised by different methodologies and empirical foci, dealing with what causes news avoidance as well as the various consequences and outcomes of avoiding the news. For our purposes, it is worth highlighting that both approaches tend to focus on what occurs “before” or “after” news avoidance *per se*. While the democratic framework primarily theorises the consequences of news avoidance, the affective framework places various psychological conditions both as both antecedents and outcomes of news avoidance.

Scholars have conceptualised news avoidance by theorising the numerous factors that predict non-consumption of news (e.g., Palmer et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, 2022; Toff & Palmer, 2019). Factors contributing to news avoidance include both intentional and unintentional personal motivations (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), mental well-being (Nguyen et al., 2022; Woodstock, 2014), and social class positions (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023). In Skovsgaard and Andersen’s (2020) framework, intentional avoidance derives from distrust in news, news overload, or concerns regarding the emotional impact of news on mental health. By contrast, unintentional news avoidance is rooted in the abundance of alternatives to the consumption of news, including personal preferences for entertainment outside of news (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). However, distinctions between intentional and unintentional news avoidance become blurry when applied in empirical research. Factors of contemporary news

consumption, such as social media algorithms, can shape peoples' exposure to news without their active doing (Palmer et al., 2023; Villi et al., 2022). Since much of news use is habitual (Broersma & Swart, 2022), the gender gap in news consumption could also be reinforced. For example, Toff and Palmer (2019) studied the differences in news consumption regarding to gender and theorised the "news-is-for-men" phenomena, wherein women perceive interest in news as a male behaviour. Moreover, avoidance deriving from habits leading to low consumption of news can stem from a conscious decision in the past turning into an unintentional habit (Palmer et al., 2023).

Within the democratic framework, a multitude of factors that contribute to news avoidance have been identified. Studies have stressed political interest and perceived relevance of news as key antecedents to news avoidance (Palmer et al., 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2013), and much of the literature concludes that those who are interested in politics place a higher value on news than those who are not (Edgerly, 2022; Goyanes et al., 2023; Strömbäck et al., 2013). Other studies have linked high news consumption to a better-informed public (Damstra et al., 2021), while expressing concern about the potentially damaging effects of news avoidance on democratic ideals (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2022). Thus, the literature assumes news avoidance will yield consequences detrimental to political life, resulting in a lack of political participation (Metag & Gurr, 2022; Strömbäck, 2017), misinformation (Tandoc & Kim, 2023), and a threat to the foundations of journalism (Palmer et al., 2020; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

Conversely, following Woodstock's (2014) counter to the "news avoidance is detrimental to democracy" narrative, several studies have mirrored the prevailing affective turn in our discipline. In the Covid-19 era, studies have defined news avoidance as a situational behaviour adopted to cope with the harmful impact of news in specific contexts (de Bruin et al., 2021; Vandenplas et al., 2021). Studies using the "affective" framework tend to theorise news avoidance to counter adverse mental effects of news resulting from news overload (Goyanes et al., 2023; Song et al., 2017), news fatigue (Vandenplas et al., 2021), and analysis paralysis (Tandoc & Kim, 2023; Villi et al., 2022). Concerns such as Covid-19, mental health, and self-preservation have greatly impacted how scholars discuss the impact of news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2019; Villi et al., 2022).

In sum, researchers of news avoidance have relied on a range of different theories to make sense of what takes place "before" news avoidance occurs, including theories about motives and reasoning, mental health, class position, and the content of news itself, or by focusing on the outcomes of news avoidance, such as lack of civic engagement and its effects on democracy. And although the debate on how to operationalise, measure, and study news avoidance empirically is lively (Palmer et al., 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020, 2022), there still room to theorise what news avoidance constitutes as a social phenomenon in and of itself. The two ideal typical positions outlined briefly above (the affective and the democratic framing of news avoidance) as well as discussions on operationalisation (e.g., "low consumption vs. complete avoidance", "international vs. unintentional", "trait vs. state" [Andersen et al., 2024; Skovsgaard &

Andersen, 2020, 2022], etc.) miss analysing what news avoidance entails as a social action. To address this gap, we turn to Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing, which allows us to connect news avoidance to the realm of "non-doing" (Scott, 2018, 2022) and posit it as negative social action.

News avoidance as negative social action

The social sciences have traditionally been occupied with "positive" social action, that is, what people do – "things that really happen or exist, albeit tacitly and out of sight" (Scott, 2022: 198) – rather than what people choose not to do (see also Scott, 2018). In journalism studies, most efforts to understand news audiences deal with what people *de facto do* and *think* in relation to journalism, be they patterns of reception and consumption, or levels of media trust and other sentiments directed at journalists or the journalistic institution. Offer (2021) argued that the social scientific tendency to focus on the beneficial side of social action can be traced back to Durkheim's (2006) *On Suicide*, which highlights the beneficial outcomes of social integration and community belonging. This trend manifests in modern classics such as Putnam's (2001) work on social capital, Shirky's (2008) account of the empowering potentials of the Internet, and journalism scholars' consensus on the importance of media trust and news consumption (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2023). Contemporary social science, however, has seen a boost in inquiries on various forms of opting out of social relations, including focusing on negative social ties (Illouz, 2019; Offer, 2021), information avoidance (Sweeny et al., 2010), cultural non-participation (Heikkilä, 2021), dark participation (Quandt, 2018), and negative social action (Scott, 2018, 2022). This gradual movement into concerns about "negative ties" and the absence of practice has also reached into media and communication studies, manifesting in a recent "disconnection turn" (e.g., Fast, 2021; Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021) and fast-growing scholarly interest in news avoidance (e.g., Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). The broader field of disconnection studies has applied concepts and insights from a range of theoretical strands to explore the intricacies of people turning off their television sets, social media abstention, and screen time limitation (see, e.g., Kaun, 2021; Moe & Madsen, 2021; Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

In order to theorise news avoidance as a particular social phenomenon, we draw on recent work by sociologist Susie Scott (2018, 2022) and approach news avoidance as negative social action. Scott (2018: 3) departed from the fact that the "background terrain of the normal remains epistemologically neglected". Even the vast body of research into the strange, deviant, or mundane ultimately does not break with this tendency, as such foci still imply a concern with "what people *do* and *are* [emphasis original]" (Scott, 2018: 4). By developing a "sociology of nothing", Scott (2018) urged us to also pay attention to what people *are not* and what they *do not do*, as these categories are key parts of the cultural fabric (see, e.g., Illouz, 2019) and thus something worthy of study.

In this theoretical light, non-doings such as “opting out of a mainstream lifestyle practice” (Scott, 2022: 199), like the refusal to stay up-to-date with current affairs, constitute a “reflexively managed mode of experience” (Scott, 2018: 4). Nothing must, as it were, be accomplished. Thus, doing nothing constitutes (negative) social action in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1922/1964: 88), as it is meaningful to the actor opting out of a particular practice and because at some level it implies taking others (people, institutions, or discourses) into account. Scott (2018: 5) argued that “when demonstrably ‘doing nothing’, the actor considers but rejects a normatively expected action for its negative associational meanings”. While the social world is filled with actors that indeed *do* and *are* various things, it is simultaneously populated by actors that successfully “accomplish nothing” (Scott, 2018: 6). The sum of such negative yet meaningful social actions make up negative social space (Scott, 2018), or social nothingness (Scott, 2022).

Approaching news avoidance as negative social action implies that we theorise a concept that has hitherto been operationalised in manifold ways and conceptualised mainly in terms of its antecedents (e.g., news fatigue) and consequences (e.g., lack of civic engagement). Understanding news avoidance as negative social action suggests, first, that we posit news avoidance as a particular “act of commission”, that is, opting out of a mainstream lifestyle practice that still implies taking into account social others (Scott, 2018). These social others may be other people (of which a vast majority holds that it is the duty of every citizen to stay updated on current affairs [Bergström, 2016]), journalism as a societal institution, a particular news outlet, or the discourse on the value of news and journalism in society. Second, as we are concerned with the *absence* of practice and the role this absence plays in a broader negative social space, we become methodologically concerned with *complete* avoidance (of a particular type of news, in our case study). From our theoretical vantage point, it makes little sense to define news avoidance as low consumption of news (e.g., Ksiazek et al., 2010; Ohme et al., 2023; Strömbäck, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2013) since consumption, even at a low frequency, per definition constitutes “positive” social action. Third, as negative social action “has implications for self, others and interaction order” (Scott, 2018: 15), we are invited to uncover the relationship between this particular non-doing and the broader negative social space, and thus to pursue questions about the social dynamics of news avoidance. This includes both the study of the social origins of this particular type of non-doing and concerns with its place in the everyday lifeworld and how it relates to other lifestyles and (non-) practices. In terms of the social origins of non-participation in “legitimate” cultural practices, including news avoidance, a range of studies highlight disadvantaged social positions (Heikkilä, 2021; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023). The question regarding how news avoidance connects to other lifestyles is nonetheless an open-ended question. The literature on both news avoidance and digital disconnection stresses constructive (e.g., improved well-being or civic engagement [Mannell & Meese, 2022; Natale & Treré, 2020; Ohme et al., 2023; Woodstock, 2014]) as well as detrimental (e.g., limited engagement in public and civic affairs [Ksiazek et al., 2010; Toff & Nielsen, 2022]) outcomes.

In sum, positing news avoidance as negative social action allows us to “study the actions that people do not do, and their social consequences” (Scott, 2018: 6). In the following sections, we apply our theoretical approach to an exploratory case study of people who completely opted out of news produced by national public service media during a global crisis.

Case study: Avoidance of public service news in the midst of a pandemic

Thus far we have argued that news avoidance can be fruitfully approached as negative social action (Scott, 2018, 2022). To target news avoidance from this perspective, we spend the remainder of the article on an exploratory empirical case study on individuals who completely abstained from consuming national public service news during the latter part of 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We begin by asking about the prevalence of this negative social action or, simply put, the size of the group that fully avoided public service news at this time (RQ1). Moreover, we are concerned with the connection between our particular form of non-doing and demographic positions and social origins (RQ2), as well as the links to other lifestyles, including media practices, in the broader negative social space (RQ3). The latter focus presents a new orientation to the extant literature in that it opens up avenues for future studies and understandings of the wider social dynamics (beyond mental well-being and civic engagement [Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021]) in which news avoidance is embedded.

Our case study is set in Sweden. In comparative research, Sweden is framed as a part of a Northern media system (Brüggemann et al., 2014) or “media welfare state” (Syvertsen et al., 2014), characterised, among other things, by well-established tax-funded public service media (Swedish Radio, Swedish Television, The Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company) that reaches a majority of the Swedish population (Falk, 2022). Although recent trends point toward increasing political polarisation of trust in public service media (e.g., Andersson & Weibull, 2018), Swedish public service media still enjoy high levels of trust and penetration, comparatively. In this context, news avoidance has a “a greater stigma” than in countries with lower levels of news circulation and public trust (Blekesaune et al., 2012: 122). National public service news is distributed via regular broadcasts on television (*Aktuellt* and *Rapport*), radio (*Ekot* and *P3 news*), and online domains (via *sr.se*, *svt.se*, and various social media channels). Previous studies have shown that the Covid-19 pandemic initially corresponded to increased levels of news consumption that was later overshadowed by a surge in news avoidance due to information overload and news fatigue (Andersen et al., 2024; de Bruin et al., 2021; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2020; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). Overall, the wide reach and high levels of trust in Sweden’s public service media have nevertheless remained stable throughout the pandemic (Falk, 2022; Larsson, 2023).

Thus, in the Swedish context, the abstention from public service news at the height of a global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic implies a break with

the reciprocal social contract established between funder (the taxpayer) and funded (public service media operating on a remit to reach all citizens). It also denotes a rupture between the journalistic institution commissioned to provide a platform from which an informed citizenry can emerge and news audiences, who are expected to maintain civic responsibility (Sjøvaag, 2010). Avoiding national public service news furthermore means stepping outside the imagined community created by the nation's most trusted news providers in times of national and global crisis. As such, this kind of avoidance serves, particularly in the mid-pandemic Swedish "media welfare state", as an example par excellence of "opting out of a mainstream lifestyle practice" (Scott, 2022: 199). In what follows, we ask about the prevalence of this non-doing, the social characteristics of the group displaying this non-doing, and how it connects to the broader lifeworld of non-doing.

Data and method

We used the nation-wide Society, Opinion, Media (SOM) survey of 2020 (SND, 2021), which has been conducted annually since 1986 by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. On 7 September 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the survey was distributed by post to 22,500 randomly selected Swedes between the ages of 16 and 85. On 21 December, 11,127 respondents had responded by post and online, yielding a survey answering rate of 49 per cent (Falk et al., 2021). Analyses conducted by the SOM Institute indicate that the data generally represents the Swedish population well, but older people and citizens born in Sweden are overrepresented (Falk et al., 2021).

To identify the group that completely avoided news from public service media (RQ1), we used five questions (on a 1–6 scale ranging from "Daily" to "Never") that tap into the consumption of Swedish national public service news via radio, television, and online domains. The questions were phrased as follows: "How often do you usually consume news from... [*Ekot*, *P3 News*, *Aktuellt/Rapport*, *Swedish radio on the internet* and *Swedish television on the internet*]". By collapsing these variables and re-coding them into a new binary variable, we were able to concentrate on individuals who fully opted out from all public service news outlets and compare this group to non-avoiders of public service media. Thus, since we focus on (fully avoiding) public service media, our case study deals with a particular form of "selective news avoidance" (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2022). Since the avoiders of public service news constituted a small minority of the full sample (about 5%), we relied on descriptive statistical analyses not sensitive to skewed distributions. All missing values have been removed from the subsequent analyses.

To study the demographic make-up of news avoiders (RQ2) and compare these to the traits of the vast majority that did not opt out from public service news, we focused on six variables. *Age* is a continuous variable ($M = 52$, $SD = 19$). *Gender* is based on official statistics and separates men (47%) from women (52%). *Level of education* was originally a 10-split variable ranging from "Studies at elementary school" to "PhD", but it was re-coded into four

levels for our purposes. *Household income* is a 12-split variable, ranging from SEK 100,000 per year or less to more than SEK 1.1 million per year, that we re-coded into three levels. *Employment status* is a binary variable separating employed and retired people from those on sick-leave, unemployed, or enrolled in re-training programmes. Finally, we used a question asking about respondents' current *favourite political party*, including the eight parties elected into the Swedish parliament and the option to name an "other party"; this variable was re-coded to analyse differences between those who favoured the far right-wing Sweden Democrats and those favouring any other party.

In the last step, we sought to connect avoidance of public service news to a broader negative social space (RQ3) (Scott, 2018, 2022). This involved tapping into the relationship between news avoidance and other lifestyle patterns and inquiring into the broader social dynamics in which news avoidance is embedded. We approached this negative social space as layered in peoples' lifeworlds regarding one's own life, other people, and society at large. As such, our conceptualisation follows previous work situating lifestyles and (media) practices concerning their orientation towards either the self, the extended social group (e.g., friends) and society at large (Bengtsson et al., 2021) as well as Scott's (2018: 6) argument that negative social action "can have significant effects on social forms, from micro-level interaction order to macro-level patterns, normative institutions and cultural scripts". At the level of the self, we probed the extent to which people displayed an absence of satisfaction with their own life, while at the level of the extended social group, we asked about the tendency to not spend time with friends and not discuss politics (with others). Finally, at the most abstract level, society at large (the realm of unknown others), we asked about the avoidance of other news sources, the complete distrust in other people, and refraining from visiting public spaces (here: evening visits to restaurants/pubs/bars). These binary variables separated the extreme category (e.g., complete distrust in other people) from all other categories (e.g., some level of trust in other people). While these items may come off as disparate, they allow us to begin to explore news avoidance in relation to different layers (self, extended social group, wider society) in the "lifeworld of apparent non-appearance" (Scott, 2022: 200).

Limitations

While breaking new terrain in the study of news avoidance, this study is not without limitations. First, it should be stressed that this is an exploratory case study where we attempt to take our approach into the field. This implies that we focus on one country, which for reasons stated in the previous section can be seen as an exceptional case in terms of "media welfare" and news circulation, and that we zoom in on the avoidance of one particular type of news: national public service news. Admittedly, our focus departs from much of the existing literature on and measurements of news avoidance (for an overview, see Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2022). As argued in the theory section, conceptualising news avoidance as negative social action implies focusing on the absence of (not low) consumption of (a particular type of) news and the relationship between this

kind of “non-doing” and other (non-)practices, as well as its embeddedness in particular sociodemographic positions. While this might prevent immediate comparisons with extant literature, we believe that our approach meaningfully adds (particularly in terms of widening the scope of empirical inquiry) to the ongoing discourse on news avoidance.

Additionally, while the SOM survey is widely used in scholarly research and recognised for its quality, it still has trouble – like other contemporary surveys – reaching young people and immigrant groups (Falk et al., 2021). This should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the analysis. Furthermore, refusal to respond to surveys might very well correlate with news avoidance and other forms of non-participation (Heikkilä, 2021), meaning we risk, like all researchers on news avoidance, not fully reaching the group under scrutiny in this study.

While our attempt to capture full avoidance of public service news outlets included all relevant platforms where national public service news is distributed, we cannot disregard the risk that respondents consuming public service news on mobile applications, podcast platforms, and social media fail to classify this as consumption of public service news “on the Internet” (which was how the survey question was phrased). The questions on broader lifestyles and (non-)practices allowed us to explore news avoidance in relation to wider negative social space, but they are far from exhaustive, and are also likely to indicate lower than usual frequencies due to the pandemic. It would be relevant to probe into civic (dis)engagement (e.g., not voting, signing petitions, joining demonstrations, or contacting politicians, etc.), cultural non-participation (e.g., non-visits to museums, theatres, the cinema, or art exhibitions, etc.), and other social abstention. While the 2020 SOM survey included such questions, they were exclusive to sub-questionnaires distributed only to smaller sub-samples. Finally, a key discussion in the literature concerns the differences between intentional and unintentional avoidance (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020), and occasional and constant news avoidance (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). In addition to the fact that these distinctions seem difficult to assert in empirical reality (Palmer et al., 2023), our data prevents us from delving deeper into the extent to which the avoidance of public service news was intentional and sustained. While the phrasing of the survey items (“how often to you *usually*...”) implies some level of consistency over time, we need longitudinal studies (see, e.g., Andersen et al., 2024) to assess the extent to which a (non)-practice is sustained over time.

Findings

Almost all Swedish citizens turn, occasionally or regularly, to national public service news, be it via television (*Aktuellt*, *Rapport*), daily broadcasts on the radio throughout the day (*Ekot*, *P3 News*), or on-demand via the websites of Swedish radio and Swedish television. This was especially true at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2020 (Larsson, 2023). Still, a small minority, making up 5.1 per cent (394 individuals) of a national sample, reported a complete abstention from public service news across all platforms. Thus, in response

to RQ1, we conclude that this particular negative social action, or non-doing (Scott, 2018, 2022), broke not only with the daily routines of most Swedes but also with the social contract established between publicly funded journalism and its audience (Sjøvaag, 2010).

In analysing the demographic traits of this group of news avoiders (RQ2) and comparing them with the majority reporting some consumption (from minimalist exposure to updates via the Internet to daily consumption across public service platforms) of public service news, we identify some key differences. Table 1 summarises these differences and presents a mix of distributions, mode values (favourite political party), and means (age). In line with much research on cultural non-participation (Heikkilä, 2021), results suggest that avoiders of public service news were more likely to occupy lower social positions compared with their non-avoiding peers. News avoiders were less educated, less affluent, and more likely to stand outside the labour market (see also Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023). Additionally, they were younger than the non-avoiders, and more inclined to favour the far-right Sweden Democrats party, as one in five of respondents in this group selected Sweden Democrats as their current favourite political party (compared with almost 12% amongst the non-avoiders). All of these associations were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The news-avoiding group was slightly dominated by men (53%), whereas in the non-avoiding group, the opposite holds true; the relationship between gender and public service news avoidance was not, however, statistically significant.

Given these observations and previous research on public service news use, we can approach this group as likely to be subdivided in at least two main groups: 1) young people that public media has a hard time reaching due to their inclination to rely on social media for news consumption (Newman et al., 2020; Falk, 2022) and 2) a politically-driven, far-right-wing, mainly male group with anti-establishment sentiments, including those against public service media and other so-called mainstream media (Andersson & Weibull, 2018; Jakobsson et al., 2023). Thus, avoidance of public service news seems embedded in a complex precarity–youth–populism nexus. The group of avoiders is disparate, as different avoiders have various reasons for opting out of public service news. On the one hand, young people who grew up with digital, mobile, and social media are more likely to unintentionally avoid public service outlets due to lack of habit (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018). On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that segments of the news avoiders intentionally opted out of public service news on political grounds, given the well-documented anti-media and anti-establishment rhetoric in both the official communications of the Sweden Democrats and among its voter base (Jakobsson et al., 2023).

TABLE 1 Distributions of demographic variables among avoiders and non-avoiders of public service news

Demographic		Avoiders of public service news	Non-avoiders of public service news
Gender (%)	Men	53.4	49
	Women	46.6	51
Level of education (%)***	Low	10.4	9.3
	Mid-low	42.3	28.9
	Mid-high	21.5	21.9
	High	25.8	39.9
Age (mean)***		35	48
Yearly household income, SEK (%)***	< 300,000	29.4	18.3
	300,001–700,000	39.8	40.7
	> 700,000	30.8	41
Favourite party: Sweden democrats (%)***		21.4	11.9
Status on labour market (%)***	Employed, parental leave, retired	84.2	93.7
	Unemployed, on sick-leave, in work-place training	15.8	6.3

Comments: The statistical associations between the variable separating public service news avoiders from non-avoiders and demographic variables were tested with the Chi² test for the binary variables gender, favouring the Sweden Democrats, and status on the labour market; Cramer's V for categorical and ordinal variables with more than two values (education and household income); and one-way ANOVA for the continuous variable age.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 connects the complete avoidance of public service news to a broader negative social space, that is, a space of “non-doing” (RQ3) (Scott, 2018, 2022). Analysing the share of people that displayed other non-doings allows us to explore the relationship between news avoidance and other lifestyle patterns, and to inquire into the broader negative social space in which news avoidance is embedded. We approached this negative social space as layered in peoples’

lifeworlds in terms of (non-)practices and attitudes toward one's own life, other people, and society at large (Bengtsson et al., 2021). While it is true that non-participation or non-use does not per definition imply passivity and complete inertia (Heikkilä, 2021), and that the Covid-19 pandemic implied lower levels of public visits and face-to-face interactions across social strata, our results suggest that the news avoiders were significantly more prone to dwell in a broader negative social space.

Although we deal with deviant attitudes and behaviours that per definition involve highly skewed distributions, we find that, compared with non-avoiders, news avoiders were more likely to display complete lack of satisfaction with their own lives, to not spend time with friends, and to not discuss politics with others. This pattern also applies to the wider and more abstract relationship to society at large, as the news avoiders were more likely to fully distrust other people, refrain from visiting public spaces, and completely avoid other established national news outlets online (*Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*) (see also Andersen et al., 2024). We note that for the avoidance of “alternative”, far-right, online news (*Nya Tider*, *Nyheter Idag*), the pattern between the two groups reversed as avoiders of public service news were *less* prone to avoid such news outlets. The same pattern emerged regarding the inclination to get news from social media, although this relationship was not statistically significant.

To repeat a point made above, these items (see Table 2) may seem disparate, as they tap into very different domains of everyday life. They do nonetheless capture the fact that avoiders of public service news, to a significantly higher degree ($p < 0.05$) than non-avoiders, reside in a broader negative social space characterised by the absence of life satisfaction, interpersonal bonding and interaction, trust in others, and a life in the public.

TABLE 2 Avoiders and non-avoiders of public service news in negative social space (per cent)

Layer in negative lifeworld		Avoiders of public service news	Non-avoiders of public service news
Self	Complete dissatisfaction with own life***	3.7	1.1
	Not spent time with friends in the last 12 months***	4.5	1.8
Extended social group	Not discussed politics in the last 12 months***	25.3	12.7
	Not visited restaurant/bar/pub in evening time during the last 12 months*	20.7	16.5
Society at large	Complete distrust towards other people***	8.7	1.7
	Complete avoidance of Aftonbladet online***	35.7	19
	Complete avoidance of Dagens Nyheter online***	77	44
	Complete avoidance of news on social media	19	21.8
	Complete avoidance of "alternative" news online*	75	85.8

Comments: Share of group reporting not to engage in various activities and lacking life satisfaction and trust. The statistical associations between the variable separating news avoiders from non-avoiders and variables listed were tested with Chi2 tests.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Conclusions and ways forward

In providing an alternative theorisation of news avoidance, we have argued that news avoidance can be fruitfully approached as negative social action – non-doing – that is embedded not only in disadvantaged social positions but also in a broader negative social space (Scott, 2018, 2022). In approaching news avoidance from this perspective, we presented an exploratory case study of people who completely opted out of consuming national Swedish public service news during the latter part of 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic that put high demands on the monitorial citizen. Theorising news avoidance as negative social action implies that we focused on 1) complete avoidance of the country's most-trusted and consumed news outlet, 2) the relationship between news avoidance and other forms of “non-doings”, and 3) the social origins of (this particular type of) news avoidance. We concluded that the avoiders of public service news constituted a small minority (5.1%) (RQ1) of the population that occupied positions of relative precarity (RQ2). The complete abstention from public service media was located in a complex youth–precarity–populism nexus, and as such, members of this group likely avoid public service news for differing reasons (young people's lack of habit and social media repertoires vs. the media resentment among far-right–wing voters). Finally, we have shown that avoidance of public service news is related to other negative social actions (RQ3) across three layers in the lifeworld: dissatisfaction with regard to the self, non-relations with an extended social group, and non-participation and distrust regarding broader society and unknown others.

While we should not exaggerate the patterns observed in this study, the avoiders of public service news were, in fact, significantly more likely to lead lives in the broader realm of negative social space. While the study of “non-doing” is not per definition concerned with detrimental or “shadowy” elements of everyday life, we have shown that the particular form of non-doing we have been concerned with (news avoidance) links to non-appearance, non-satisfaction, non-doing, and non-participation. It seems, then, that it is fruitful to avoid studying news avoidance in isolation from other social practices and lifestyles, and to understand it as embedded in a much more encompassing, late modern withdrawal from social relations (Illouz, 2019). By focusing on the “negative social space”, this study has presented one way to do so at the overarching, quantitative level. We have argued, via Scott (2018, 2022), that negative social action is significant and matters not only for the quality of democracy and the public sphere (since news avoidance implies a break with the prevailing practice of news consumption and monitorial citizenship and the almost universally supported notion regarding the value of news for democracy [Bergström, 2016]). News avoidance also matters subjectively and intersubjectively as it corresponds to other acts of non-doing in peoples' everyday lives and since it is more likely to manifest at precarious social positions, stressing the fact that these “negative bonds stem not only from peoples' individual motivations and abilities but also from precarious life conditions” (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023: 1993).

This study contributes to the extant research on news avoidance not only in that it theorises news avoidance as a particular form of social action, but also because it opens up avenues for future studies and understandings of the wider social dynamics (beyond mental well-being and civic engagement [Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021]) in which news avoidance is embedded. Previous research often conceptualises news avoidance as low consumption of news. While such studies are undoubtedly important, we nonetheless believe that there is something ontologically special about the complete disconnection from (particular types and genres of) journalism, and that a theory of negative social action allows researchers to close in on news avoidance as a non-doing. We have shown that such non-doing is related to other seemingly unconnected (non-)practices such as neglecting or lacking friends, refraining from visiting public spaces, and distrusting others.

We call upon future research to further explore the characteristics and experiences of the broader negative space in which news avoidance is embedded (e.g., Skarsbø Lindtner & Uberg Nærland, 2024). Indeed, many of the questions provoked by Scott's (2018, 2022) sociology of nothing require qualitative and in-depth exploration of how "nothing" is experienced. Since our survey data cannot capture incidental (and non-reported) news avoidance, nor the extent to which this particular non-doing is sustained over time, we encourage studies on the full disconnection from news using digital trace data, ethnographic data, and longitudinal measures. Reversely, we also invite explorations into the practices that replace news avoidance (Heikkilä, 2021) and thus ask what the "positive" social space around news avoidance entails. In the context of our case study, this involves studying possible alternatives to public service news. Following arguments in previous work (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023), we recognise that studies are needed beyond our particular case on the avoidance of national public service news in Sweden. News is not a monolith, and as such, research needs to explore the negative social spaces surrounding the avoidance of other types of news in other countries and media systems. It is crucial to realise that the avoidance of a type of journalism other than public service news (in Sweden) would denote a completely different form of negative action likely to be embedded in a different kind of negative social space.

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