

Idea								
Compassion fatigue	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Idea Trauma- informed communication	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓

To illustrate my findings, Table A shows which respondents recognized which terms. I also noted if respondents were familiar with ideas or concepts even if they didn't know official terminology. Fifty percent of respondents were familiar with the term news avoidance but all of them were familiar with the idea of news avoidance. Only 25% of respondents were familiar with the term compassion fatigue, but 50% were familiar with the idea. Again, only 25% of respondents knew what the term trauma-informed communication meant, but 85% were familiar with the idea in practice.

RQ1: Are strategic communicators at US news outlets aware of CF-induced news avoidance? To answer this first research question, I found through my interviews that these communicators were on a whole not cognizant of CF-induced news avoidance. Most of the communicators were not familiar with the official terms included in my questions: news avoidance, compassion fatigue and trauma-informed communication. Communicators were most familiar with news avoidance and/or news fatigue and often used them interchangeably like respondent K: “Um, you know, I have not heard of [news avoidance]. I've definitely heard of news fatigue. I don't know if it's related to that.”

Many people were less familiar with compassion fatigue. However, and this was true with all the terms, even if they didn't know a term or may not have thought specifically about it before, almost everyone was able to demonstrate understanding and share experience with the concepts after I shared term definitions. An example would be respondent D who when asked if she knew what compassion fatigue was said, "No, but I can maybe guess what is it?"

Rarely was anyone familiar with trauma-informed communication. This is why I included the set definitions in my research questions and that proved very useful. Just as with the other terms, however, once defined the communicators could often think of at least one example of that term in their personal or professional lives.

This was a research question because the awareness these communicators have of CF-induced news avoidance acts as an indicator of the awareness that journalists in the US have of these terms on a grander scale. Even if they weren't familiar with terminology, it demonstrated that these topics are not currently top-of-mind for many communicators. If news avoidance is seen as a growing problem to be resolved in journalism and these communicators play key roles in making decisions that could contribute to or treat news avoidance, we know that these terms and topics could be blind spots on a larger scale.

Many respondents emphasized that they do not actively focus on measuring their audience members who are news avoidant, they are more focused on studying the characteristics of audience members who consume the most. Respondent D said:

It's tough to track that from inside the newsroom. For instance, what you're actually looking for is people who aren't on your site. And it's much easier to track people who are on your site. We do track performance over time, is our audience growing or diminishing, and we look out for that.

Respondent M pointed out another reason why it may be difficult to track news avoidance especially around breaking news:

It's hard to really understand that aspect of the feedback loop because typically when news is breaking, and when things are happening very quickly, our audience rises. And so, to the degree people are avoiding news that they find to be stressful, that segment of the audience was seemed to be outweighed by those who are perhaps more casual news consumers who gravitate toward this big breaking news when it happens.

RQ2: What strategies are strategic communicators utilizing to address CF-induced news avoidance? This research question asked what strategies are they [communicators] utilizing to address CF-induced news avoidance. The answers to this question ranged widely.

Studying analytics and Google trends data to find out “why they’re reading what they're reading,” was a strategy cited by respondent D. The ever-increasing value of creating content inspired by search engine activity was echoed by respondent K who said, “I think it's important for all of us to be aware of the metrics, but not because we're trying to just drive a huge audience, but try to look at it from the perspective of this is what the audience is trying to tell us. Like, this is what they're trying to say.” Respondent J said her team looked at the dissemination of news through discovery. “We ask is this story meant to answer a question? If it's a question people are searching for, we may not issue a push alert on that because we know the audience will come to us via Google or Bing.”

An example of this strategy in action was that through keeping close tabs on search terms and audience metrics, a communicator might decide to change the headline of a story to be more SEO-friendly. Or, if a story is having a lukewarm reception with a publication’s general audience, the communicator might share the story with specific groups who they know are interested in the story being shared. Targeting these “micro audiences”, as respondent K called them, was an especially interesting strategy because the approach seemed like an almost public relations approach to sharing a story versus a traditional journalistic broadcast approach. Sharing

a story to micro audiences based on their metric interests seems to be audience-driven communication that serves both producer and consumer.

Respondent T emphasized that their audience strategy was based on audience demographics. “We have a whole team dedicated to nurturing relationships that our outlet has with our [readership].” Their focus and purpose in audience engagement was to define their target audience and then use knowledge of that audience to build trust through being dependable in delivering on their promises as an organization and by catering their coverage to their target demographics as much as possible. Respondent T also said:

We can meet them where they're at. We can do a ton of research on our audience insights, do focus groups, we know what where they're at with their finances, major life decisions...we can use that to strategically help them and have them interacting with us at all times, because we're also a business.

Solution-based journalism was presented by several as another way to combat news avoidance. Similar to using search terms to guide what stories are being written, several respondents spoke of the need to create and deliver stories that don't just deliver the facts but answer “How do these facts apply to my life?” During pandemic coverage, for example, respondent D spoke about shifting their reporting from updates to solutions:

We're writing a lot and we're trying to be as useful as possible so that we're not saying to people ‘Here's a whole bunch of stories, read them all.’ Instead, we're trying to be very pointed and say ‘If you need free food, this is the list. If you lost your job, and you need a new job, here's who's hiring’.

Respondent D also cited Maslow's hierarchy of needs as being an important factor. “Your basic needs are food and shelter and safety...when all of those needs are taken care of, then you can start thinking about other things that are maybe more esoteric or less urgent.” This strategy could be effective considering that some news avoiders have been found to search out news when they are in search of information (Lee, 2013).

Some respondents said their strategy was to make local community connection a priority. “I think it is baked into the DNA of good newsrooms, that are anchored in their communities, to understand what audiences want in periods of community trauma,” said respondent M. They emphasized that news organizations have a role to not just cover what happened, but to do it in a way that helps the community absorb, understand, and move on. “National reporters and editors don't necessarily have to face the people involved at the supermarket. And local journalists do.” Even if respondents focused on community had a national audience, they highlighted the importance of pulling coverage from local journalists and local perspectives when possible.

I included asking about trauma-informed communication as a part of this research question because of a curiosity if trauma-informed communication could be a strategy to combat CF-induced news avoidance. Essentially, the answer was that while almost all the respondents spoke favorably of the tenants of trauma-informed communication or practiced it in some form, it was not a part of their strategies. Many strategies approached audience engagement with broad, macro goals instead of micro, specific language.

RQ3: Have their strategies been successful and **RQ4:** How is that success measured I asked primarily because the strategies used by a certain news organization might be worth trying to replicate by others.

Respondents who did not seem to have a clear strategy and were not cognizant of the research terms, even anecdotally, didn't have clear or original strategies to combat news avoidance or just enhance their general audience engagement beyond traditional journalistic practices. A challenge to answering this question for many communicators was that some were highly involved in their team's analytic data, and others were not. Because there were some differences among the specifics of respondents' day-to-day tasks, many could speak generally

about success but would have needed to connect with their team members who specifically dealt with data in order to give a quantified answer.

Success in audience engagement in general by my respondents was measured through analytics and subscriptions, not direct feedback from consumers. The general rule of thumb in their measurement was that the more eyes, ears, clicks and subscriptions that stories got, the more successful they were.

Respondent M thought that if society shifts more towards paid subscription models, maybe news avoidance will be easier to observe and measure. Their news organization closely tracked which stories seemed to result in the most subscriptions and they tried to create more similar content:

The kinds of stories that cause people to subscribe are stories that highlight issues in the community of importance. And they may be investigative stories that expose wrongdoing, so they're not reflexively positive stories all the time, but stories that have a solutions element and a community element tend to resonate more with subscribers than routine coverage of death and destruction.

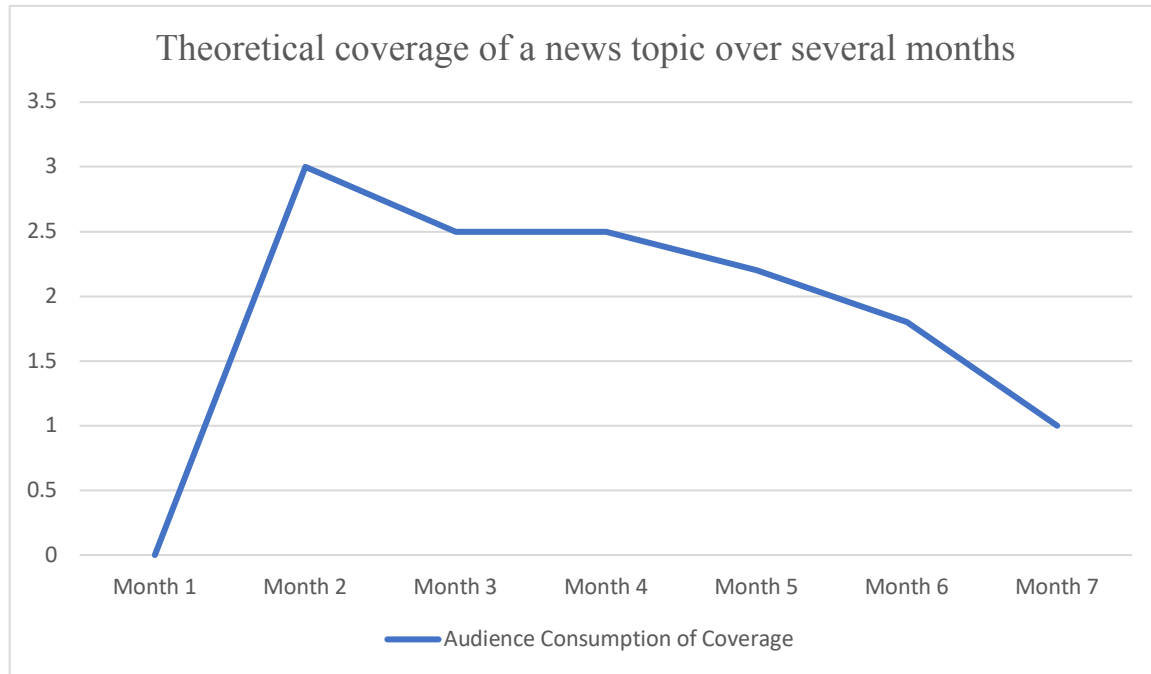
Coronavirus coverage was used as an example by respondent K as to why success against news avoidance is particularly difficult to measure. "Our traffic is probably up about anywhere, depending on the day, between like 25 and 40% or so while the coronavirus stuff has been going on the last few weeks," said respondent K, even though the coronavirus has all the element of being a topic that could lend itself to compassion fatigue:

But there are definitely times when people sort of reached the end of the rope [with similar stories in the past] and they either can't read about that content anymore or they can't experience it in the in the same way as we're delivering it to them...I think with coronavirus, we will eventually get to that place too. Eventually it's going to get to this place where every single day is going to feel like yesterday.

Respondent K said it is a challenge figuring out how to deliver essential information in a way that is not overwhelming for people so that they can still take the information away they need to live a productive life and make wise decisions.

Respondent J called this point in ongoing news coverage where consumers are beginning to practice news avoidance “saturation”. Measuring the success of a single piece of news media is difficult because there is no way to truly know how many consumers avoided it, but when tracking ongoing coverage of coronavirus over months, for example, perhaps news organizations would be able to see the saturation point in their coverage where consumers begin to stop consuming. To know if that cessation of consumption or saturation point is because of compassion fatigue would likely require more insights such as polling subscribers or monitoring comments. If say subscribers to a newspaper were monitored to see when they reached their coronavirus “saturation point”, it would be interesting to see if they fit the demographic most likely to avoid news.

To visualize, here is a theoretical model to describe what this saturation point in news coverage might look like according to respondent K's description.



When the line (aka audience consumption) reaches its highest point after consistent rising interest, perhaps this could be marked as the theoretical saturation point where, possibly due to CF with the coverage subject, consumers begin to tune out and avoid the topic more and more. This could be a gradual decrease in consumption, like this example, or if it is more dramatic (such as deciding to start a “news fast” altogether), it could be an immediate and total drop in consumption at say month three or beyond. Respondent M made a good point that, “The valleys between breaking news events have the potential to be a little bit deeper when people are tuning out” and perhaps news avoidance data can be seen more clearly in analytics not during breaking news but farther along the curve, like above.

Success was infrequently measured through digital comments, which was a surprise to me. Even respondents who included comment moderation as one of their primary responsibilities

often couldn't recall seeing feedback directly related to news avoidance and/or compassion fatigue.

"It's almost like self-preservation." said respondent J. He continued:

You want to sort of stop feeling all that and self-care. But I think that's more private. I think people would be embarrassed to sort of talk about that. It's like, 'Oh, how can you stop caring about something when people died?' So, people may just stop [consuming news] or tell a couple people in person, but I think people admitting that on a platform as an audience member- they may not want to do that.

Comments may not be a valid form of monitoring news fatigue because comment sections vary from news organization to news organization, too. "One of the local newspapers where I live (not one of ours) has done is they eliminated their online comment section because it had just become not a place where real conversation was taking place. Very toxic conversations were taking place," said respondent M.

Conclusion

Whether respondents had a set strategy related to CF-induced news avoidance or they were thinking purposefully about it for the first time, their general insights on the matter were enlightening. A key takeaway from this research for me is that the line of communication between producer and consumer is blocked. This has been touched on before in analysis of newsrooms, such as by Nikki Usher in her book *Making News at the New York Times*. Usher found that at least in 2014 when her analysis was taking place, audience interaction was not considered a high priority in news organizations and editorial staff were not encouraging reporters to listen to their audience. She documented that this producer and consumer relationship was an archaic approach to reporting and not adjusting audience engagement ideas with the shifting modern newsroom seems to have negative consequences today, too.

In a traditional business model, a company can't just make a good product, they also need good customer service and relationship with their consumers. Especially in a national news organization context, there seems to be less "customer service". This likely stems from news historically playing a democratic function and public service and some journalists might argue that the less public input into journalism, the better. After all, journalism shouldn't theoretically be swayed too much by outside opinions or written to cater to an audience more than to serve the truth. However, journalism in cannot currently function outside of a business model. It straddles the line between being a democratic service for the public good and above influence, but also being a product in a producer-consumer interaction and as such needs effective strategic communication.

News media consumers seem to most often have three options for responding to news and making their opinions as consumers heard. First, digitally they can leave comments and interact with news content on social media via likes, shares, etc. Second, they can try to directly connect with a newspaper in person, via phone or email. From just my experience with this project, I can tell you that it can be quite challenging to get someone to listen to your queries, especially at a major news organization. Third, news avoidance: the very act of consuming or not consuming news sends a message to the producer that they do or do not want a product.

Respondent D had a unique perspective because her media outlet was launching a project to get detailed feedback from their city about the contents of the newspaper and if their news organization was well received or not, like focus group. "When you have been a part of a couple of listening projects, often what you hear from people is 'I didn't know you cared' and they're kind of surprised that this big giant institution is actually individual human beings," said respondent D.

The most interesting and promising strategy that I spoke with a respondent about was shifting news distribution to a daily newsletter. Even though most respondents didn't cite this approach as one of their engagement strategies, some expressed similar sentiments. "We definitely look at newsletters as a way where we can maybe reach an audience that wants to look at their news just once a day and have a beginning and an end," said respondent J. "We're looking at the newsletter as a way for people who are overwhelmed or who need some guidance to know what to prioritize for news. I think the newsletter has become that medium."

Respondent T cited the newsletter format as not only their strategy for combatting news avoidance, but a possible solution to news avoidance. Their news outlet produced content but was far more focused on curating the news for their consumers so that, once a day, one of their consumers could read a summary of important news events happening on a national and international scale in politics, lifestyle, pop culture, business, etc. This tasting tray of news, with hyperlinks to full news stories if desired, was exactly why their audience favored the news outlet. Many news outlets have email newsletters, including some of the other respondents, but none focused on it as heavily as respondent T. Their consumers seemed to reach their news avoidance saturation point, or news satiety, with a daily summary of content without getting overwhelmed of experiencing expressed compassion fatigue.

One study of news avoidance found that "Often participants said they relied on others—typically a romantic partner, but also, sometimes, a parental figure, a colleague, or a friend—to follow the news in their stead and inform them about important issues" (Toff & Palmer, 2018). The idea of a newsletter format fits the research around news avoiders in that it could be considered a form of consuming this pre-digested, curated news. Just instead of from a parent or spouse, it is from a trusted news organization. The brief newsletter format with curated,

bipartisan content could lend itself to reducing compassion fatigue but also could be desirable for a consumer with time constraints, affective polarization and news fatigue. A newsletter is more likely to fit into the interstitial moments in someone's day. Respondent T's publication found its consumer demographic to fit within very specific parameters. It should be noted, however, that respondent's T's organization geared its content towards the same specific demographic and it is unclear which came first, the readership or the marketing of content to that readership.

In a 24-hour Golden Corral of news media, respondents seemed to indicate that there may be an increasing desire for less, but more nutritious, news media. Generalizing respondents' insights, perhaps the best general strategy against news avoidance is high quality journalism over an extended period of time that is solutions-based and delivered in limited quantities.

Respondent J shared what a friend had expressed to her about preferring the e-edition of her local paper for news consumption and thought that it reflected the attitude of many news consumers:

She liked that format because there was a beginning and an end to it...going to any new site there's always countless information and stories and you don't know when you're done. And I think there is a sense of that right now where there's so much going on, so much news out there, and you don't really know when you're done.

Respondent J saw an increasing yearning for a modern version of the very beginnings of journalism before a 24-hour news cycle. "Maybe it's the newsletters. Maybe there's a reason why podcasts are popular and I don't know, but there are people yearning for when they should stop and they can move on to something else and then focus on something that's not news."