

STRATEGIES TO COMBAT NEWS AVOIDANCE

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by
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ABSTRACT

This research outlines the strategies that communicators involved with audience engagement in news organizations are using to reach their audiences despite compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance. The research was based in gatekeeping theory and gathered from semi-structured interviews with communicators in US news organizations about what strategies their communications teams were forming or adopting in response to compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance, as well as the self-evaluated success of those strategies. Strategies cited include solutions journalism, tracking search engine queries and newsletter formats.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The seed of this project and my ongoing curiosity around news avoidance really solidified during a phone conversation about current events. It was a Friday afternoon a few months into my first semester of grad school at the Missouri School of Journalism and my mom's voice rang through the room on speaker phone as I wrestled with a fitted sheet.

“No, I didn't hear about that news story. I don't really read or watch the news, it's just so depressing and there are better uses of my time.”

I stopped my multi-tasking. I wouldn't have thought twice about her comment before joining the world of journalism, but it was suddenly shocking. Looking back, I realized that short of my dad's fanatic devotion to Rush Limbaugh, the only time we watched news at home was on 9/11. It literally took a terrorist attack for my parents to consume the news directly.

Throughout the rest of grad school, I noticed more and more in my personal life people expressing news fatigue, often the result of compassion fatigue, and resulting news avoidance. During certain periods even as a journalism student, I found myself participating in news avoidance. I initially began researching news avoidance with a focus on news avoiders. But as I shifted in my time at the University of Missouri into strategic communications, my research focus looked into the news organizations. How can companies that produce news market their content to an audience that is increasingly going on a news diet? And, perhaps just as important, are news agencies even aware of news avoidance?

In the grand scheme of things, my research may be the batting of a butterfly's wings. But I hope that in the world of journalism and the future of the industry, it brings us all closer to a tornado of substantial positive change. I had the unique and intense experience of watching the COVID-19 pandemic unfold in the months that I spent working on the professional and research elements of this project and it weighed heavily on almost every journalist I spoke with. I felt the waves of COVID-19 in my professional life, personal life and in my ongoing research. News avoidance has been a documented, growing trend for years and as we go through this global disaster together, I think that there has never been a more appropriate time to study understand news consumption and how to contend with an audience that just can't eat another bite.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to fully understand the scope and vision of this project, we must first understand the different terms that will be used and their etymologies. The main concerns of this literature review are with compassion fatigue, news avoidance, and their relationship in the literature with each other and with strategic communication strategies.

The term compassion fatigue (CF) is first attributed to Joinson in 1992 within research about the emotional toll of working in nursing. The definition of compassion fatigue is “a state of exhaustion and dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, and socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress” (Figley, 1995, p. 253). Documented physical symptoms of CF include exhaustion, difficulty sleeping and increased use of destructive coping mechanisms such as alcoholism (Figley, 1995). CF on a mental and emotional level has also been associated with anxiety, hopelessness, loss of compassion, cynicism, dread, and hypervigilance, (Figley, 1995; Joinson, 1992; Orlovsky, 2006). CF has even been demonstrated to have a negative effect on spiritual health (Harris & Quinn Griffin, 2015). CF also effects individuals’ personal and professional lives. A study found that CF can limit productivity and leads to more sick days and lower workplace satisfaction (Pfifferling & Gilley, 2000). CF doesn’t just affect the sufferer; in care situations it can decrease the quality of care a patient receives (Mathieu, 2012).

How a researcher refers to CF may change but the core concept remains the same. Figley stated that CF is “identical to secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD) and is the equivalent of PTSD” (1995, p. xv). Other terms used interchangeably with CF are secondary traumatization, vicarious traumatization, secondary survivor, and vicarious

traumatization (Figley, 1995; McCann & Saakvitne, 1995; Remer & Elliott, 1988; Saakvitne, Gamble, Pearlman, and Lev, 2000).

The literature reveals that certain individuals are more susceptible to CF than others. CF is not about having enough empathy, but rather feeling drained of empathy. Risk factors include having high levels of empathy (Naijar, Davis, Beck-Coon, Carney Doebbeling, 2009); having a preexisting anxiety diagnosis, mental health issues, personal trauma, and being selfless (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006; Lerias & Byrne 2003;).

CF, though originally conceived to describe a phenomenon specific to caregiving situations, is not limited to a caregiver and patient relationship. Anyone in a position that requires empathy, compassion, and or exposure to trauma (firsthand or secondhand) is a likely candidate. Persons in the healthcare industry, first responders, social workers, and journalists have shown a high tendency to experience CF (Conrad, Kellar-Guenther, and Yvonne, 2006; Dworzniak, 2018; Saakvitne, Gamble, Pearlman, and Lev, 2000).

Within journalism research, CF has been linked to and studied in journalists who cover traumatic events as well as found in news audiences (Maier, 2015; Moeller, 1999). One study found that the main reasons why mass media contributes to CF were sensationalism, simplistic explanations of complex situations, an abundance of reporting on “bad news,” and a lack of solution-based journalism (Kinnick et al., 1996, p. 690). This research, however, is concerned first and foremost with the strategic communication decisions that are being made that determine how, when, and what kind of news media are being promoted to the public through what venues not necessarily the change in content or framing within a story.

We are living in a time where distrust of the media is rampant (Reuters, 2018). News media are full of death and destruction (Woodstock, 2014), and funding for the traditional forms of news is drying up (Westley & Severin, 1964; Sobal & Jackson-Beeck, 1981). A century ago, newsboys shouted out juicy headlines to get people to buy newspapers. Today, individual stories are promoted to the public in an attempt to increase traffic to sites and eyeballs on stories. It is micro-strategic communication, if you will. Though journalism and strategic communication traditionally have been treated as separate pursuits, modern news organizations and best practices often requires journalists to think about “marketing” news content. But as the relationship between news producers and news consumers grows tense, some people are choosing to stop consuming news altogether. Or, at least, to go on a news diet.

In the simplest terms, news resisters are those which make up a portion of the population who do not consume, or limit their consumption of, news media over a prolonged but indeterminate period of time. There seems to be as yet exists no agreed-upon, universal definition of news resistance within the literature of journalism scholarship; even different titles such as news resisters (Woodstock, 2014), news avoiders (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010), and nonreaders (Westley & Severin, 1964) are used interchangeably. News avoidance is an individual choice (Woodstock, 2014) the reasoning for which we are only beginning to understand (Toff & Palmer, 2018). Woodstock proposed that news avoidance can be measured and understood as a spectrum of behavior instead of as a static identity (2014).

The earliest pursuit of news resisters began with a profile drawn up by researchers about the “non-reader” of newspapers (Westley & Severin, 1964). They found non-

readers to be, "...low on the scale in occupation, income, and education; either quite young or old; more likely to be a farmer than a city dweller; and relatively disinterested in social life." (Westley & Severin, 1964, p.45). In 1974, Penrose, Weaver, Cole, and Shaw returned to look at non-readers in their partial-replication study, this time in North Carolina. They found that in ten years, non-readers surveyed much the same as they had in 1964 except for that there were more non-readers than there had been previously.

Age has emerged as a common divide between news consumers and news avoiders (Benesch, 2012; Westley & Severin, 1964; Zukin, 1997). In a European survey, online newspapers are read especially by young adults, followed by youths and adolescents (Fortunati, 2014). They also found that students, usually a younger set of the population, consumed more digital content. A potential difference in news resistance for younger generations has to do with how involved they are in social institutions (Westley & Severin, 1964).

Education has also been a noted marker in news avoidance when research first was being conducted (Westley & Severin, 1964) and has remained so (Benesch, 2012). This pattern in news avoidance is consistent with broader findings about news consumption as well; lower levels of educational attainment have been linked to less news consumption (Fortunati, 2014). Avid news seekers occupy the opposite end of the educational spectrum than news avoiders and tend to be more educated than the general public (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010).

Gender has exhibited a strong correlation with news avoidance (Benesch, 2012; Toff & Palmer, 2018). Studies have emerged that point to a gendered difference in the way people consume (or don't consume) the news (Fortunati, 2014). In a 2009 phone-

survey study across five European countries, women were found to “...read significantly less than men any kind of news, whether print, online, free, and mobile” (Fortunati, 2014). Causation for this gender gap in news consumption and avoidance is speculative but women with children were far more likely to avoid news (Benesch, 2012). Women are more likely to turn to news when they are in search of information (Lee, 2013).

Education and gender are a powerful cross-section of news avoidance. “With rising levels of education, news consumption among men increases considerably, whereas news consumption among women increases only to a moderate extent...” (Benesch, 2012). The news-democracy narrative would suggest that there is a connection between being civically active and consuming the news, but this did not always prove true in research (Sobal & Jackson-Beeck, 1981; Woodstock, 2014). News resisters and political party affiliation do show a marked difference in news reception, though (Pew, 2018). Republicans and younger Americans were more likely than Democrats to report news fatigue (Pew, 2018), a common complaint and precursor to news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2018b).

From the literature, it can be concluded that as of the most recent and longstanding research on news avoidance, news avoiders are most likely to be (but are not exclusively) young women (Toff & Palmer, 2018) with children and little education (Benesch, 2012). The motivations of news resisting behavior have been found to be distrust and sense of place, time constraints, care taking, mental health, affective polarization, and news fatigue (Ariely, 2015; Westley & Severin, 1964; Woodstock, 2014; Toff & Palmer, 2018). News resistance was predicted to become and continue as a major concern for journalism (Toff & Palmer, 2018b). While news avoidance patterns are

present in the behavior of a much larger sector of the population, news avoiders who specifically “consume news less than once a month or never at all” were 3% globally and, in the U.S., 8% (Newman, 2017). One study went as far as to claim that over half the American population resists news when defining a news avoider as someone who “...consume relatively little news, spend almost no time watching cable TV news channels, and avoid news magazines and news Web sites entirely” (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010).

Not all news avoiders choose to limit their consumption due to experiencing compassion fatigue from news media, but the literature about news avoidance motivations does point to the physical and emotional burdens of caretaking as being a main complaint of especially female news avoiders (Toff & Palmer, 2018). The increasing academic interest in news avoidance has led to the introduction of a new term: news fatigue (Gottfried, 2016). A 2018 Pew survey found that the number of Americans who felt exhausted and “worn out” was 7 in 10 (Gottfried & Barthel, 2018). News fatigue differs slightly from CF-induced news avoidance in that news fatigue doesn’t attribute its cause in any detail or specificity whereas CF induced news avoidance is specifically attributed to news coverage of potentially traumatic, overwhelming events (as opposed to an inundation of too much news on any subject). While research has been conducted establishing a connection between caretaking and news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2018) and the connection between CF and mass media news coverage (Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996; Moeller, 1999), to my knowledge (Gabbert, 2018) this is the first explicit research beyond anecdotal exploration on the specific phenomenon of CF-induced news avoidance.

CF has been shown to be more likely to affect women, though there is more research to be done on the connection between gender and compassion fatigue outside of healthcare (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Educational attainment has also been linked to a greater likelihood of experiencing CF (Boscarino, Figley, and Adams, 2004). Women have been shown in studies to exhibit more empathy and to excel in jobs related to social skills (Cortes, Jaimovich, & Siu, 2018). Many of the same reasons why women are more likely to be news avoiders are the same reasons they are more likely to experience CF: traditional, patriarchal gender roles gender women as empathetic caregivers in the home and in society, which leaves little time or compassion left over for traumatic events in the news. Compassion fatigue also has been found to correlate with youth, lack of job experience, and educational attainment, all of which were key factors in news avoidance populations (Liddle & Creamer, 2019).

In combatting CF, studies have been done in a healthcare setting showing that even if there is awareness of CF and employees are at high risk of experiencing CF, there is a lack of “workplace-based strategies to reduce CF in these occupational groups...” (Cocker & Joss, 2016, p.4). Just as nurses experiencing CF are more likely to take more sick days and avoid being in situations that will drain their empathy reserves, so too a news avoider with CF will try to avoid consuming news that could require expending empathy.

In an interview for Utah Public Radio, Patricia Smith, the founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, said her advice to people struggling with CF due to news consumption was to “Limit. Limit what you’re viewing. Limit what you’re reading. Limit what you’re seeing. It’s all about boundaries, personal boundaries.” The

onus of alleviating news induced CF, at least in a general sampling of online advice, is on the news consumer. However, what could news producers be doing to alleviate CF in their consumers?

The argument that news consumers need to be the gatekeepers of their own news consumption fails to acknowledge the fact that the digital nature of modern news makes it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid news. A 2017 Gallup/Knight study also found that Americans are now relying equally on social media and newspapers and that younger adults (50 or under) are more likely to consume news online than through any other source.

Incidental exposure in time interstices indicates that total news avoidance is becoming harder, if not impossible, with the emergence of digital news media platforms (Dimmick et al, 2010; Edgerly, 2017; Toff & Nielson, 2018). Time interstices are "...the gaps in the routines of media users between scheduled activities" (Dimmick et al, 2010) and incidental exposure in this context refers to when people are exposed to news unintentionally when they are using social media and digital news media platforms (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019).

Trauma-informed communication is "...getting to the core of what our clients are trying to communicate in a way that can move people, but without further traumatizing the survivors, and in turn, triggering other survivors" (Rally, 2019). Studies have found that incorporating trauma-informed communication has shown a "...reduction in seclusion, reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms and general mental health symptoms, increased coping skills, improved physical health, greater treatment retention and shorter inpatient stays" (Sweeney, Clement, Filson, & Kennedy, 2016).

News sneaks into our consciousness through the interstitial moments that fill our commutes, workouts, and elevator rides. It is not enough for an overwhelmed news consumer to stop buying a newspaper, because the strategic communicator for a news organization has already bought ad space on their Facebook feed or in their Google search results for news content. What, then, is the current level of awareness and strategy happening on the part of such strategic communicators? To what extent-- if at all in real time-- are advances in communication such as trauma-informed communications changing the way news is marketed towards the public? That is a significant gap in news avoidance and CF literature that this research contributes to filling.

Research Questions

RQ1: Are strategic communicators at US news outlets aware of CF-induced news avoidance?

Since this research is breaking ground when it comes to studying the roles of strategic communicators in major US news outlets in relation to CF and news avoidance, it was of value to first find out how cognizant such individuals are of the phenomenon. Whether subjects were aware of or not aware of CF-induced news avoidance was relevant because it acts as a gauge about awareness on a larger scale because major news outlets have the position and authority to potentially exert great influence over smaller news outlets.

RQ2: What strategies are strategic communicators utilizing to address CF-induced news avoidance?

The details of strategies being implemented in major US news organizations to combat CF-induced news avoidance is valuable information for the strategic

communications and journalism communities. Sharing what has worked and not worked to combat CF-induced news avoidance could be evaluated by other news organizations and potentially adopted. This research also sheds light on the effectiveness of trauma-informed communication.

RQ3: Have these strategies been successful?

RQ4: How is that success measured?

The reasoning for asking RQ3 and RQ4 was twofold. First, they affect whether or not the strategies used by certain news organizations are worth trying to replicate by other news organizations. Second, they provide information about best practices in measuring difficult-to-quantify audience engagement analytics.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping theory is officially based on research that began with Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist, in 1943. Shoemaker and Vos say, “Gatekeeping is one of the media’s central roles in public life: People rely on mediators to transform information about billions of events into a manageable number of media messages. This process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.1). Shoemaker and Vos break down gatekeeping and explain that it is concerned with information about events that becomes messages and, if those are published messages from a news organization, becomes news items.

In gatekeeping theory, gatekeepers have a great deal of power and potential influence over their audience. “Gatekeepers determine what becomes a person’s social reality, a particular view of the world. Although a single gatekeeping decision may itself

seem trivial, both varied messages and common messages emerge every day, making the gatekeeping process complicated and highly significant” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.3). Gatekeeping is not a function just for editors or just for reporters. Instead, gatekeeping theory considers everyone who is involved in creating and distributing a story from the reporter to the person who hits the publish button on a web story, to be a gatekeeper and to be using gatekeeping. Seen through this theoretical framework, the interview subjects in my research are understood to be influential gatekeepers in their news organizations.

Methods

The research method used for this project to gather data was semi-structured interviews from 30 minutes to an hour long with a pre-set list of questions in an interview guide that was be deviated from as necessary (see Appendix A) that took place January through April of 2020. The interviewees were communications professionals on staff with major US news organizations who are responsible for planning and executing strategic communication strategies for their organization’s print and/or online news. The decision to interview this particular demographic was made because these subjects and organizations have the greatest potential to influence by example the journalistic and strategic communication practices of other US news organizations.

Choosing to hold interviews for 30 minutes to an hour long was based on previous scholars’ recommendations and experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These time parameters were also determined by the researcher’s estimation that any amount of time less than thirty minutes would not be sufficient to get through the interview guide and no maximum amount of time was placed on the interviews so as to avoid limiting the data collected in a session. In this case, ideal newsrooms were those that have national or

even international audience since they have a great deal of influence and are large enough that they are more likely to be able to afford communications staff with specific audience-engagement roles.

The range set for this study was 8-12 interviewees. This decision is informed by previous research done on how many interviews are required to find saturation in a qualitative research setting with a heterogeneous group of subjects (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). In the field of qualitative research there exists as of yet no definite, agreed upon number for how many interviews to conduct to satisfy the research questions. In many cases, twelve is the minimum number of participants for a homogenous group of interviewees, and that is the minimum recommended for reaching saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this case, however, the range was set lower because the target demographic for interviews was a small pool of professionals to pull from, possibly less than 12. Usually when three interviews have yielded no new results, saturation has been reached (Francis et al., 2010).

Appendix A is the interview guide. The questions were asked in an order that seemed like a natural flow of thought from topic to topic, starting with more surface level questions and definitions and then moving into deeper topics. However, an interview guide is just that: a guide. The questions were occasionally deviated from, or re-arranged, as the interview progressed. The questions were not meant to be exhaustive but to be prompts that would motivate the interviewee to go on at length.

Interviewees were found through their online presence and affiliation with leading newsrooms as well as through committee connections. The interviews, whether conducted in person or via phone or video call, began as much like a casual conversation

as possible in order to make the interviewee feel at ease and comfortable sharing with the researcher. Establishing trust and building rapport was an essential part of the interviewing process in order to gain the most honest and sincere feedback (Fontana & Frey, 1994). During the course of the interview I took notes and also recorded the conversation audio for later review. I transcribed the audio afterwards using Otter.ai and then went through and manually corrected the transcriptions until they were accurate.

This research is the foundation of an article detailing my findings, which I plan to pitch to publications such as the *IRE Journal*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the *Nieman Journalism Lab* website, *Poynter*, and *Editor & Publisher Magazine*.

CHAPTER 3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS*

*(*redacted for anonymity)*

Respondent D
Senior News Director for Digital at a major US city newspaper

Hannah Musick

Could you confirm what your official title would be?

D

Yeah, I'm the senior news director for digital.

Hannah Musick

Alright, awesome. And how long have you been in that position?

D

Since I came to [news organization] May of 2018.

Hannah Musick

Great. And could you just tell me a little bit about what that looks like day to day?

D

Yeah, so essentially, I'm the editor of the website. But what it looks like from day to day is starting at 7:30 in the morning. That's our first news meeting, which is a lot earlier than it would have been in the print days or even just the web days not too long ago. But we meet at 7:30 and a lot of folks who call into that are doing it remotely. But there are a few

of us in the office and that's where we start talking about what's breaking this morning. So we try very hard not to look back at what's already been published, this is what do you need to know about now and what's coming up. And we talk about timing as well. So is that going to publish in the morning while we still have our bigger traffic moments? Or is that going to come in later in the day and therefore should we talk about maybe holding it tomorrow until tomorrow if it's not breaking? And the folks on that call would be the different subject matter editors. So the *** team, the biz team, the urban affairs, [city name] investigative, all of those different things. And we also start off with what's trending. So it includes a digital report of pageviews and unique visitors from the day before, but also what's trending on the site at the moment. And so sometimes we'll see if something's really spiking that we didn't expect, we might decide to put more resources to that. Or likewise, if something's not doing well, and we thought it might, then we look at really reframing it, especially through a headline, and we're headline testing and checking things all day long, but that's kind of a moment when we might discuss it. We also are highly aware of what's happening on social media at that time. And so we always end that meeting with a report from our social media editors. He's actually searched social and audience in general. And that's where he will talk about anything that we haven't discussed at the meeting, but that people out in the real world are talking about. So it might be some viral thing, it might be news that we may not have known about. But it's a little more on the serious side. So we'll look at anything there that we might have missed in our own reporting that we should follow up on.

Hannah Musick

Okay, gotcha. So, it sounds like you really have to be sensitive to what's going on in audience reception, and what's going out just kind of at all times, then.

D

Yes, yes. And, you know, it's we have a lot of tools that help us sort of put a window on some of these things that are happening. But yes, it takes eyes on multiple screens to make sure we're doing it.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. So I'm curious, have you really come across or are you familiar with news avoidance?

D

Yes. You mean the idea that people just at some point, too now, for whatever reason, it's too depressing or they're overwhelmed or maybe I saw it on social media, so I don't need to read the traditional newspaper? That's what you're talking about. Right?

Hannah Musick

Yeah, actually, I have like a definition down just for reference and that is almost exactly what it says. Have you noticed in your news audience, your media audience or even in your everyday life, news avoidance behavior?

D

You know, 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 so is our audience growing or diminishing and we look out for that. I would say it's probably easier to do on site when you're looking at a specific geographic region. And so being able to say, there's less interest from this city versus that city than there used to be. Or even around a certain subject. So, it's harder to track on a mass scale, I will tell you. You can kind of see anecdotally that where people will comment and say, "This is why I don't read the newspaper anymore. This is why I avoid things like the [news publication], or the [city] news or something like that." "You don't have anything positive" might be one of the responses or something along those lines anyway. Getting a real number look at it is harder to track. In my personal life, too, I know quite a few people who are not as into the news as I am. Professionally, I should be right? But I have people in my family who it doesn't cross their day to day habits as much. You know what I mean? Like, they know how to get to work and to deal with their kids every day and so if the news happens to seep into their life, it's more of an accident than an actual proactive measure on their part. You see that through things like coronavirus too where 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" and just to be very specific because if we just ask people to read an 80-inch story on every little narrative aspect of what's happening, they're not going to. And all of that is going to get missed. So we think about avoidance as much as we can, because we're

trying to really serve a particular need. Something I think when you're thinking about print readership is still trying to be useful, but I don't think we were always trying to be as specific and pointed as we might be online when you can think about answering somebody's specific Google search query.

Hannah Musick

Right, or a very specific question. And you can also link to resources more easily online, too.

D

Yep.

Hannah Musick

So would you say that it is more solution based journalism?

D

Ah, well tell me how you define solutions based because I've heard a few definitions.

Hannah Musick

Saying here's resources you might need because of this news, not just here's what happened but also the "so what" approach.

D

So solutions as in you have a problem and I'm trying to help you solve it. Yeah, we definitely do that. I mean, a definition more in line with like, say the solutions journalism network where you might even highlight somebody else's solution as sort of this bigger effort to solve a bigger issue from time to time. Like, here's how the city of Memphis fights its crime problem. And you show that to people in [my city], so they get a sense of how it's being done elsewhere. I would say we do less of that sort of full scale, big picture solutions to more of like the individual needs of people on the ground. And that's where we focus our solutions. It's not that we disagree with the other or don't see a need for it, I would just say from day to day we're more focused on immediate need of individual users.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, that totally makes sense. During intense times of news coverage like coronavirus, because this is just unprecedented for my lifetime so let's say natural disasters or huge election cycles, do you notice that there is a difference in the news consumption of your audience?

D

Oh, yeah. For me it always comes back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The theory being that your basic needs are food and shelter and safety and that sort of thing. And 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. And I think when it comes to disaster situations or pandemics, and I am saying plural but this is certainly unprecedented for all of us. But

when it when it comes to situations like that it starts to boil down to those basic needs. And so we start to see very simple things like I was mentioning like I need a job, I need food, I need a bus so I can get to work. One of the things that happened here earlier this week is the bus drivers for the city buses said we're not being protected enough and we're afraid to drive and so they had a work stoppage for at least a good percentage of the bus drivers and then the city came up with a solution where people don't walk in the front door of the bus anymore and pass by the bus driver and drop change in a basket or something.

Hannah Musick

What do they do now?

D

So now they use the back door or the side door towards the back of the bus and they get a free ride. But at least they don't get close to the bus driver. And so there's a there's a physical distance now between the bus driver and all of the passengers, I forget how many seats in front that they can't fit in. But it gives the drivers themselves a certain amount of social distance from everyone else on the bus. And then they're also cleaning and sanitizing the buses a little bit more often than they were before to try and protect the drivers. But I mean that's where it's an essential need. Like I can't get to work without a bus for a lot of people, and my employer is insisting that I come to work, even though we're in this situation so as to get there or I'm going to lose my job. And that's where it really becomes very basic need. And that's the kind of reporting we find is resonating the

most along with who's sick where and might I have come into contact with that person by being in the same space? All of those really urgent, most critical questions right now.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, survival has to come first. Can you think of during let's say the 2016 election or the Harvey Weinstein trials, would you say that the amount of interaction and amount of news consumption happening goes up or goes down? What did that look like?

D

Ah, you know, I would say that the first one yes. So definitely during elections 2016 election, we're gearing up for this election. We saw it in 2018 as well. It definitely spikes at that point. We don't see it as much during the Harvey Weinstein trial. I would say when you look at something like Harvey Weinstein where we don't have a lot to contribute of our own news to a story like that, say here in [my city], we're not going to see as much of a bump off an event like that. But we would also have elections because we're going to have our own to contribute. And that's where on the web being unique matters and so that's the spike.

Hannah Musick

So how do you measure your audience engagement?

D

We use a lot of different tools. We use Adobe analytics for more of long-term assessments of audience patterns and device types and things like that. That gives you a more detailed look, but it tends to be better for looking at things over time. We use Parsley for real time analytics and mid-range analytics. So how is my story doing? You might use Parsley for that. That gives you a good sense of how many people are on my site right now, who's reading what, are there any trends I'm noticing, is this a search story instead of a social media story and is there an option then maybe where we need to change it up a little bit so that it travels on social media? So we'll look at that to see audience interest. And if we see that there's a gap where we're not getting readership from somewhere and we think we probably should then we look at how we can do that. We look at social analytics, likes and shares and that sort of thing. Crowd tangle will give you a window into other people's posts on Facebook and Instagram and Reddit. We use Twitter analytics, Tweet Deck, and that sort of thing to see what's resonating on Twitter or what people are talking about. It's less of traffic from Twitter and more about can we find out about something that's happening that we didn't know about from Twitter?

Hannah Musick

Lots of different tools. So what strategies do you and your team use to kind of combat news avoidance or in other words, keep readers engaged?

D

So we try to really understand why they're reading what they're reading. And if they're not reading it, why they might not be. And so we do a story, for example, going back to

the who's hiring story of the coronavirus. If we had framed it a little differently instead and instead said "joblessness is a major problem right now" and quoted five people who said they're struggling, maybe that's not going to resonate like a list of people who are hiring will. And so it's not that there's not an interest in the subject. It's just that it wasn't framed properly. So to get a sense of that we might look at what are people searching for. And you can use Google Trends data for that and some other search tools, but what are they searching for and when they do, what are the keywords they use? So they're not going to search for economic trends in [my city], but they might search for [my city] jobs.

Hannah Musick

Right. Hiring positions. Yeah. That kind of thing. So kind of framing and tailoring to what your audiences is like going for the most. Are you familiar with compassion fatigue?

D

No, but I can maybe guess but what is it?

Hannah Musick

So basically, it's a commonly cited reason for news avoidance. It's basically when something that requires compassion on your part is going on in the news and you keep hearing about it and talking about it and caring about it and you can become mentally and emotionally and even physically tired because of all this expenditure of compassion.

Does that make sense?

D

Oh, sure, sure. Yeah.

Hannah Musick

And so, I'm curious- you mentioned that in comments sometimes people will talk about this. Do you see trends at all of people having compassion fatigue and complaining about that in relation to news?

D

I don't know. Maybe not as much. No. I mean, I guess we'll see comments from time to time where somebody might say, "why am I supposed to care about this?" But I think when I think of a story that is particularly emotional or heartbreaking tale, I think that people do rise up and respond to that. So I would say not as much, but maybe I'm just not seeing it.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, totally. I mean, if you if you don't see something, then that's also a really valid answer. Do you and your team train in or talk about trauma informed communication at all?

D

Trauma informed communication. Can you define them?

Hannah Musick

It's basically an academic title for common sense or sensitive best practices in journalism. So writing about really potentially traumatic or sensitive material in a way that doesn't really traumatize or hurt your readers. Like saying died by suicide versus someone killed themselves. That approach to journalism.

D

Yes. In fact, there was a project, a national project led by USA Today, which some companies were involved in, and it focused on suicide. And everywhere we published that we had specific language about you know, if this is something you're thinking about, here are some resources, and just giving people a heads up before they accidentally start reading too if that's a concern. So I would say yes, I would say it's not fully 100% part of our thought process in every case when it should be but absolutely, and we're trying to, in those cases, not only listen to experts, but also listen to just people's response to those stories and take that into consideration.

Hannah Musick

How do people respond? How does that work into that process?

D

It could be a couple of different ways. So you can comment at the end of the story or the end of the Facebook post and so it might be less of a direct outreach and more of free

press. But we'll get specific messages from time to time like a phone call or an email from a source that we know encouraging us to behave differently. And so we would listen to that. And then how that might travel through the newsroom is someone would get it and then they would share it with the rest of us, probably on a management level. Or maybe they might do it on a specific content team level and discuss it and say what do you think we should do about this and we'll take it into consideration.

Hannah Musick

Yep. So like that direct feedback loop of this is what we're hearing and we need to change what we're doing?

D

Yes. Yeah, absolutely. And the coronavirus is kind of changing a lot of things that we had planned. But one of the things I think that it may inform but not completely derail is right now we have a listening project going on with residents of the city to really understand what they would find most valuable in our work. What we should do more of or less than, or which stories they believe that we should tell and we haven't. And that's specifically within the city even though we cover the state. That's a project to just get a better read on the city itself.

Hannah Musick

That's really cool. Are the results of that going to be published anywhere?

D

I don't know, I can ask the person who's running it and find out. I would expect to see at some point, maybe a column or letter from the editor rather than say an article on Poynter or something along those lines, right. I don't know. I'll ask her.

Hannah Musick

That's super interesting.

D

Yeah, I think it's a great project. And 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.

Hannah Musick

That's interesting. Yeah, if you have any, any follow up information on that, when you talk to her, feel free to share. Okay, well, I know you need to go soon. But do you have any other observations kind of related to use avoidance and audience interaction that you wanted to share?

D

No, I think that's pretty much it. I started way back in the print days. So a long, long time ago. And the feedback you got back then was just how many people bought your paper and how many didn't. Or not even how many didn't, you just saw how many people

bought your paper and somebody in circulation might stand up and give his theory on why today was more popular than yesterday. But that's really all you had to go on. And so I think now, there's so many tools out there that you can really be smart about how you're responding to the audience, and you can tailor your approach for your purpose as a news organization. You can pay attention to all of them, you know, whatever you choose, but there's so much more insight now and it's far more rewarding and interesting.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, you're so much more data to work on.

D

Yeah. And it's not how can we get more and more and more, it's not like pageviews, crazy pageviews. It's about what does this tell us about our readership? What does this tell us about the city or the state and how can we use that to inform our editorial judgments?

Hannah Musick

Right, right. Really how can we serve this population the best?

D

Yeah completely. And we also make money out of pageviews.

Respondent K
Senior News Director for Digital at a major US city newspaper.

Hannah Musick

Could you confirm what your title is?

K

Yeah, definitely. So I am the senior news director for digital at *** and the ***.

Hannah Musick

Perfect. And how long have you been doing that?

K

I've been in this particular position about two years. And I've been with the company in various positions for about 15 years.

Hannah Musick

So can you kind of describe what your daily role is in that in that position?

K

Yeah, sure. So in kind of a nutshell, I oversee sort of several different groups. So even though I have digital is in my title, and I'm focused heavily on the website and platforms and social media and kind of overseeing the teams that manage those on a day to day basis, I also have the visuals staff, the entertainment staff, and the breaking news staff, which report to me. At first glance, it probably seems a little random. But you know, the

idea is that we strive to being digital first and mobile first. And so that's kind of my goal is to make sure every day that we have a good a good plan, and that we're executing on that plan for our mobile audiences, especially.

Hannah Musick

Right, awesome. There's kind of a lot of different moving parts, but it all works together.

K

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. To give you to give you an example of how we're working on it, right, working through like the coronavirus stuff right now. I'll work with the breaking news team. And obviously each of these groups has their own immediate leaders and supervisors, but we'll work on "Okay, what do we need out of our breaking news team?". Whether it's covering press conferences, or following tips on different stories, that kind of thing, and we always have an eye toward like okay what can we do for our online audience and how do they need this story? So it could be that something breaks quickly and they're just filing one line of a story and getting the information up there and then building it out as the day goes on. Then it could be going over to our entertainment team and really talking about how is this affecting dining and the restaurants in our area. We have an area where fish fries are really big this time of year around here and so we've even done things like let's do lists of where you can still go to your local fish fry. So a lot of it is different things going on and a lot of different areas but it all ends up being focused in different ways on all the all the different types of target audiences we have and who we're trying to reach online.

Hannah Musick

Are you familiar at all with the term news avoidance?

K

Um, you know, I have not heard that term. I've definitely heard of news fatigue. I don't know if it's related to that.

Hannah Musick

Oh, yeah, definitely. They're very related. Kind of in a nutshell, it's when people choose to almost go on a news diet. So they're limiting their consumption of news for an indeterminate period of time. And it is usually very related to news fatigue, like you were saying, where you can become overwhelmed especially by the 24-hour news cycle. So I'm curious in your personal life or your professional life, have you noticed news fatigue or news avoidance before?

K

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think we're kind of experiencing it right now at different degrees even though according to our web traffic and our analytics we've really peaked and in a huge way. 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. So we have a lot of people who are coming to us which is which is great. But yes, there we there are there are definitely times when people sort of reached the end of the

rope and they either can't read about that content anymore or they can't read about it or experience it in the in the same way as we're delivering it to them. Even if we take a take a step outside of coronavirus, we had for several years a reporter assigned to cover the opioid epidemic here in [city]. We were hit incredibly hard first by people who are addicted to prescription pain medication and then later to people who kind of transition to heroin and some other some other drugs. And she's fantastic. She still works for us and still covers that beat. We kind of got to the point though, after a little while, where is she even agree with this that we need to maybe pull back a little bit. Not necessarily in reporting, but let's take a look at the types of stories we're trying to tell. Let's not try to force a story just because to us it may feel big, but really in the grand scheme of things it is an incremental thing that's going on, let's wait. And let's do a better job of sort of picking what it is that we write about. We want the stories that we're telling to feel different enough from one another where doesn't feel like we're constantly banging our head against the wall with the same type of thing and constantly throwing stuff at people. So I think with coronavirus, we will eventually get to that place too. Sadly, the numbers will continue to go up and [nearby state] and [nearby state]. I think everyone's expecting that. Eventually it's going to get to this place where every single day is going to feel like yesterday. And so that's where I think the challenge comes in for us trying to figure out how do we deliver the essential information but how do we do it in a way that is not overwhelming for people that people get what they need to lead a productive life or where they get the information they need to make wise decisions. I guess maybe that's a better way to put it. I think that's a that's a constant thing with any story like that which has a has a long tail.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, because it's not going to be over anytime soon. So that's fascinating that you guys are thinking about the long-term picture of how are we going to continue feeding this to our audience without overwhelming them?

K

Yeah, definitely. And don't get me wrong. It's not to say that we hit it out of the ballpark every time. We all think that hey, this would be great and then it ends up not doing well for us or reaching the audience we expected it to. But right now, we're kind of transitioning and the immediate updates, breaking news daily stuff still has really high interest. We still have a ton of people watching the daily press conferences that we're streaming live and we still have a lot of people reading the stories about what the hospitals are doing all these different things. But we also have a team assigned to look for stories that are a little bit more about people who are helping, people who are volunteering services, or somebody who is organizing a drive or something like. Those are bad examples, but basically things that are sort of counter programming because we kind of feel like there's going to be a time when people, and that time is either now or incredibly close, where people are also going to be looking for a little bit of hope. While we've done a little bit of that, obviously, as the stories have popped up, this group is really going to be looking at doing it in a more systematic way. And they're really going to be responsible for it, too. So we don't have to necessarily worry about having another reporter choose between a breaking news story and a more feature a story. I'm sure that

will morph, too. There'll be there'll be times where people will start to feel like, "Okay, I've had enough of these stories" and then we'll have to figure out what's next.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, yeah, totally. So almost taking a solutions-based approach?

K

Absolutely, absolutely. And what helps now, too, is a lot of the tools that we have. We can sort of get a sense of what people are interested in and what angles that they want to know about. Like earlier this week we started to see the number of people who have filed for unemployment and we're seeing a lot of people who are looking for that type of content. So whether it's who's hiring or whatever. Earlier this week, we did a very quick story on here are some big employers in [my city] who have openings. We've done things on child care stuff. Or when the shelter in place was first ordered in the area, we did a lot of stories off of what people were searching for. And so that was everything from why are liquor stores allowed to stay open to am I going to be arrested if I walk down the street or can I go to check on my relative or something like that. A lot of it in the past, like 10 or 15 years ago, would have done a newspaper story where it would have just been this real long thing and maybe it would have two or three sidebars that you may have some lists in there. But now the tools that we have are really nice because we can see what people are searching for. And then we can try to help meet those needs and not necessarily always just relying on our gut for "Oh, this is really important". To one of our

readers, the most important thing for them at that particular moment might be needed to get a job so we have to bear that in mind too.

Hannah Musick

So corona is one of those cases where it's still unfolding. I mean, a few weeks in but relatively new into this peak of new news coverage. Can you think of during a hot political time, like during election coverage or impeachment coverage or the Weinstein trial or something like that, do you notice the consuming behavior change over the course of time? Does it does it drop off at a certain point when people become fatigued? Can you see news avoidance?

K

Hmm, yeah, no, no, no, I'm trying to think outside of the opioid stuff that we had. We do generally notice there is a point in time. Like if you look at the Dayton, Ohio shootings that happened. There is a period and this is really true with anytime there's a disaster where a lot of people are affected or hurt and there's an immediate rush to get the information. Everybody wants to know exactly what's happening and what happened in the direct aftermath. Depending on what it is and the severity of it and all of that it could go on for three, four or five days. It just depends. But there definitely does get to be a time where it hits audience fatigue. People are hungry for that information at the very beginning, but then it starts to really drop off. Then only the people who are really, really, really devoted to this and may be directly impacted or know somebody who's directly impacted. And so we definitely see that begin to fall off. And that's where having the

different metrics programs that we have really come into play too. Not that we make decisions solely off of metrics, but it does inform us that hey, our audience, maybe wants us to step back and not write five stories a day about this when one may be able to do it. Or maybe we need to try something different on our social media accounts. Or maybe we need to try a different search or that type of a thing. And so it's a definitely a balance there of trying to measure that when the audience begins to drop off and we feel like we need to continue to deliver the news.

Hannah Musick

So your strategy, I guess, when you see that news to keep happening, and that drop off happening, is to evaluate with your team what are we doing? What can we change to better accommodate what people are needing now? Kind of like that? What can we do to alter what we're getting out so that it's going to meet the audience needs?

K

Yeah, that's absolutely right. That's absolutely right. It's sort of meshing the traditional news judgment you have. Let's just say there's a tornado that comes through and hits one of our communities. We know how to cover that initially. And we know our audience is going to be interested in how big of an impact is this and how long will the shockwaves be felt, how are people rebuilding? We could tell those stories, and there's definitely an interest, but we also try to make sure that there are people who might be googling how do I file a homeowner's insurance claim or any number of things. And if people are looking for that information, we have to balance it and we have to figure out what resources to

sort of move where. It just can't sort of always be about the big macro story. Like, there's also these micro stories that people are looking for help with and it's kind of surprising where people will turn to and try to find that help from.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. What kind of metrics do you use to?

K

Yeah, we look at a couple of different things. In like a general sense, we still look at pageviews and unique visitors and time on site. We're also now within the last like year, year and a half, we're paying a little bit more close attention to both stories that result in a subscription which you can't always necessarily say 100% somebody saw the story saw the headline and subscribed to because of that, but it is one of those things we're kind of getting our feet wet with a little bit. But so looking at that, and then also looking at what are taking those metrics and splitting them out by loyal readers and loyal users, so people who have come back three times in 30 days or we also split it up by people who are already subscribers as well. And so looking at what they're reading and paying attention to as well to try to help inform how we how we go about it.

Hannah Musick

So it sounds like paying even closer attention to subscribing behavior and to what the audience is telling you that they want?

K

Yeah, definitely, definitely. We often noticed there while there is some overlap, sometimes there's a difference between what a subscriber and what a non-subscriber will read or are interested in.

Hannah Musick

Do you guys have an email newsletter or anything of that sort?

K

We do. So we have a six or seven sort very basic newsletters that go out every day that are basically links to stories. They're not really written or curated or anything like that. But we actually have one newsletter that is a weekly newsletter that's written by somebody who does. She was a former local TV personality who was laid off and now she does a Facebook Live show for us. And she does a sort of narrative newsletter once a week. And we also just launched a coronavirus newsletter as well. But yeah, those are definitely those are definitely interesting too.

Hannah Musick

I'm just curious, have you have you seen more people subscribe to that or a consistent number of people subscribe to that over the past two years?

K

Ah, yeah. It's not a huge audience. You know, honestly, I would just be guessing at her click through rate at this point. I'm sorry. But there are several of our newsletters that are in like yhr 10s of thousands of people, a few of them are in the hundreds, they're not huge. If we were putting a bunch of time into them, we may not continue to do those. But it is it is definitely something that that we're seeing. What I find to be super interesting on the newsletter front is this coronavirus newsletter. The click through rate is through the roof. It's like 25 or 30%. And usually it's like 2% or something like that. It's interesting that people want this content in that way, and then they're responding that way.

Hannah Musick

That's awesome. I'm glad to hear that. Have you ever heard of the term compassion fatigue?

K

I have yes, yes, yes.

Hannah Musick

Okay. So because it's kind of related to what we've been talking about and news fatigue and compassion fatigue are often very similar and often like a catalyst for news avoidance. So is that on your radar when it comes to your position?

K

I would say that it probably comes up less than attention fatigue simply because of how we're set up with the things we pay attention to. Say you're writing about, I guess the classic one would be like people who are in jail, right? And there could be this sort of like, "Well, why should I care if they're experiencing bad conditions?" But for us, it's more about this is an important story to tell still. Like there is a certain injustice going on here or at the very least there's something that should be addressed that people should know about. So that definitely comes up less for us. But I would say it's something that we're aware of. We talk about it in terms of who are we going to market the story to? Right? Like who? Who would want to know? Sure, we're going to put it out on our platforms and everybody who wants to can read the story but are there ways to reach the micro audiences out there, too, that we think might be interested? For instance, we'll send out with our heroin and our drug addiction and drug abuse content because there are certain people who would look at that and experience compassion fatigue after a while just depending on what your views are your outlook on these things are. But there are groups, national and local groups, and their followers or their members want to want to read this stuff. It's sort of incumbent upon us to try to find those people and find those influencers or community groups or advocacy groups and say Hey, we've written the story we feel like it's really important. Maybe our core audience would be lukewarm, but we feel like it's important and we could share it with them as well.

Hannah Musick

That's really interesting. This idea of micro audiences is super, super fascinating. Would you like personally communicate that? Or would you do that through newsletters? Or how would you target those micro audiences?

K

Yeah, that's a good question. Sometimes we make it part of the planning process. And sometimes we start with groups or individuals who we already have a relationship with, and usually that comes from a reporter. You know, they've interviewed somebody or know a different group personally. A lot of times what they'll do is when the story is published, they'll do some quick outreach to those people and say, Hey, I thought you might be interested in this. We've also done stuff from our branded accounts. Like our main Twitter account, we've done that before, too. And especially when a reporter doesn't feel comfortable doing it for whatever reason or feels they'll be put in sort of an ethical dilemma by asking somebody to share, we want to be mindful of that. But, so, so we have done it that way, too. And those things will sometimes not yield a lot. But then there are times when it will, it will hit those audiences.

Hannah Musick

Right, right. Kind of does what it's supposed to do. I feel like I'm throwing a lot of terms out but have you ever heard of trauma informed communication?

K

That would be new for me.

Hannah Musick

It's probably something that you're already familiar with just not the title. But it's basically the idea of using best practices in a mass media context to not encourage emotional distress or retraumatization. So things like writing died by suicide versus saying someone killed themselves or not including graphic details of sexual assault, things like that. Is that familiar?

K

Oh, yes, absolutely. I would say the most common way that comes up for us is we will, we will often put a little note at the bottom and sometimes tops of stories with a suicide hotline number and that kind of a thing if a story we feel like is going to have an impact that way. Especially over the last two years, we've had some staff members who have just been really good and really attentive to that. But yeah, I'd say that's probably the most common way that we do that.

Hannah Musick

The reason I bring it up is just because often stories that involve a lot of traumatic subjects are the ones that can be can trigger news avoidance or news fatigue. So I was just curious if that played into the way you and your team share the stories and things like that.

K

Yeah that that will come up occasionally in how we frame the story and the language we use for social media. Especially when you think about Facebook, or Twitter or Instagram, you're really getting just the bare bones of the story. And so we will sometimes have that conversation about what do we want to what do we want to include in this, what do we want in the descriptions or in the post languages, what do we what do we want to stay with this? And there are definitely some we have to be careful of for a lot of different reasons. That's actually a part of a part of what we talk about, too. Somebody's just going to happen upon the story out of the blue and what impression are they going to get? We make mistakes like every single day and there are things that we that we leave out 100%.

Hannah Musick

Do you have any other observations about kind of these different moving pieces within your organization or anything that I didn't ask that you think is important?

K

No, no. This report sounds super interesting. I find that that for some people when they are confronted with metrics or anything like that, it's very easy to kind of say "Oh, well our audience only cares about this crazy crime or completely seemingly frivolous story". And 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 trying to say. It's an art and some of it is a science. But you can yield and you can get some really good, interesting stuff out there. And the reverse is true too that even though there might be

stories that you feel in your heart are incredibly important, but you're worried about your core audience not caring about it, there could be other audiences out there for you. It's not always a sort of either-or proposition. I count myself in the same boat. None of us really had to think too much about circulation before the internet, and we didn't really worry too much about subscriptions. We knew what they were generally, we knew what our audience very generally looked like on a day to day basis and how many people subscribed, how many people bought the newspaper at a at a stand or whatever. But this is all kind of new to us. I sort of feel like we're entering a kind of new thing where people are actually kind of paying attention to that stuff for the sake of just learning more about who their readers are and who their potential readers are.

Respondent E

News Audiences Chief at an American international daily business newspaper

Hannah Musick

So in your current role, what does that look like day to day?

E

Well, every day is different. So I run two teams at the [news organization], one team I run it is a designer, a developer who's a coder and a reporter who actually will be leaving me soon because she's getting promoted. So I have that team and we're working on building tools to integrate journalism, and working on new experiences for professional women and people of color. Have gotten a little bit further on the work as it relates to professional women, with us rolling out some new products, I hope by spring, and some

new experiences. And then the other team that I run, I was promoted in December to oversee the manager that runs the team that curates all the comments on their website. And the organization went through immense change with this commenting, turning it into conversations, limiting it only to people that have memberships, setting up community rules, and really has like a team of people that are curating the conversation. It's about six of them, that makes sure that the comments are like meeting community standards, getting hate speech off the site. Like there's a whole protocol and process and technology that they use. And I was asked to step in, and lead this team. And so I'm working with them on how to grow community, how to be aware of stereotypes so we can get those off the site. And I expect it's going to get really crazy between now and Election Day and post-election. So on a day to day, it really depends on what project I'm working on what team I'm more ingrained into. And then I also work on our newsletter which is growing fiercely, and started with just a couple hundred since before I joined, and now is like 15 times what it was when it started. So I don't have like a day to day. What I can tell you is that I spend 75% of my time in [city]. So what that looks like is I get up in the morning, and usually by eight I'm in my home office either working on my phone or my computer, my tablet, communicating with people updating on projects and writing some copy myself, updating reports doing slides, because my mandate just isn't internal work that I'm working on. But it's also to be our face of a journal. On the weeks that I travel to New York, it kind of looks different each month depending on the needs of like, what's on the calendar, what's on the schedule, our agreement is that I would come every month for a week. And I think I'm more likely this year with it being an election year to pivot to going to three days every three weeks because it gives me a little bit more face time isn't

quite as hard on me being gone a whole week. And you know, I had shoulder surgery a year ago and so I've been recovering well from that but it's still hard. And so doing the two day turnaround means I am it's much easier for me to navigate with my bag getting on and off the plane. So it really did so it so it depends on a lot of things. Like I said I lead two teams. So depends on what's happening with the new audiences team versus the audience voices team that week. It depends on if I'm doing any public speaking that week or have a board meeting to attend. It depends on if I'm working remote out of [city] or if it actually is a week of part of the week, and I'm actually in [city]. So that's why I can't really give you like, this is what it looks like every day.

Hannah Musick

Oh, sure. Sure. totally understandable. And I mean that's one of the best parts I'm sure is that every day is a little bit different. Yeah, awesome. Have you noticed people either in your audience, or kind of in general in day to day life, avoiding news coverage, before?

E

I didn't catch the last part. Have I noticed them-?

Hannah Musick

Avoiding news coverage?

E

Hmm. I don't think so. And I'm not really sure like how I would know that, but I don't see him.

Hannah Musick

Okay, so how have you come across the term news avoidance before?

E

I'm just thinking, how are you defining news avoidance? And what do you think that will look like?

Hannah Musick

Sure, sure. So from the current research has been done and how I'm defining it in my research is news avoidance is when people choose to not consume or kind of limit their consumption of almost like go on a news diet, news media over a prolonged but indeterminate period of time. So it's an individual choice. And there's different reasons behind it, go on this news diet. And it's a spectrum. For some people they might be like, Oh, it's all fake news and I'm not going to read the news anymore at all. I'm going to like, cut myself off. And then for other people it might be like this coverage of the election cycle is really stressing me out. So I'm going to stop looking at news stories for the next two months or something.

E

Hmm. So I think that that probably depends on or could be influenced by a person's age, occupation, education level, geographic location and race, and gender. And so I think like, I haven't had any personal experience with news avoidance and haven't seen it intersects with the work that I'm doing because, honestly, on any given day, we got 40 stories open on [our website]. And it's hard for the customer/audience voices team to stay up on all of the comments that have been posted. So I'm not experiencing news avoidance in my role, but what I will say is that I'm not suggesting that it doesn't exist. Because we certainly know that news organizations have been impacted by changes between print and online, audience levels fluctuating, advertising costs, revenue models. But I would be curious and I haven't read anything about this whether or not news avoidance looks differently for people based off of those factors. And I would bet that it probably would.

Hannah Musick

So it's really interesting you say that because there hasn't been a ton of research done on it so far. But what has been done has found that it's more prevalent in women and especially women who have a large role as a caretaker in their family's life. And that education level and to some extent income also kind of factor into it for sure.

E

Yeah, that's what I'm thinking That's really interesting, but no, I don't have any personal experience with it.

Hannah Musick

Okay, so that probably kind of answered the next question, which is kind of during times of intense news coverage like natural disasters or political cycles or like an coronavirus I was going to ask if you notice in the audience, a change in behavior.

E

Hmm. Well, I do know that I hear that the open rates on the push of alerts related to the coronavirus have been shooting to the roof, meaning people gets this alert that our news organization has news and the push alerts don't necessarily from what I hear do that great. I don't have the actual data on like what they are. But I was in a meeting yesterday where the person who handles them said it was like phenomenal. Like it was huge and everybody was opening this push alert on the corona virus and what you need to know to protect yourself. So I definitely think in times of health scares, or international health concerns, we're such a global world now, with people traveling and coming and going. I definitely think that information on those topics really resonate with audiences and is of a concern.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. So the way that you guys measure kind of audience consumption of the different media you're putting out, so you said, like open rate on push alerts, what are some other ways that you measure audience engage?

E

Hmm. So we look at time spent as an engagement measure. Because just because someone's opening something doesn't mean that they're spending any time on it. We look at that in comparison to what type of media it is, text, video, podcast. We can look at scroll like when people are scrolling down, we can look at return if they're coming back, those are some of the measurements that we look at.

Hannah Musick

Do you guys also pretty closely monitor for paid news access or app downloads?

E

So, we are behind a paywall. So generally, you can see some of the news outside of the paywall, but at a certain point visitors will hit the paywall.

Hannah Musick

Right.

E

And this is a dynamic paywall, and that it's different for each user. So based off of the information, you can gather using cookies and third-party research based on your computer URL. And it can tell if you've been there before, if you've looked at other articles, it will then serve you up and experience and prompt you to become a member based off of the information it has on you. But yes, we are able to look at who's paying who's not. I want to say it was just in the last couple of months that it was reported that

the publication has now exceeded 2 million digital subscribers. So we're absolutely seeing growth in in traffic as it relates to digital.

Hannah Musick

So are you are you familiar at all with compassion fatigue?

E

I don't think so.

Hannah Musick

So compassion fatigue, it's something that kind of came from a healthcare background with nursing and stuff. And it's kind of like when over a long period of time exerting compassion can be like really mentally and physically exhausting for the person in that role. So that has expanded into other areas of research including journalism where a person who is often exposed to negative or depressing hard news can experience compassion fatigue. National disaster coverage, that kind of thing, potentially traumatic news. So it has been identified as a major cause of news avoidance. So I was just curious if especially in comment moderating, if you have encountered anything to do with that, I guess. Compassionate fatigue and news avoidance combined.

E

I haven't but let me say this, my experience with comment moderation with leading this team is only two months old. Because remember, I got a promotion in December to pick

up that team. So when I was hired, I was hired to work on developing new audiences. And then I was asked in December to take on this team with this kind of moderation. So some of these answers, I might have a different answer a year or two from now, because I'm only two months in with this team. And so no, I haven't experienced that so I can't really like speak to that. And I'm just trying to think like the way we're set up with our workflow I honestly don't even know if anyone on my team could speak to it, because you don't really know what the audience is thinking unless they put it in their comments. And I feel like a lot of these questions are things that like, you know, do you avoid the news? Do you have a news avoidance? Do you have compassion fatigue? I feel like those are things that people would never communicate to us. So unless we were asking how would we know? And so like I don't know how that would intersect with the work, and certainly haven't observed it. And I don't even know that my team that has been working in this space for a significant amount of time, would be able to speak to it because I'm 95% sure they've never had a conversation with any readers about these topics. I don't think that even they would even be aware. Because, you know, on the day to day, you know, our goals are to keep the conversation civil, to moderate it to keep it going. But then also be looking at the data that we can gather on these conversations, and be able to make strategic moves of how we want to change the audience experience for growth for the journal. So compassion fatigue is never going to come into our wheelhouse because that isn't our charge. And we're so busy on the day to day with like what we're doing.

Hannah Musick

Thank you for explaining that. That's no worry. Part of my research is concerned with even just seeing the level of awareness or the level of if there's a way to measure that. So that that is valuable feedback. That's great. So another question I wanted to ask you about this, this third part of what I'm looking at, are you familiar with (or your team) trauma informed communication?

E

I'm not.

Respondent M

Senior Director of News Strategy for a middle-market American daily newspaper

Hannah Musick

Could you go ahead and confirm what your title is?

M

Senior Director of news strategy for [news organization] and [news organization].

Hannah Musick

Great, because I know from your website, there's really quite a few things that you do not just that.

M

I do a lot of different stuff. It's a Swiss Army Knife kind of job.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, very true. Okay, could you explain what your daily role looks like and what kind of day to day that means?

M

A lot of what I do is manage news partnerships. I guess I talk about the job that's probably most relevant to the research. And, you know, we enter into partnerships to kind of come up with new and creative ways to present news and information to people. Another set of relationships, I manage is there are a variety of third-party software tool providers that purport to help us engage with audiences better. And so I manage those relationships with those companies and you know everything from live blogging software to analytics, that kind of thing. And then I work with our newsrooms on Learning and Leadership Development.

Hannah Musick

No shortage of free time, right?

M

I find a little bit.

Hannah Musick

Awesome. Wow, that sounds like a little bit different every day.

M

Absolutely.

Hannah Musick

Gotcha. So how long have you been in that position?

M

I've been in this particular specific position for about two years, a little over two years. Before that, I ran a group responsible for news operations and that included our print design studios. And before that I was Chief Content Officer of another media company.

Hannah Musick

So, my topic is news avoidance and kind of easing into that, have you ever noticed people, either in your media audience or in general, avoiding news coverage before?

M

I often say one of the conversation that has scared me the most was Oprah Winfrey suggesting to people that they go on a "news fast" in order to manage their emotions. And that was really the first time I've been introduced to that. And since then we kind of come across people who would say "I don't pay much attention to the news because they find it too depressing or I don't watch a lot of news because it's not relevant to me." And those tend to be, you know pretty specific conversations. Random in the sense that you know,

when people find out what I do we get in conversations about news and every now and then somebody will express that feeling.

Hannah Musick

Okay, so, that Oprah example is actually like a perfect example of the type of news avoidance that I am interested in studying. So that is ideal. You're definitely aware and familiar with news avoidance. So just like you were saying, there's different reasons for avoiding it and it's kind of a spectrum. Some people do like an almost social media blackout. Like, "I'm not going to read any of the news for a year." And then other people "I'm just going to avoid it until this traumatic thing happening in the news is over, and it's less stressful." So I'm curious, since some of the triggers for news avoidance that have shown up in the research so far are things that are very emotional, or that might trigger compassion fatigue. Some examples would be the ongoing coverage of Corona virus can be very stressful. Political election cycles can be very emotional and stressful for some people. During times of intensive coverage, have you noticed that the news consumption of media you're putting out changes for your audience at all?

M

Well, 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.

Hannah Musick

Okay, so it's like, there might be a portion that is avoiding it but there's such an influx of people situationally interested that it's really hard to measure?

M

It's hard to see a correlation when you're in the midst of providing that information. What I will say is I think that fatigue probably shows up in different ways. I mean, it's not necessarily in audience statistics, but in the degree to which people trust the news and information outlets like my outlet are providing. And I also think we see that in a willingness or lack thereof to pay for news, the degree to which people see news as a civic good and that is useful. I mean, if you feel fatigued by news, I would imagine, and I don't have research to back this up, but I would imagine that if people say news fatigues them they would be less likely to pay to subscribe. And they would be less likely to consume it during those times when the story of the moment is truly commanding attention. In other words, the valleys between breaking news events have the potential to be a little bit deeper when people are tuning out. And again, people are not going to pay for news when we think of it as a consumer good, as a public good. As we pivot toward more subscription models for news, I would think that that I would think that that's a factor. I'd be interested in seeing research related to that.

Hannah Musick

You'd be interested in seeing research related to how it affects subscriptions?

M

Absolutely.

Hannah Musick

That's new perspective. That's really interesting. Because, I mean, I don't think the research exists yet. But from a logical perspective, that makes a lot of sense.

M

Like I said, I'm not going to pay money for something that depresses me and if I feel like news depresses me, am I a subscriber? Probably not.

Hannah Musick

Do you happen to know if there are periods of time where there are more people subscribing versus less? Or periods of time where a lot of people would unsubscribe?

M

Well, I think we tend to look at the kinds of stories that drives subscriptions. What I would call routine news of death and destruction does not drive subscripsts. And so I feel like a lot of news organizations, local news organizations in particular, are getting away from what I call turn of the screw crime and court coverage. Because it may it may fulfill a traditional news of record function, but that's not those are not the kinds of stories people are subscribing for and are causing people to subscribe. 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.

Hannah Musick

Really interesting. So you don't have to switch all of your hard news to cat stories.

M

Oh, yeah. Absolutely not. I mean, there's a place for cute dog and cat stories but it's a very, very limited part of the you know of the media diet because that's more like a dessert if you will and what causes people to subscribe is not dessert.

Hannah Musick

That actually is a very apt metaphor because a lot of news fatigue and news avoidance is like going on a new diet. So that fits in really well actually.

M

Yeah, you know, if you if you eat nothing but cookies and candy, that's just as bad for you as all the stuff that's bad for you.

Hannah Musick

Right? Exactly. Avoiding the news entirely and only watching BuzzFeed videos, you're going to get the same news and societal nutritional value, I guess. Are there strategies that you and your organizations follow to combat news avoidance in your audience? Maybe you haven't thought about it as news avoidance before this conversation, but strategies to combat overwhelming people with very traumatic or difficult news?

M

Well, I'd say it's part and parcel of the editing function is to be vigilant about what audience members are being exposed to, to be very judicious about the way that we cover tragedy. I was looking at coverage of the El Paso Times recently where they had the mass shooting at the Walmart late last summer, and the way that they went about that coverage being focused on the victims rather than the perpetrator- to hold back publication and posting of images and video that were graphic, to hold off on publishing of the shooters manifesto which was released very quickly after that shooting. I think it is baked into the DNA of good newsrooms that are anchored in their communities to understand what audiences want in periods what I would describe as community trauma, and that the news organization has a role, not just in covering what happened, but doing so in a way that helps the community absorb it, understand it, and move on and kind of integrate what has happened into their lives. You know, to me, that's the role of a good community news organization. And the nationalization of news...I believe there's a distinction in the way that local news organizations tackle these kinds of stories and national news organizations. Because national reporters and editors don't necessarily have to face the people involved at the supermarket. And local journalists do.

Hannah Musick

It's a totally different level of intimacy with your audience. So, being with an outlet that is much more national, how does that affect the way that your organization and you when dealing with stories like this? Would the strategies or the way you write about things change?

M

Well, I will say that the way that our organization is organized, that we are now a network of local news organizations. Our reporting about shooting largely came from the journalists who live in El Paso. So I feel like we're a little bit different in that regard. But, overall, it's about understanding the audience and understanding what level of information and detail particularly of traumatic events, allows people to make sense of the senseless. But not go into such gratuitous detail that people are turned off by it. I think most of our journalists are parents, are sons, are daughters. We talk to our family members who are not journalists about journalism and I think as people's attitudes about news change, I like to think we take that and try to apply that feedback and those lessons as best as we can. I can't say that before this call, we've ever had a conversation about how do we bring in people who actively avoid news? But I do think that there is an ongoing conversation in newsrooms is about engagement. And we can measure that. And if people are engaged with our content we feel like we're doing it well. If people are not engaged with our content, then we're trying to figure out how do we make adjustments and understand why.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, it's really looking to see where those eyes and ears are coming from not necessarily who's missing from the conversation. Okay, how would you then define or measure success when dealing with engagement and news avoidance?

M

We measure engagement by the amount of content people consume. In digital media, most people are what you call one and done. They'll come to a story through social or through search, and they'll read that story, and then they'll go on to another story on another site. We measure engagement by how much content do you consume with us? And clearly somebody is coming to our news outlet or one of our local sites, and is consuming two or three stories, then we feel like this is somebody who is actively engaged and wants to know. It's really hard to figure out how to take one and done and make them two or three?

Hannah Musick

Right, how do you get them to keep clicking through and keep coming back.

M

Right. And then we look at particular stories, like I said before, we look at particular stories where somebody will go to that story and then the next thing that they do is hit the paywall and they decide that they're going to subscribe. We really pay attention to the

kinds of stories that motivate that behavior. And again, we find that those stories have some depth to them, they have some nuance to them. They are they are not clickbait type stories because people can get that anywhere.

Hannah Musick

Right. If they just want facts, you can get that anywhere?

M

I'd say it a little differently, I'd say lightweight, fluffy or superficial. People can get that anywhere.

Hannah Musick

So subscriptions, you would say that's also a good measure? Because if someone's going to put money subscribe or see content, then that seems like a really good measure of engagement. Is that correct?

M

Absolutely. For us that's the ultimate measure of engagement.

Hannah Musick

So you talked about Oprah and anecdotally, compassion fatigue and people consuming news. Has that manifested itself in any other way when looking at audience engagement?

M

Not that I not that I can put my finger on. I love this research question because I think there's an opportunity for a lot more research specifically in this in this area.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, it seems like it's really starting to gain traction and attention and more research is being done now, and has been probably the last 10 years. So I'm really also excited to see kind of what comes out. Have you ever heard of trauma informed communication?

M

Say that again?

Hannah Musick

Trauma informed communication.

M

Are we talking about when we're doing stories about particular kinds of trauma and listening, enlisting people who've been affected by that to advise us on how to do it?

Hannah Musick

Yeah, that's actually a great example. Yeah. Things like that or also things like using certain terminology so as not to trigger or emotionally distressed someone in your audience. Trigger warnings is one way that some news organizations do it, using different

phrasing such as died by suicide versus killing themselves, that kind of educated communication.

M

Yeah, we had a fairly sizable project last year on this. I think that was a really good example of that.

Hannah Musick

So can you tell me a little more about that.

M

Unfortunately, I've got about five minutes before I've got another call so I want to make sure I get all the key questions. But I was going to say was, you can just just Google [project name] and you'll be able to see the whole package.

Hannah Musick

No worries, that is great. Just to kind of wrap up now, so that you can have time for the next call, is there any other observations about news avoidance in your organization that you'd like to share? Or anything that I didn't touch on that you think is important?

M

I'm not sure that people in newsrooms are consciously thinking about news avoidance as a thing. It's probably being conflated with issues such as lack of trust. Lack of trust, I

think is bigger than this question of fake news. To me, lack of trust is "I don't believe the news organization is acting in my best interest." It can be "Everybody lies and the press is not to be trusted either" and that general decline of trusted institutions. I think those issues that are closely related. But in terms of what is what journalists are consciously thinking about? I think they're consciously thinking about lack of trust more so than news avoidance.

Hannah Musick

It's good to hear though, at least from a kind of more editorial, overseeing perspective, that engagement and being careful of language seems to be like on your radar. So that's a good first step at least.

M

It's huge but it's closely correlated with the need to gain, regain and retain trust with the audience because it's really clear that we have a lot of work to do. And language, phrasing, framing, our approach to stories. Something that one of the local newspapers where I live (that's 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. There are those who say that online comments are part of part of this issue of lack of trust.

Respondent T

Talent relations for an American news aggregate that distributes primarily via newsletter.

Hannah Musick

Could you explain what your job looks like day to day and what that job entails?

T

Totally. So I always describe my role as kind of having two halves to it. The first half is booking for our audio podcast series and our video series. That in itself kind of has two halves because I'm working with inbound pitches from publicists, whether it's politicians, business leaders, etc. And I'm working with outbound pitches. So I'm like ideating who we should be going after, with a couple different things in mind like current events. Like right now I work off my own like slate that I create of content that's coming up like here's all the TV shows coming out in the next quarter, here's the films, movies or books and festivals. From there it is strategically thinking and looking at those lists and making recommendations to our team on who I should be outreaching to for which series that would resonate with our audience or perform well, I see those as sometimes two different things, and or would be a really good brand moment for us. The other half of my job is I'm the front facing person to all talent will either if they're in the office or we're out of events and we're shooting, I am the person greeting them introducing them to our team. I am their resource; I am the go between as well as front facing to our publicist. So I'm going to multiple drinks, lunches, dinners with publicists a week so we can work with talent further down the line.

Hannah Musick

Honestly, that sounds like so much fun honestly.

T

It's really fun. I always say it's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. There's never a day that's normal when you're working with talent or just like oh, this is a fine day. No it's either like the best day ever and you're meeting someone or working with someone really awesome or the worst day ever.

Hannah Musick

You have a lot of good stories.

T

My God from when I worked at [news organization] I have a seven page Word document of stories.

Hannah Musick

So how much interaction would you say or how much does traditional journalism and the news cycle affect your what you do?

T

So I would say it depends on the job and from my perspective it is dependent on the outlet. When I was working at [news organization], the news cycle because I was more strictly lifestyle and entertainment, the videos were much less news focused. Now at [my

current news organization] because we are truly a brand that is focused on news and at the end of the day we are there to help our audience live smarter. That is our line which revolves around obviously our daily newsletters, our flagship product. It's summarizing the news and the top stories of the day so anything we're doing to serve our audience usually involves the news. And you know, it even depends across products, like for our one celebrity series, it's a little less journalism and newsy and more what's the movie that's coming out with the celebrity is promoting. Whereas the podcast that I book for, it's a career-based podcast that definitely focuses more on like newsmakers. Our one other video series, that's more of our like 60 Minutes style video series and also a little more news based.

Hannah Musick

So definitely varying levels and different kinds of news, but especially in the flagship product newsletter a lot of news contents.

T

Right, exactly, exactly. I mean, the more entertaining it gets, the less news focused is the thesis for me.

Hannah Musick

So, have you heard about news avoidance before?

T

I don't think I've ever heard the phrase news avoidance, no.

Hannah Musick

Okay. I kind of touched on it a little bit earlier, but do you kind of understand what the meaning of it is?

T

From what you said earlier, I would take it as people are just like choosing to avoid reading the news consuming media in any way due to like fatigue or you know, another reason that they feel like they need a break?

Hannah Musick

Yes, totally got it. Specifically, in research a lot of it has to do with compassion fatigue. Being overwhelmed because there's so many things that you would have compassion for and it is too much.

T

That's actually just like interesting. I'm applying this to my own life and I can see that being the case.

Hannah Musick

Have you noticed especially during intense news, have you noticed news consumption in your audience and the way that they're interacting with your product?

T

So, I actually think that we are really in a unique position compared to traditional media outlets, in that, you know, it was founded when the founders who worked at [news organization] at the time said we're not working in media and we don't have time so just summarize it for us and give us a headline. So they made a quick email newsletter just for their friends and they would craft a couple things like here's what if you only read like three things you need to know to live responsibly and inform yourself. So in some ways, I see [our news organization] as a solution to news avoidance because it truly is just a summary of things you need to know and people don't have to be going through a bunch of articles they curate themselves. It's a highly, highly trusted brand for people in our community. They're trusting products that we're recommending; they're trusting the information we're putting out on candidates because we're not partisan. So people in our community they're using it to cut through all the noise, just get the facts and know what they need to know and nothing else. So I would actually see us as the opposite of most. They're not scrolling through a traditional homepage where hard news lives. We're kind of like a news aggregate. We're not breaking news in any way. So I would say that our audience is actually coming to us to solve that problem.

Hannah Musick

That is fascinating.

T

Yeah, it's completely unique and it's hard to it's hard to describe. They have the newsletter in front of them and they're interacting with it. They have a podcast. They have social media, it's much more direct to consumer kind of versus a bunch of links or push notifications or Twitter feeds, that's not us. We are for when people want a bare minimum of what they need to know.

Hannah Musick

Right, it's like here's exactly what you need and nothing more.

T

Right, exactly. So I would say that that's kind of the solution in my mind.

Hannah Musick

So when there is something potentially traumatic going on, I guess, or something like very emotional hard happening, especially on a national or global scale, do you notice the way your consumers interact with the newsletter change? Like are they clicking on more articles, clicking on less articles, is the type of articles that they're going to changing?

That's kind of like a huge question I ask I realize.

T

That's a great question. And I can't totally speak to that. But I can ask somebody on our marketing team about that, because I don't have click rates at all for the daily newsletter.

Hannah Musick

Oh, yeah, sure. That would be cool. Yeah.

T

It's a great question but I don't want to give you the wrong information.

Hannah Musick

So up until this point, news avoidance hasn't really affected the way that you do your job.

Right?

T

I would say are we only talking news avoidance as hard news that's traumatic?

Hannah Musick

I am particularly interested in traumatic news, and that can be hard news, but it can also be softer news. Maybe a good, harder example of this is the Harvey Weinstein trials. A softer version of it might be an essay on sexual assault.

T

That's helpful. So can we ask your question again.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, sure. Does news avoidance, and being mindful of that sensitive content and how people might react, affects the way you do your job?

T

In the fall we interviewed Ronan Farrow, we interviewed Chanel Miller, and we interviewed Susan Fowler. All three of those are tied to huge national news stories. All three, you know, obviously related to negative, sensitive topics. I would say again people are coming to us specifically to know what they need to know about topics these women did a bunch of interviews and they're trying to dive deep and get interesting quotes out of her or something different than another outlet has gotten. But the we, and I was like really confused on why we did this the first time, but all our best performing videos are where the author literally just summarize their story. And I swear to you, they are the highest viewed and the most engaging videos as far as comments and its just an overview summary of people's stories that have been in the news for a long time. So from that perspective, I found that it's actually opposite because we really liked we have the like, you know, the person there summarizing their story for us. Hearing it from the source for our audience and also breaking it down to the easiest thing- people typically will watch a two-minute video and it's all they're going to need to know on a basic level and they don't have to consume anymore. And the comments are huge. We look at something at such a high level we move out instead of zooming in which a lot of outlets do. It has helped our engagement and our focus and our performance and success.

Hannah Musick

So that's so interesting because it kind of just like you were saying earlier the solution to news avoidance. Even with a really difficult topic people are like, okay, it's two minutes, I'll know everything I need to know, I won't have to invest, like a lot of time and energy.

T

We have a whole team dedicated to like nurturing relationships that our outlet has with our community, way more than [previous news outlet]. We didn't have a relationship with those readers in that way. So because we've cultivated this relationship, they trust us to give us all they need to know and that's it.

Hannah Musick

Awesome. Yeah, absolutely. This is this is really interesting, because a lot of the people that I've talked to so far have been traditional news outlets. And it's definitely a different perspective on the whole thing.

T

We don't have a true direct competitor who's doing exactly what we do. It's truly pretty unique. I think that that also like gives us a different perspective. Whereas you could find the same article on like, CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, and we are really streamlining that consumption.

Hannah Musick

Are you aware at all of trauma informed communication?

T

No.

Hannah Musick

So trauma informed communication in a mass media context is the best practices and best ways to communicate about potentially traumatic or sensitive story material in a way that doesn't like encourage retraumatization or like triggering someone who has like a related trauma. So the language we use, like died by suicide versus someone killed themselves, as an example. So I was curious like when it comes to putting together especially the daily newsletter are there certain rules or ways that you guys handle those more sensitive stories?

T

I would say we always use a trigger warning, worded in some way. So there will always be that kind of language at the top. I can't speak to the newsletter on this from a talent perspective. But any way that they choose to talk about something, if we have the actual person on who went through this situation, we would allow them to speak to the topic however they choose and that's a good reference moving forward in any other coverage.

Hannah Musick

Okay, gotcha. Kind of letting them tell their own story.

T

Exactly like whoever Chanel like described the story that she told in her memoir, like, that's how we spoke about it in all the coverage later in the write up online and social media posts, etc.

Hannah Musick

Cool. This might be more of like a marketing question but do you know if there's been a difference in how much people open stories or how they interact with them from a time when you didn't do trigger warnings versus now?

T

I don't know this history of like doing those kinds of warnings.

Hannah Musick

Do you have any other observations on like news avoiding compassion fatigue or trauma informed communication, and just kind of the operations that you're involved in?

T

Let me think. I mean for us, I want say we try and use talent to learn lessons from them that like our audience can apply to their own life. Maybe that is a way that we're trying to like cut through the avoidance or the fatigue. We're trying to make content that's purposeful that they can apply to their own life versus they read a story about this really sad thing. Instead, we say here's what you should do if you have to go through this, like,

like hire lawyer at this moment, do this here, do this, like, detailed? So maybe that's another way that we're trying to avoid it and our audience feels like they can connect and use our news for purposes in their own life more than to just be informed. It feels like it has a little more leg to it, meat to it.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, so almost like solution-based journalism. Here's a new perspective. Here's how it applies to your life.

T

Right, exactly. Everything we do revolves around how does it apply to me? That is the question that we see our audience asking. Especially 2020, I feel like we could talk about news avoidance with the 2020 election for 12 hours straight. And maybe you're not even focusing on politics, but for us they want to know, okay what does it mean to me? How does it apply to me? What is this going to mean for my life? That's all they want to know. Hopefully that is a way that people would stay engaged with us because they feel it connects to them more personally. It's more than just the facts. It's also how it affects their lives.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, totally.

T

We are definitely unique with this lens of avoidance where I know our audience is avoiding everything else. And also, I would say that hard news doesn't have a specific audience. ABC is not like we're only going to focus on people 50 to 60. But we have a targeted audience, we have a demographic. So we're able to package the information more for them versus other outlets that are a little more larger scope. We can really take a [demographic group] standpoint on things. Right and we can know our audience and we can meet them where they're at. We can do a ton of research on our audience insights, focus groups, we know what where they're at with their finances, we know where they're at with their life choices, where they're at with their career decisions, like all of that stuff, we can also use that to strategically help them and have them interacting with us at all times, because we're also a business.

Respondent L

Associate producer for a broadcast news channel with an emphasis on business.

Hannah Musick

So could you tell me a little bit about the specific duties you oversee in your position?

L

Yeah, definitely. I'm an associate producer at [news outlet]. I work on the strategic content and news partnerships team. So what's interesting and kind of unique about my role is that it's not necessarily the traditional breaking news environment I guess that kind of a role that you typically expect when you especially start journalism school. I feel like that's kind of where you find yourself indoctrinated until you figure out what your

emphasis area is going to be and things like that. It was very aligned with strategic communications, which was my emphasis area. But again, it's not a huge BREAKING NEWS role, it's news partnerships. And so a lot of what I do on a day to day as a producer is I work across we call it 360. That's across TV, digital and events. And essentially, we produce these different micro franchises within our organization across those different platforms, some of which are sponsored and some that are not sponsored. So obviously, the sponsored franchises that we have year over year is where that news partnership piece comes into play. And we obviously work with other partners as well on a non-sponsored basis to help support those franchises whether that has to be has to do with data, whether it has to do with institutional support, supported events and things like that. We work with a wide range of different teams and obviously companies and organizations outside of us, but broad strokes that's a little bit into the team that I work on and kind of the role that I play. Again, working across those three mediums on different franchises whatever they may be.

Hannah Musick

Awesome, that sounds exciting. Sounds like a lot of different stuff comes up every day.

L

Yeah, it's definitely flavorful. There's a lot of different you know, I feel like and I've said this multiple time, I've been there about a year now since I was an intern. You know, I say this to a lot of people but as cliché as it is, there's no such thing as a typical day, you know, because you're working across the three mediums, and you've got all of these

different franchises, and some of them are very established. And you know, the one main one that I work on we've been doing for eight years now. And others just pop up because the sponsor will come in and say that they want to sponsor something on 5G, and we want to do a whole special report and an event series on it and we got to kind of throw ourselves into action. A sponsor willing to do that is a huge revenue driver for the company. So, you know, that's kind of the role that we play.

Hannah Musick

That's awesome. How long have you been doing this?

L

So I was an intern here in 2016. And half of the time that I spent during my internship was on this team, and then I did a whole bunch of different things in between there and then just returned here full time a year ago.

Hannah Musick

Awesome. Yeah, I saw that you had some books that you'd written, too. You've been busy.

L

Yeah, definitely. So both of those books I actually wrote before I was an intern and that was kind of my early career. I wrote my first book at the end of my senior year of high school, going into college and then I wrote my second book when I was a junior. I think it

was right before I interned here and did a whole bunch of speaking in there. When I was an undergrad, I ran for MSA vice president with a friend of mine. And after that, I was working on a startup for about a year and a half which actually brought me to New York, right after I graduated and right before I moved back here because then I moved back to [city] and then I was figuring out what I was doing and then I landed here so there's a lot that happened in between there.

Hannah Musick

Kind of all fell into place.

L

All fell into place. Nice. Exactly.

Hannah Musick

So in that role at[news organization], have you noticed people in your audience or even in general avoiding news coverage before?

L

As far as like sources for stories that I've done or sort of like, which what type of people are you trying to learn more about?

Hannah Musick

The audience that you're creating content for.

L

Okay, got it. Yeah, I mean, I don't know that I have a huge grasp on news avoidance from an audience standpoint. I definitely do as a passive consumer. I see enough on social media where people are a little bit fatigued by the news. I think one of the interesting things here is you constantly hear about this dichotomy between an [liberal news outlet] audience and a [conservative news outlet] news audience. And obviously, there are a lot of other outlets that fall into each of those buckets. But if you consider those kinds of two main players, a lot of people draw that line between a liberal audience being more us, and a more conservative audience being from somewhere else. What's interesting about being here is because it's business and finance news specifically and its economic news specifically. It is an interesting middle ground because inherently business and finance and economics news tends to be a little bit more conservative in nature. But you're getting that in a [news organization] environment that people tend to consider more liberal. And so it's an interesting middle ground for people who work internally I feel like because sometimes they feel hesitancy or skepticism, whether it's from sources or people who are consuming their story, you know, from an audience standpoint, like you said, who may or may not be turned off by that liberal perspective.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, definitely. Like you're kind of in this in between space here. A really unique advantage and my perspective.

L

Definitely. That's not a very great answer to your question. It's just kind of an observation that I've had. And I feel like, when you talk about news avoidance, I feel like people may be a little bit less avoidant of some of the stuff that my news organization produces because of the reputation we built on that basis. I don't know if that helps at all.

Hannah Musick

No, no, it does. It does actually. When you talk about especially in 2020 about news avoidance and news fatigue so much of it and so much of the literature on it has been tied to politics. Especially conservative versus like liberal leanings and so that's very relevant actually. So probably not everything that comes across your desk is necessarily something that might be sensitive about some example notable times of news avoidance have been the Weinstein trials, impeachment, trials, natural disasters, even the coronavirus happening more recently. So when you and your team are preparing materials that might be a little bit more triggering for lack of a better word how do you approach that.

L

Well, it's interesting because our team has to be particularly careful about things like that, because we do produce so much sponsored content. So, we're not only thinking about the audience for that content through our own lens as journalists, but we have to look at it through the second lens of a sponsor. There's not a lot of sponsors that want to come in and sponsor a special report, for example, online, or TV segments on air about the

coronavirus because its a very negative story. I would say, and I don't know if this helps because it's not as much from the audience perspective as it is the sponsor perspective, but I feel like there may be something applicable in here. It's hard to get somebody to come in and sponsor something that's going to an audience that may otherwise avoid it during these times when anything can happen at a moment's notice. That's always obviously been true in journalism and news but especially in these heightened times with Trump as president and impeachment, like you said, and things like that because you never know what's going to happen and it's hard to get somebody to come in as a sponsor under those circumstances. I think there is "sponsor avoidance", that translates in a way into news avoidance by way of teams like mine that has to pick and choose what content we put out there. And again, I'm not in a traditional breaking news environment on a day to day so I don't know how applicable this is to what you're working on, because there's obviously ethics and standards and things that from a sponsored content standpoint, isn't as much in play for me as it would be for traditional journalists. But I do think that sponsor fatigue and sponsor avoidance of certain topics certainly plays into news avoidance in terms of the content that we have to pick and choose putting out to an audience because of these more negative stories that you were mentioning, whether it's the coronavirus or impeachment or Weinstein, MeToo things like that.

Hannah Musick

So how do you handle that? How do you kind of deal with like the sensitive topics when dealing with sponsors? What's your approach?

L

We have a pretty large team at this point. It's about I would say 22 to 25 people now. And what's interesting is because we work across those different platforms, we've got kind of micro teams within that like a team of editors and people who work on editorial content digitally. There's a there's a TV team that focuses on commercials, limited commercial opportunities, commercial free coverage, things like that. For sponsors, there's a segment of our team that specifically does like podcasts and event stuff, councils and things like that. So all of us kind of have to convene on matters of a sponsor that's coming in, like I mentioned earlier for 360, which is all of those platforms. IBM may come in for one of our franchises and do a summit, they want a podcast on this topic, they want a special report online, they want 15 TV segments over the course of the next three quarters, etc. And so we have to make sure, based on how big that client is for us, that the content that we're putting out there, for instance, TV is probably the best example. One of the reasons why we have to pay so close attention to the news without being in that traditional news role, is because you don't want one of those 15 commercials over the next three quarters to come up after a segment that was tied a coronavirus segment that was tied to IBM. I guess a better example is if we have like a healthcare sponsor, like an HSS. We don't want to run a sponsored segment on TV sponsored by HSS if the topic is going to be about the coronavirus, for example, you know, so we have to pay pretty close attention to things that happen on our air every day and things that happened in the news in general, because, especially with some of these topics, some of these negative news cycle topics being much more prevalent that I think you were kind of alluding to earlier, whether it's impeachment or Harvey Weinstein or coronavirus, any of these things- it causes us to be

on more high alert for those larger sponsors that come in asking for more, because we have to make sure that the content that we put out on a day to day that may or may not somehow appear sponsored by this one clients of ours doesn't appear like they're endorsing Harvey Weinstein or coronavirus. And so I think to answer that question, it's a full team effort just in terms of working across those different platforms to ensure that there's no overlap in sponsored content and some of the more negative things that may be covered potentially within that sponsored content. I guess the best answer is that we have to uphold the same journalistic standards, obviously, that somebody in a more traditional journalistic breaking news reporter role might have to, for the purpose of ensuring that that sponsored content meets the client's expectations, and satisfaction. The goal is to get them to obviously to renew their sponsorship for that franchise for the following year, or get another sponsor to come in, so all of that comes into play whenever you're, you know, producing segments or special reports or events or podcast episodes in a news cycle where it's so unpredictable.

Hannah Musick

Right, right. Anything is fair game.

L

Right? Right.

Hannah Musick

That's really interesting, actually. So it's almost like your team's role is to be mindful of what context those sponsor placements are being put into the news cycle.

L

Yeah, exactly. It's not shutting down negative stories, it's not making sure that those negative stories don't see the light of day. It's making sure that as far as our standards are concerned, and as far as the sponsors standards are concerned the lines don't get crossed between something that is hard hitting news like that and make sure that doesn't cross with a sponsorship, for example. A sponsor may very well come in for a health care related segment on the latest update and it would certainly be possible that we could sponsor some things around the latest developments in the coronavirus, but it's almost like that news and whatever is going into that article or that segment on air has to be vetted a little bit first to make sure that it's not this breaking, detrimental news that catches everybody off guard. And if a sponsor happens to be watching or reading whenever it happens, and we don't know about it...does that make sense?

Hannah Musick

Yes it does.

L

We work very closely with all of the shows. We work very closely with all of the reporters. And we do a really good job of reading like reading through those things ahead of time before they go to print or before they go to air and making sure that this

development on the coronavirus either could or could not count as something towards a given client sponsorship.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. So measuring the success of that team effort and that sensitivity is probably by how many clients come back year after year and satisfaction recorded by those clients?

L

Yeah, it's definitely based on the number of renewals that we get from certain clients and sponsors year over year. It's also based on the number like just the revenue dollars generated year over year, from different sponsors across those different platforms, and measuring what's working and what's not working across TV, digital events, relative in each of those categories, how much revenue is being brought in by our team. And I've really only talked about the sponsored stuff that we do, we do a whole bunch of stuff as well that is relevant to the news that is not sponsored that we envision being a bigger and bigger piece of the news cycle going forward kind of identifying trends into the next two, 5, 10 years. And there are franchises across those platforms that we produce, that aren't necessarily sponsored but that we want.

Hannah Musick

Could you give me a recent example of that?

L

Yeah. For business and finance, there's a lot of things right now that we can kind of identify or have sponsors interests that we could build out stronger franchises for. I'm trying to think of examples that I can give you that are not off the record that haven't been announced yet. You know, broad strokes, I would say some of the trends that we're looking at are things like 5G, for example. That's something that's attractive to a lot of sponsors that we could build out. Obviously, there's a lot of sponsors that want to come in for something generally tech related. But if we can go a little bit more granular and do something around 5G specifically, we might be able to pinpoint a specific sponsor that that is attractive to. A lot of that process is done by our marketing and sales team, which works on the other side of the river in [city]. They're the ones that meet with the clients face to face. My team is really just the team that produces whatever content a sponsor comes in for. But they're the ones that have those conversations on a day to day meeting with clients, different companies that will say we want to reach this specific type of person.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, that totally makes sense. Have you heard about or do you use trauma informed communication in the content you're producing?

L

Say that again?

Hannah Musick

Trauma informed communication. It might not be totally relevant to some of the content that you're producing and your role, but it's part of my questions so I thought I would ask.

L

Okay. Yeah, well, no, I don't think so. Maybe I don't fully understand it. I've never heard the term I guess I should say.

Hannah Musick

Yeah. So it isn't hugely widely known yet. But it's basically things that you've probably already heard of in training at the J school where anytime you have something that's potentially traumatic or sensitive, conveying it and communicating it in a way that doesn't encourage retraumatization or emotional stress basically. So that can be the way that your placements are arranged as well as the actual contents of the placements and things like that. So an example is sexual assault, or self-harm, you wouldn't go into detail because that could be emotionally distressing to someone reading it or viewing it. So I'm curious if that played into what your role.

L

I think you hit the nail on the head when you said it has more to do with placement than I think it does production. We just wouldn't produce content in an effort to get it in front of a sponsor around any of those more traumatizing topics. We work like really closely with the sales and marketing team that's actually based out of [building name] because they

aren't necessarily journalists so we talk to them almost on a daily basis to make sure that they're not offering placements of certain content that would otherwise be from a journalist standpoint. We do produce content that sometimes will focus on those more traumatizing topics. It's not often but there is crossover just within general news coverage that we may take something whether it's a write up from one of the reporters or a segment on air, we will vet that to make sure that there's nothing explicit in there that a sponsor wouldn't want to be linked back to. But I can envision a case where there's a topic that we may pick up as a part of a sponsorship. Obviously, we would vet that first like I was mentioning earlier, but we make sure that we touch base with the sales and marketing team to ensure that that's meeting the sponsor's expectations and not just something that we can get a pass for in terms of fulfilling the sponsorship. So we pay pretty close attention to those placements if not, for that reason, then just based on those journalistic standards and ethics alone.

Hannah Musick

Right, right. Because yes, that kind of bleeds into everything, doesn't it?

L

Mm hmm. And like I said, it's not often that we are presented with that scenario, or that we pick up content that would be considered traumatizing, just because that's not something that is obviously attractive to a sponsor. Let's just say there was some kind of a breaking news story about a sexual assault case, I don't know why this would be on [news outlet] but lets say it was. And somebody clicked on it and then they saw a banner ad

from IBM, for example. That's obviously not something that IBM is gonna like. So we have to pay attention to, like you said, the placement where those banner ads show up. You know, they shouldn't be showing up on those types of stories. I mean, we have systems and processes and programs in place that put those ads whether they're on TV or banner ads online or social ads, or whatever, that control for those things. But our team obviously has to pay attention to things like that in case something goes wrong and an IBM ad does show up at the top of a story covering sexual assault or something like that. And so I would say what you initially said the placement factor is probably the biggest piece of that for us.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, if everything's great but in the wrong order it could have bad after effects. Is there anything that I didn't ask but related to what we've been talking about that you think is important?

L

I don't know. I mean, it sounded like you were looking for more news avoidance as it pertains to an audience. And I probably gave you the more sponsorship side of things, less journalistic side of things as it translates into an audience. Hopefully, that was helpful.

Hannah Musick

That was actually really helpful. I think that a lot of the people that I'm talking to definitely are going to be addressing more of the audience side of that interaction. The research really is kind of in that gray space in between strat com and traditional journalism. And so it hadn't occurred to me that context of placement would be something that factored into it as much. So that was a new perspective on it.

L

We have one larger, weekly call that we do every week with our sales and marketing team. And there have been plenty of times where they've come to us and said, such and such sponsor is looking for content related to this. And we've just said, No, we don't really do that. And I think part of the luxury of being on our team is you do have to pay attention to the news all the time but you have the luxury of saying no to things because there's some things like you were mentioning, traumatizing topics and things like that, that we just don't have to produce. The purpose is obviously not just to inform that audience using our journalistic standards, but also to meet our client's, the sponsor's satisfaction in reaching that audience and hopefully providing returns for them depending on what business they're in. And so there have been plenty of times where we've been on calls with the sales and marketing team at [news organization] that want to pitch some idea or that a sponsor came to them and said that they want something produced where we've said no. So we fortunately have that luxury and it does happen. But I think that's the result of being in a nontraditional journalistic role. Like the one that I feel like I'm in.

Respondent S

Digital Producer and Social Media Editor for a broadcast news channel with an emphasis on politics

Hannah Musick

Could you confirm your title?

S

Digital producer/social media editor.

Hannah Musick

And you are at [news organization], right?

S

Yes.

Hannah Musick

Awesome. Could you kind of explain what your daily role is in the operation?

S

My daily role is kind of twofold. Right now and during the weekdays, so Monday, Tuesday Wednesday, my role is built around hours just being a social media editor which involves coming up with copy to post, clips to social media channels, Facebook and Twitter, photos, Instagram. We have templates that we get that we post a video clips to Instagram TV. We also will take clips from on air, which, you know, during my shift

we're always watching the air. And so if we see a good like, minute or two minute clip, I'm like, Okay, let's take this off of air and put this online and let's come up with copy for that. And it's all about getting the best product being given to us via a link to a small clip on website or going, Hey, this is a great moment that needs to go online, let's put it online. And then we're generating and just taking the clip off the air and putting it in a video that will play automatically on Twitter or Facebook or just photos on Instagram.

We will also publish promotions. First, we schedule promotions for the website. On bigger days, such as Super Tuesday and everything, my job becomes more about getting those those bigger moments like focusing on getting big moments getting those analysis clips, finding those key moments during the debate. And then on the weekends, that's when my more digital piece all come into play because I'm both coming up with the copy for posting online, the clips and everything else, but I'm also managing the homepage and what videos on there the photos that are the front page.

I'm also deciding what videos get their own links on our site for a good chunk of the day. If there's some really great content that we think should really be going online, but it's not necessarily breaking news. Of it is breaking news, there's a whole digital video team for our news organization and they'll grab it. But if it's just an analysis clip breaking down general things that going on, that's where I'll come into play. I'll think to myself, I'm going to grab this, I'm going to come to the headline, the copy, the image. A good example of that recently was when churchgoers decided to turn their back on Mike

Bloomberg. I saw it, our panel had one minute of talking about it, and I grabbed that one minute. I gave it a title and then I asked our photo desk for a cover image.

Hannah Musick

So it sounds like you kind of have to be vigilant all the time about what's going on, what would be good content, how can we use this, how can we find this, how can we coordinate with our different parts of our team?

S

Yes.

Hannah Musick

Very cool. And how long have you been in this role?

S

This specific role with these more defined duties I've been in since January. Before then, I got hired in July. Before then, I was also making videos designed for social media consumption in the style of Now This for our news organization's audience in addition to these two jobs on certain days of the week.

Hannah Musick

Kind of going into the topic of my research, have you noticed people in your audience, or in general in life, avoiding news coverage before?

S

So in the audience, I can't speak to that in general. That's difficult because we have a very loyal audience. Also, our numbers as long as I've been here already our numbers have been performing very well. Digital will have had some of our best performing months on record in terms of traffic so clearly not avoiding news coverage. Granted, we've had some of our, you know, most fascinating stories. In recent memory, we've had the impeachment trial. We've had this Democratic primary, which [news organization] has been fortunate to host a few debates. Just in this past few months, we've also had the COVID-19. We've been keeping up to date our audience out of duty because that is important and people are very interested to keep up on the latest and most accurate information on that. We have the hurricane that hit the Bahamas, as long ago as it feels. There was the tensions with Iran. So all these very large news stories have been going on.

Hannah Musick

For something like, let's say ongoing election coverage or ongoing impeachment coverage, did you notice a drop off at all with engagement with your audience the longer that you covered that topic? Or was it pretty high throughout?

S

Give me one second to write this question out.

Hannah Musick

Yeah it's not in the list, just something that came to mind.

S

Do you want me to talk about impeachment or election first?

Hannah Musick

Whichever one you probably feel like you can talk more about

S

Let's start with impeachment. And no because, again, we have a very loyal audience. And politics is our lane. And so especially with breaking news the whole way down from the first story of the whistleblower that we were trying to get information about and when we first learned that the whistleblower might have information about a high ranking government official, but then rumors started that the official was possibly President Trump down to the final impeachment vote our audience stayed engaged basically the whole time.

Our anchor, she ran a two minute roundup of the latest news about the impeachment hearings every single day and that aired at the top of our show and we would post them online every single day. So impeachment was something that we were covering very, very tightly and you know there was also a lot of factors going on in all across the brand it was wall-to-wall coverage of impeachment and like I said we had some of our best months going on there so drop offs I don't believe were really all that strong.

During a debate, you know, the key moments, those are always big. Debates where we host because we can post everything and we have accessed all the footage. But also debate nights, especially when our anchors, our analysts, are covering the debate. You get a lot of coverage of that because people want our anchors, they want our analysts, they want their thoughts.

On our website, like I said, we have a loyal fan base, and they want to hear what our what our talent is saying. And so, right now, we are seeing heavy traffic. Like on Super Tuesday, we saw incredibly heavy traffic on both social and website and people wanted to also want to know who won the state. For big events that people are really interested in, they just want the information fast, accurate and shareable.

Hannah Musick

Are you familiar with the concept of news avoidance?

S

Not as a formal term but through people in general avoiding news yes.

Hannah Musick

So can you give me an example of that?

S

I would have friends tell me the only place they got news was through my social media feed, which haunted me. And I would tell them, please don't do that. Because I'm one person and I'm biased towards the outlet that I work for. I've had friends that tell me they just avoid the news because it just makes them sad the past few years, that they don't like to hear about the constant political stuff, the conflicts in the Middle East, the latest scandals going on in American politics. These are not studies that have been done but right there just what friends and family have told me. And so, I tried to stress the importance of, it is draining, to being an engaged citizen you should be staying up to date on the news. I don't go as far as the Washington Post's "Democracy dies in darkness" but I say that that's how we kind of lose track of what's going on in the world.

Hannah Musick

It's interesting because you've anecdotally observed it in friends and close relationships and everyday life, but in your audience engagement here, it sounds like especially because of your specific news organization and because people come to you exclusively for political content, it really doesn't show up in the numbers.

S

Yes. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say our audience skews older...but I don't have that data.

Hannah Musick

I agree that's probably a very safe estimation.

S

During my time at a different news organization, we had a engaged audience at times as well. But we were also very vulnerable to Facebook's algorithm shift. I think it depends on who's typically you're talking to. My parents have been watching [my current news organization] not since the day I was born, the network is younger than me somehow, but my parents have been watching since it was created. When I showed them the office they not ironically said it was more exciting than Disney World. So some people like them are going to never stop watching it.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, I think that it's going to be really interesting to see how things like shift for millennials currently, but also the next few generations. Especially with cable, I'm super interested to see what happens. I guess I kind of asked this already number five, so we kind of covered that. And then for how you measure audience engagement you do time on page and bounce rate and things like that probably right? Shares and likes?

S

So the main way that I look at engagement is through social flow, and Parsely. Are you familiar with those two websites?

Hannah Musick

Oh, yeah, for sure.

S

I don't really need to go into the granular details of those two then.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, I used Parse.ly quite a bit at MU actually.

S

I'll monitor traffic with Parse.ly. And social flow is a website that lets us schedule content out on social media platforms and we'll get to see how many people shared it, how many people clicked on it, how many people liked it. So those are good ways to keep metrics and everything. Especially when you get to see the click rate on a post. That's my big metric. It's always very strange when you see a huge disparity between clicks and likes. It's like, oh, that did a really good job of getting those likes, but not the traffic to the website. And so it's like maybe share again, try to get people actually clicking on it now. And sometimes, you know, it is some more lighthearted content that gets through to our audience. There was a day last week where we actually didn't have the heaviest of news, believe it or not. And they covered a sprinting Javelina video that went viral. It's like a pig. And then they took a minute to talk about it and they said because the news has been dark lately, let's had some fun. And they looked at some ways that the internet was having fun with it including setting it to dramatic rom com music. That did extremely well.

Hannah Musick

Not really what you imagined when you went into work that day probably.

S

No, no, yeah.

Hannah Musick

Have you ever observed compassion fatigue? In the question it says in your audience's news consumption, but if that hasn't been apparent, then are you familiar with it in general?

S

Not in regards to news. But as a general thing I'm familiar with compassion fatigue. I guess I regarding news, I guess I could see something like this. I can touch base on something very quickly that might be able to supplement for you. When the situation with the Kurds started in Syria, people seemed to care out the gate. And then that care fell off very quickly. But that also could possibly be attributed because that's international news. Like international politics, and international situations, is a difficult thing for media. That could be compassion fatigue that could also be just Americans not being interested in news outside their own borders. Off the top of my head, I can't exactly speak to content here. So I know what you're talking about where over time interest dwindles in these moments. But that's something that you might need hard granular data.

Hannah Musick

That's good feedback. That's really helpful, actually. Have you have you been exposed to or are you aware of trauma informed communication?

S

Communicating about potentially traumatic media in a way that doesn't really encourage retraumatization- yes. And also yes.

Hannah Musick

Is that something that you just know about from your everyday life like or is it like something that was formally taught to you?

S

I don't know if it was formal taught to me. Being careful with this language I don't know where I learned. But being careful language is something I've seen here. In this situation, you would need to see a test run, like an article or a video that says this person died by suicide or this person killed themselves. So that it is tricky. But, for example, one of the stories that is most dear to me from my time at [previous organization] was a Marine who attempted suicide. I never said she tried to kill herself, she did attempt suicide. That's how we described it in the video. The video did very well. So I don't think there was news avoidance there. I couldn't tell you if they're successful or unsuccessful at parrying news avoidance only because I don't have that information on hand.

Hannah Musick

Oh, for sure. Totally understandably. Especially when you are making very fast decisions, kind of like you were describing earlier when you are placing content on the homepage or you are creating social media posts and social media copy, does that idea of trauma informed communication something you're thinking about ever?

S

Could you say that question again?

Hannah Musick

Sure. That was a very rambling question. When you are creating copies for social media and arranging things on the homepage and a story comes across your desk that is a really intense, hard news topic- is it in your head when you are doing your work "what is the best way to describe this because it is so sensitive"? Is it a conscious part of your process? Sorry, that was no shorter.

S

Generally, stuff has been filtered down, before getting to me. If it's been on air, usually I can just go off the headline that they've used in the lower third. I'll also bounce it off our News home page editors. I'll say what headline should we use here? Or there are always other people I can bounce something off of when something is tricky. That's always very helpful. During multiple shootings in Texas, these were tough moments and one of them was the Odessa Texas shooting where there was a shooter who went on a shooting

rampage and killed people. And there was a woman crying on air talking to our anchors and the quote she said to our anchor was "I knew he was going to shoot me". So the headline I gave it was "I knew he was going to shoot me" witness describes her escape from Texas mass shooting. That one was the most powerful quote and she was describing her escape. But you know, there was a moment of is this exploitation or not? But it didn't feel like it was because that really was what's going on. And the witness described her escape from Texas mass shooting was what they used on air. So I was really applying the quote to the headline they were using on air.

The other one was when there was a shooting that happened in church. There is an interview with a security guard who actually shot the shooter so that only two people were killed. And the headline on air was Volunteers church security guard hailed as hero. So he said, I believe that I killed evil so again, I put the quote in the headline. Again long, but these personal beliefs were elevating it. There were decisions I had going back and forth. I remember a tricky one recently was a woman who's a conservative talk show host. Her name is Tracy Winbush. She is the president of the Ohio Black Republican association. She was on AM Joy over the weekend one day. It was a segment that the social media editor on the weekend and I had bounced back and forth quite a bit trying to figure out how we were going to write the copy on social media for this one. Because there was a lot of victim blaming in the segment. And we were just like, this is weird. Like we really threaded the needle on this because we really didn't want to quote something that could be construed as a victim blaming.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, that can be very tricky for sure. Those are fantastic examples. I'm curious as we are kind of going to the end here, do you have any other observations on news avoidance or compassion fatigue or trauma informed communication? Or and also the forever journalism question: is there anything that I didn't ask about that's relevant to the topic that you'd like to share?

S

I would just say a good way that we get our audience to react is that we do really let our anchors and contributors' personalities shine through. They are very opinionated. And, you know, sometimes we'll just type out the direct quote. So we use our anchors' personalities to really help shine through and get people interested in the content they're talking about but really do have to make sure that everything is accurate and fair.

Hannah Musick

So relying on your on their strong personalities and then also on experts' voices and making sure it's all accessible and shareable and fair?

S

And accurate.

Respondent J

Director of Digital Strategy for a middle-market American daily newspaper

Hannah Musick

Could you go ahead and confirm what your current title is?

J

Yeah, I am the director of the [news organization] for [news] network in [state].

Hannah Musick

Perfect. And could you kind of like explain what like your daily role is in that position?

J

Sure. I manage a team that sits across four properties in central and southern [state]. And our team's goal is to help our newsrooms drive digital audience, and that is done through making sure stories coming from our newsroom are well optimized, jumping on any trending angles that we can write. Maybe creating a gallery or a video that will help create additional traffic for a story. Having conversations in our newsrooms about planning and making sure to plan ahead so we're not just reacting all the time. I also has a role in how we do our print production, too, making sure that we are working with our design studio to meet deadlines and work in newsrooms to make sure we have compelling, fun pages for print. But also a lot of it is working with editors and strategy, doing social video analytics. Anything digital I kind of have a foothold in.

Hannah Musick

That sounds like a lot to oversee especially with all those different moving parts.

J

Yeah, it's a lot it's a lot. I think I'm lucky that I have a brain that can understand some of that. At first I got this position in April and it's a new position that was made as we're growing and so it took a while to get used to but yeah, it's lot. But you just learn to adapt and adjust and prioritize.

Hannah Musick

Awesome. Have you ever noticed, whether professionally with your audiences you're dealing with, or in your own personal life people avoiding news coverage before?

J

Um, I think looking at our audiences...it's funny because I am so in it all the time, but my husband, he's in a different field altogether. So sometimes when I tell him about a story that happened that day, he only finds out when I tell him at six o'clock at night. So I don't necessarily know if that is news avoidance, it's just not constant news consumption. I do know some other people or hear anecdotes from people who are tired or overwhelmed with what's going on in the world and they decide to get off Twitter or like not follow news coverage or not really have news apps in their phone or on their feed on Facebook. And I do know sometimes on weekends when I've had personally a pretty crazy newsweek, just exhausted, I will put my phone on Do Not Disturb. I'll look periodically to make sure I've not missed anything for work. But I try to not really be in the in the

constant grind of what's happening, what's breaking. Because now that I have a toddler son, I don't want to be consumed by that cycle. I want to enjoy my time with him, too.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. So that is exactly what some of my research is looking at, like news avoidance where people are choosing to not consume or limit their consumption of news media for any amount of time. Sometimes it's a week, sometimes it's a year. It's just an individual choice.

J

A year, I can't imagine that. I can do maybe a couple hours but not even a day or two days.

Hannah Musick

Right, right. I mean, it's just kind of the the air we breathe. You know, it's everywhere. So I'm curious, during times of really intense news coverage, even like national or international news, do you notice that news consumption changes in your audiences?

J

I think that, you know, for instance, like this corona virus is a great example of what's happening, the story is creating anxiety for a lot of people. But they are turning to us a lot, just looking at the metrics that we have. You know, you would think people would be overwhelmed. There's a lot of talk about media hysteria and media causing a lot of this.

But our traffic shows that people are still looking, they're still Googling for answers. We've seen a big spike in traffic the past couple of weeks, and a lot of it is for last week because of corona virus, a lot of our audience is coming to us by search. So maybe they are not intentionally coming to us for news, but they're looking for answers. And those answers in turn are bringing them to news sites.

Hannah Musick

Oh, I see. I see. I'm curious, during for example, the 2016 election coverage. I guess that would be before you were in this particular position. Or even like during the election coverage that was happening before coronavirus hit- do you think that the same behavior is happening in your audience? Or do you think Corona is like a special situation?

J

I think corona is different because it's impacting all of us physically. I think the elections are a little different. I know people who will maybe unfollow friends on social media because they're tired of their views. They'll take a break, hiatus, from Facebook. It's not just news but it's about the idea of measuring up to somebody. So a lot of this is tied to I think personal, maybe self esteem, or the weight of watching everybody else is doing. So there is that as well. But I do think that people, more with elections than coronavirus, are taking a break from knowing what's happening.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. So, how do you monitor and measure and observe news avoidance in your audience?

J

So we because it's something that we don't really consider we are looking more at the people who are consuming news. We don't measure it, but just to anecdotally, you know, I look in my own network and see what they're saying about topics of interest, which is where I sort of began to see that people were upset at the media for creating hysteria and inflaming tensions on politics because of headlines you use. And I'll see that sometimes in our Facebook comments or just in my own network as well. My own Facebook network. That's pretty much where I measure it. You know, a lot of people who I know physically are involved in news here and they are kind of used to it. But I talk with friends who don't consume news as much as I do and their whole relationship with news is less heavy than mine is.

Hannah Musick

It depends what your network is.

J

Exactly, right. Yeah. Because mine is journalism centric. But I have some friends who look at the news once or twice a day when they get an alert on their iPhone from like Apple news. But they are not as involved in news coverage as like I am. So maybe they

just check in, or see something in Facebook coverage, or they hear something from a friend. So it's not news avoidance, it's just not news saturation, maybe?

Hannah Musick

That's a really good term to kind of explain that. News saturation. So looking at this from friends and family and people in your network, and then also looking at some of journalism research, knowing that especially in times where people are really overwhelmed news avoidance is more likely, from your perspective when you are thinking about reaching your audiences and news saturation what are the practices you are doing to make sure that you're still reaching those people?

J

So I think you know we focus a lot on Facebook and a lot on Twitter and on our website and our app. So 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. And so our company has the capability to send out a newsletter every morning called the [newsletter name] and you can program five stories into a slot. And that's it. And I think that there's an opportunity there where there's so much else going on and it's so hard to know what is really important. 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.

Hannah Musick

That's really interesting. How long have you been doing a newsletter?

J

We've been doing the newsletter for a while, but I think our focus on making sure it's more meaningful and curated happened maybe sometime last year, maybe last fall.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, that's super interesting. Do you have like a high rate of subscribers to that newsletter?

J

We do actually. Typically, stories that do well are our breaking news stories, crime stories, etc. But a good read for instance, may do better because it found an audience in the newsletter. And so we are definitely seeing that the traffic on some stories that typically wouldn't do well on our homepage or on social may get a bigger audience in the newsletter.

Hannah Musick

Very interesting. Do you know if that audience or the people that are subscribing to the newsletter are at all different than those who might still be really engaged with your main content?

J

So the people on the newsletter are also typically our subscribers, or they've had a connection with us. There's an old adage that I think is true where maybe only like 20% of your audience is most active on your content. I don't have a direct correlation but I'm really seeing the rise of newsletters in general. I think that there are people who maybe just turned to a newsletter as their point of contact with news and that's it.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, yeah. Like I can handle one email a day, this is good.

J

I mean, you can think of the newsletter as a 6:30 news broadcast done by like Lester Holt, like you know, in that 30 minutes you're told what you should focus on for the day. What is funny is my husband watches that and it is how he kind of catches up and like the PBS News Hour following, but that's like his news consumption. So in some way, the newsletter says here's what you should read to kind of get caught up on what happened today and to help you not get overwhelmed with everything else going on.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's so interesting how we're kind of returning to that model but in a different way. Have you ever heard of the term compassion fatigue?

J

No.

Hannah Musick

So we've kind of been talking about it already, but it's a state mental or emotional where you are caring about something or a situation so much for so long that it becomes very exhausting. I think an example would be natural disasters or when a mass shooting happened and you might not be personally involved in the situation but you keep hearing about it, you keep thinking about it, keep talking about it. And over time, it could become exhausting, because you're expanding compassion. So I'm curious especially in in feedback from your audience, or comments on Facebook, have you noticed comments related to that idea of being exhausted over extended care about something?

J

I have not publicly seen such feedback. You know, we had [storm] here, that was in [year]. That was a big story for our community and there was a lot of exhaustion and anxiety over damage in [state]. The biggest kind of feedback I saw in our audiences was how can I help, what is open, and how can I get help. Maybe the sentiment was shared in private with people but I never saw it publicly from the audience saying I'm tired, I'm exhausted of this, don't share more. It was not something that I even noticed because it would have been one or two comments that was against the whole swell of outpouring of emotion and support that I saw. But I think about talking to friends and it's almost like self-preservation. 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. You're like, oh, how can you stop caring about something when people died? So people may just stop

doing it 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.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, absolutely. That's a great point. Another term that I was curious if you've heard about or were familiar with is trauma informed communication?

J

Trauma informed communication, like pretty much people learning about stuff because they've experience trauma?

Hannah Musick

Basically, like the idea that as a communicator, you're aware of how trauma works, and that retraumatization and emotional distress can happen depending on how things are communicated. Some guidelines are often set in place to protect against that like-

J

Like a warning or something.

Hannah Musick

Right, right or like writing died by suicide versus someone killing themselves. You know what I mean?

J

Yeah, yeah. So I don't think I've not heard that term before. But I do know that when we've had a murder suicide, we will try to mention that but be very brief about it. We don't put trigger warnings but if we're writing more about mental health and suicide, typically you'll see our company will put information about the National Suicide Prevention hotline in there as a resource. But I don't think we do a lot of that.

Hannah Musick

Just kind of basic common sense?

J

Yeah, yeah. There's not a lot of discussion. as much about that anymore. I know that we are kind of doing more solutions journalism, like here is a problem and here's how to fix it, but that's not really what you're asking. We do it maybe by including a suicide prevention hotline and not going into details about rape or sexual assault or suicide. But yeah, that's more for ethics. That is not something I've heard people consider when discussing news coverage right now.

Hannah Musick

Do you have any other relevant observations about these topics we've been talking about in your organization's operations?

J

In terms of trauma coverage or what examples can I share?

Hannah Musick

About news avoidance. You mentioned digital push alerts and things like that. Because, you know, there's a lot of different ways to share news with your audience and let them know what is happening. So how do you decide what becomes a push alert or what becomes a special email versus what doesn't?

J

A lot of it's tied to if this is an important story that people should know about? Do we think that we may get additional audience with this? And we think of the push alerts as maybe people are getting their news through headlines, skimming on our phones and not even tapping through. We look 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. So I don't know if that's helpful or not to what you're asking

Hannah Musick

Oh, yeah. It is, it is. Do you think that more people are going to become interested in moving to a more newsletter format? Something where the news is a little bit more digested when it gets to them?

J

You know, what's funny is that a friend of mine a couple years ago mentioned that our E-edition, which is like the electronic version of the newspaper, and a friend of mine told me that she liked that format because there was a beginning and an end to it. Because she was saying that currently 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. And so I think I think there was going to be a yearning for like that 6:30 pm broadcast or a signal that you're done with the stories at least for right now. I think as mental health becomes more of a discussion; we're so connected. We now know a lot more about even smaller news stories in other markets that maybe a couple years ago we wouldn't have cared about or known about because it wasn't a bigger story. So I think there's going to be a yearning for self care because when you hear about rape or child assault, in any marketplace it is easy to get overwhelmed by that. So I think there is going to be a desire to have a beginning and an end to a story or to a to a news period consumption. You know, and maybe it's the newsletters. Maybe there's a reason why podcasts are popular because 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.

Hannah Musick

Because otherwise I mean, you literally could just read news all day and never reach an end.

J

When I'm on Twitter like it's not for me because I go into like so many rabbit holes of discovery, and it's like, oh, shit, man, it's like two hours later. What the hell was I doing? On Facebook when I was younger and I would be on it a lot more it is constant, there has to be a stop to it. And I think in order to preserve our sanity and to help our mental health, maybe we need a way to tell readers you can stop now.

Hannah Musick

All right. Well, is there is there anything that I didn't ask you about that you think is relevant or important to know?

J

I think one thing that I will mention is a friend of mine had mentioned this to me a while ago, and I think I mentioned it briefly, but I think say 10 years ago our local news wasn't as well connected as it is today. If there was a fire that killed five people in like, say, Kansas City, it was a big local story but not a national story. My friend said that now we're so connected stories that weren't national stories become national because the media knows that it's going to spark an emotion. So I wonder too, if that's kind of caused the rise in news avoidance. For instance, in my Apple news this weekend I saw a story about a woman who was killed by her ex-husband in Colorado. And I was surprised to see that on People because it was just a local story, a local domestic murder suicide story. And because I think because people know what sparks emotion, they made it a national story. So I think there is something to be said there. The reason maybe the world feels so

much more weighted is that news is always happening, it just did not rise to the national level before.

Hannah Musick

Yeah, I mean, even corona is a great example. Because we know about what's happening in every little pocket of right America, every pocket of the world.

J

Exactly. And probably 10 years ago and it may not have even risen to that level because it wasn't affecting you but now everything local is national. As resources are dwindling, national organizations are relying more on local news to help fill that void.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

News avoidance is a complex topic. It lives in the developing and unsure intersection of journalism and marketing, one of the less-studied corners of journalism. News avoidance is also a slippery subject to research as it is not studying behavior but a lack thereof. However, just because it isn't an easy research topic doesn't mean that it isn't worth putting under a microscope and I was fascinated by what I found.

As predicted in my proposal, pinning down research subjects was a challenge. I relied on committee connections and the internet to find subjects. I looked for three main important factors: clear affiliation with a news organization, a job description that aligned with the job functions I laid out in my proposal, and availability. Availability became ever more important as COVID-19 escalated in the US and journalists are now busier than ever.

Table A

Respondents	D	K	E	M	T	L	S	J
Term News avoidance	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Term Compassion fatigue	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
Term Trauma-informed communication	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗

Idea News avoidance	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
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.

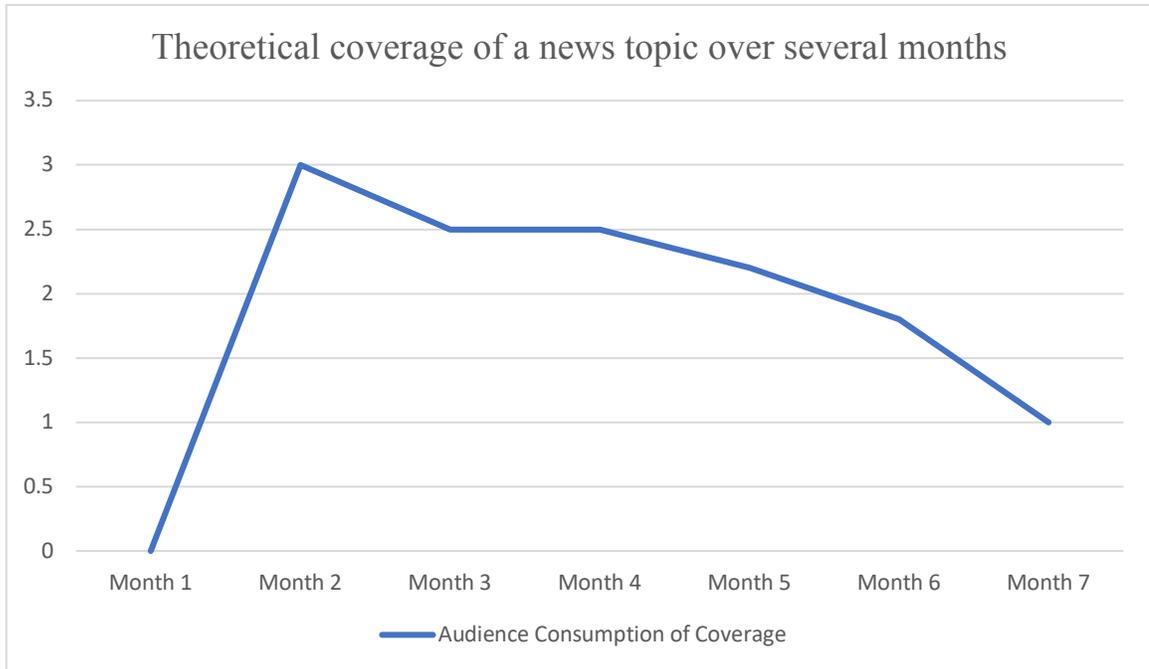
Coronavirus coverage was used as an example by respondent K as to why success against news avoidance is particularly difficult to measure. “Our traffic is probably up about anywhere, depending on the day, between like 25 and 40% or so while the coronavirus stuff has been going on the last few weeks,” 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 converge 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.”

APPENDIX I: WEEKLY FIELD NOTES

Week 1 - 1/19/20 thru 1/26/20

Work:

This is technically the second week of my new job but it is the first week that has coincided with the semester. I began on January 13th with a half-day of training and a half-day of working. I settled into my new workspace, met all (or most) of my coworkers, and began on-the-job training with Jesslyn, my supervisor. I am a Communications Specialist for UM Healthcare and I am a part of the public relations team. My “service line”, or area of expertise, is the school of medicine.

Much of the first two weeks here have been training and learning everything I need to know to do my job to the best of my ability. This has included memorizing department structures, names of key figures in the system, and beginning to make connections with the school of medicine people (SOM). I also have done a lot of online onboarding training. As of the end of week two I have attended a few SOM meetings and a vivarium town hall as well as several inter-department meetings. I have started to research and gather information about the state of our SOM content related to diversity and inclusion and I am arranging a few interviews related to that initiative. I’m also now taking lead on a project concerning the Springfield SIM center opening, arranging an interview with a researcher, training and helping to write the dean’s remarks for the vivarium open house. I am definitely stretching my skill set and learning a lot every day.

Research:

I met with Dr. Porter this morning to touch base as the semester begins and also to make a game plan for this week and the rest of the semester. We reviewed the notes from my proposal defense and she helped me to revise my email template for interview requests. We agreed that I will send my weekly report to her every Sunday night (or Monday morning, early) and that we will Zoom every Monday evening at 8 pm to touch base.

Here is what I am focusing on this coming week:

- Revising my interview questions
- Sending questions to Porter for approval
- Making changes as necessary
- Sending updated question list to the committee
- Practicing recording a Zoom call
- Buying a handheld recorder
- Making accounts on Skype, Zoom, etc.
- Emailing [redacted] as my first point of contact
- Emailing more interviewees from my proposal
- Emailing any other interviewees my committee members suggest

Week 2 - 1/26/20 thru 2/2/20

Work:

This week I conducted an interview with two researchers who just received a major grant. During the week I wrote up a press release and got feedback for edits. I also attended a presentation by the interim dean, helped escort press during a patient return press event,

and had several meetings to bring me up to speed on communications plans for major SOM events coming up in the next few months.

Research:

This week was a bit more packed than anticipated in the evenings but Dr. Porter and I touched base on Monday evening and decided it would be best to confirm I don't need IRB approval before I begin official interviews. We revised my final questions and sent them to committee members for approval, waiting for a response. As soon as they approve I have an approved email drafted for the IRB office and an approved, personalized email draft to my first point of contact. I'm also waiting for the committee members to share any pertinent contacts I may be able to interview that are outside my current interview list and that they have offered up in the past. I've got emails cued up and ready to go as soon as I get the word.

Week 3 - 2/2/20 thru 2/9/20

Work:

This week at work I worked with my team to finalize the dean's remarks and saw him present them. I sorted through more research released by physicians apart of my service line, wrote some sifters, and had onboarding check in meetings with my supervisor. I met with one of the leaders in diversity and inclusion and aided her in setting up a newsletter and did some research into the SOM's history.

Research:

IRB has been the main focus this week. IRB authorities indicated that I needed to do a few hours of training online and I filled out a formal report asking for permission to bypass IRB. I did that on Wednesday and right before the end of the week received a request to alter or add on to my request form and re-submit (apparently this is pretty standard process). I followed the instructions and re-submitted on Friday and I am hoping for a definitive response from the IRB on Monday of this week!

Week 4 - 2/9/20 thru 2/16/20

Work:

Next Gen continues to be an initiative this week. A met with another med student to interview them about their experience with one of our student diversity and inclusion programs and I worked on compiling information on media coverage of the recent Boonville hospital shut down. On Valentine's Day we did a presentation to staff and faculty (mostly physicians) about media training and handling reporters and I helped to put together a PowerPoint and facilitated the presentation. Match Day prep is heating up as we draw closer to some big dates.

Research:

Research is finally making some significant headway! The IRB gave permission earlier this week (yay!) and I also reached out to the committee about their interview subject recommendations. Jon replied with several recommendations and Dr. Porter very helpfully secured a source's most current email and I will reach out to her on Monday (tomorrow). Despite being sick Wednesday I managed to send out 4-5 emails and have

already heard back from three people. One said she is not the best person to talk to and said she would ask around, the other two were open to talking and I am in communication about best days and times to talk and permissions they may need or not need from their superiors. I also updated my questions with the descriptions of necessary terms so that I am ready whenever I get the word from one of my subjects. I bought a handheld recorder for interviews but it came broken so I am borrowing my fiancé's zoom recorder this week in the meantime.

Week 5 - 2/16/20 through 2/23/20

Work:

This week at work was a little disrupted by the fact we moved locations. Because I'm SOM I have frequent meetings at the school so I will be going back and forth as needed. We have an event coming up in April and I'm responsible for our communications plan and also event coordination so I have been contacting deans to arrange speakers and working with the creative services team to prepare invites and flyers for legislators. I've been continuing to work on communication plans and I've interviewed more researchers for press releases. Also, I bought a plant for my new office.

Research:

The guy I interviewed last week referred me to another interviewee and so I have been communicating with him about when to interview and why I'm doing this, etc. I emailed Dr. P's first contact/suggestion as well since she is supposed to be back in town, no reply yet. I've started reaching out to and researching other sources as well. Getting in contact

with people I find via google is difficult, I made a new Twitter to see if it would be easier to message people but especially high-profile people block outside messages. However, I have also found a lot of personal websites and resumes and such and emailed people that way. The more, the more likely people will say yes!

Week 6 - 2/23/20 through 3/1/20

Work:

This week was quite busy as we adjusted to being in the new space and I went back and forth between the hospital and the office for many interviews and meetings. One of my co-workers is going on maternity leave soon, so I have been training to take on some of her tasks and duties. The communication plans in play are being finalized and events for SOM are going to start happening in March and April. My car was killed by a thief trying to steal parts this week and that also threw a wrench into some of my plans (no pun intended) but let's hope next week is a little more kind.

Research:

I had a few interviews via phone this week and I'm interested in the different perspectives I'm hearing on the topic! I'm also finding that I'm not receiving a lot of feedback about news avoidance being evident in clicks and eyes because there is both an influx of consumers on major news stories as well as people avoiding and the numbers may balance out or be hard to track of people who are avoiding news. What I have been finding really interesting, however, is the level of awareness amongst my interviewees and their ideas for measurement and engagement. I also have been sending follow up

emails asking for more interview recommendations and one source wasn't able to interview but gave me 5-6 names of people he recommended, which was helpful!

Week 7 - 3/1/20 through 3/8/20

Work:

Things are really ramping up at work between the ongoing coronavirus coverage and a lot of events happening this month and next in the Med School. We got our first case of corona in St. Louis and if/when it spreads to Columbia I will probably need to begin working from home and it will affect the events that I'm organizing communication plans for, as well. It is going to be an interesting few weeks! I've started taking shifts for our media hotline, too.

Research:

This past week I conducted interviews and I restructured my contact letter per a respondent's suggestions and Dr. Porter's affirmation. I have reached out to more people, an ongoing process, and I am scheduling them into blocks of time for this week. I have begun the transcription process with the help of Otter.ai but it definitely takes a chunk of time! Hopefully the more I do it, the faster it will go.

Week 8 - 3/8/20 through 3/16/20

Work:

As you can only imagine, corona has again dominated what is happening at work this week. We have ongoing internal and external coverage and it seems like there are new

updates that alter communications every few hours. I've been in a lot of meetings and have been working with the school of medicine to help them communicate with students about questions and concerns around corona. I also got the stomach flu this week and was out for two days, but corona was more disruptive.

Research:

Research was quite disrupted by corona this week, too. The con of having interview subjects who work in the news media is that they are being controlled by the corona coverage and working overtime. I had people cancel their interviews last minute because of this reason multiple times and was able to talk to one person after they started working from home. The positive of this mania is that people will be working from home more and more I think, so maybe it will actually be easier to get my last few interviews nailed down. Fingers crossed!

Week 9 - 3/16/20 through 3/22/20

Work:

Corona has again dominated what is happening at work this week. We have ongoing internal and external coverage and it seems like there are new updates that alter communications every few hours. We are just now working from home so that has been a transition.

Research:

I have one interview lined up for this week despite emailing to follow up with people who I reached out to before and emailing several new contacts. I will for sure have eight interviews, which is my minimum, so I'm not terribly stressed. People are just so busy with corona coverage that getting many more is unlikely so I have been focusing instead on transcribing.

Week 10 - 3/22/20 through 3/29/20

Work:

Over a week of WFH under my belt! I love waking up and logging on, the commute is a lot shorter, but doing everything visually has definitely come with its own set of challenges. It can be harder to communicate with team members, to "pop in" to someone's office and ask a question, or to read tone from emails. Overall it is going well, though. COVID-19 is top shelf priority of course but I'm also doing some work figuring out options for virtual commencement ceremonies and such.

Research:

I have officially reached my minimum for interviews (whoohoo!!) and I'm focusing on transcribing and writing and researching what this final project should really look like. I have an example I found to share with Dr. P during our video chat on Tuesday night.

Week 11 - 3/29/20 through 4/5/20

Work:

I can't believe it is April already! Time flies when you're working (though March lasted about 5 years with everything going on). I have taken over the COVID-19 email newsletter from my co-worker who is transferring to a different position and that was interesting to learn a new system and to take on that role. That is what I am mainly focusing on at the moment as well as ongoing COVID-19 coverage, communicating the highlights from the daily Governor briefings, and other duties. Work from home is going pretty well and I think we are all starting to adjust.

Research:

I emailed Mark Horvit who taught my proposal class last semester and he shared with me two examples of what a project should aspire to be in formatting and organization. I have started writing my project draft around that outline and it is helping to inform my transcribing and my mental organization as well. The clock is ticking so I'm working on it a little every day after work so that I won't be pulling any all-nighters this weekend!

Week 12 - 4/5/20 through 4/12/20

Work:

Another day, another coronavirus WFH session. I'm starting to get really used to this and I actually think that with as much overtime as my team mates and I are working right now on COVID-19 materials, it probably wouldn't be possible if we weren't all at home in our pjs. I wake up, open my laptop, and don't really move or stop until the evening. I am thankful for my coworkers and my job and that in our own way we get to help. My co-worker moved to a different job and we are on a hiring freeze so we are all trying to

take on extra tasks to get everything done. The university system is being hit very hard financially. This is a valuable experience to get to see how a health care system handles crises communication from the inside.

Research:

It is go time on research writing and whenever I'm not working, I'm writing. It took quite a while to pull my transcriptions together and then to go through and redact so as to preserve anonymity. I feel like I am moving along but as it has been this entire process, it is a little difficult to know exactly what my final product should look like. Dr. Porter has been helping out with this and so has Mark. It is interesting to begin to pull out ideas and connect threads.

Week 13 - 4/12/20 through 4/19/20

Work:

The curve is flattening in Missouri so while work is still quite busy, we are turning our attention to stories and responsibilities outside of COVID-19 coverage again. If there is a surge as was previously predicted, we will return to all COVID-19 coverage and communication. If there isn't, however, I'll be diving more into my service line. Right now, they're trying to figure out how commencement ceremonies will be carried out (including my own, bye graduation) and I'm stepping in to facilitate that and communicate about that.

Research:

Research is writing, writing and re-writing at the moment. I turned in my first draft of the final project to Porter and now I am working through revisions and updates, such as this.

I'm so excited to finally be pulling together the pieces of my research into a more cohesive puzzle. It can be challenging when writing to know when to be academic and when to be more personal and informal as this document is quite the mix of both.

Week 14 - 4/19/20 through 4/26/20

Work:

We released the first MU Medicine Newsletter that I helped to write and assemble so I am now working on two internal newsletters as well as other projects. I really like working from home but am also looking forward to returning to the office. It is amazing how much has already changed at MU in the past two months and I know that changes will continue to come down the line. What an exciting but also tense time to be graduating. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at MUHC and I hope to continue working here as planned for at least the next four years. I have learned so much about public relations and internal and external communication in just a few short months, I can't wait to see where I am at in my skills and abilities a year from now.

Research:

My project report has gone through several revisions and is now in the hands of my committee members! In the next two weeks I will defend. I plan to put together a PowerPoint zoom presentation since I will be defending virtually this year, a first for all the grad students. I'm proud of my final body of work and I will begin submitting it to publications once the defense has finished.

APPENDIX II: SELF-EVALUATION

When I started my search for the professional component of my project, I knew I wanted an internship at MU Health Care. I did several hours of extracurricular video editing for the MU ophthalmology department during my second and third semesters of grad school and I wanted to pursue doing communication work in health care long-term. I reached out to Jesslyn Chew, the PR manager at MU Health Care and a fellow J-School alum. She had two opportunities for me: I could take an unpaid, 30-hour-a-week internship or I could apply for a full-time communications specialist position on their public relations team that had just opened up. I interviewed for the latter and was beyond thrilled to accept their job offer just before the holidays

Overall, I'm really proud of what I have accomplished in the professional component of my graduate research project. Since January, I have taken on duties concerning communications with MU Health Care's internal and external audiences. I've learned many new skills such as how to use mass communication software and team communication platforms and how to write a press release and communications plan. I've also learned career skills that you can't teach in the classroom, like how to professionally juggle multiple conversations over email, how to memorize the names and positions of everyone in the hierarchy of an organization and how to be a professional in every sense of the word.

Just as this project is the final test or summation of my proficiency as a graduate student, the past two months at my job have really tested me professionally. My team and I have been acting as essential communicators during the pandemic and that does not come without a certain amount of stress and challenge. Our "essential" services look very

different from the sacrifice of medical staff putting themselves at risk of infection every day, especially as when community spread escalated in Missouri we transitioned to mostly working from home. Since we work for a health care organization and university, however, I don't know anyone on my team who hasn't had to put in extra hours and taken on extra responsibilities. We are constantly staying informed of local and national COVID-19 developments so that we can support and encourage our health care workers and connect them to the information and resources they need to succeed. We also are working daily with the media and in our own internal messaging to reduce panic, share vital information about the virus and how to protect oneself, and share information about changing hospital services and testing procedures.

My time in the grad school program and my experience conducting this research has helped me grow in my career. Having been a reporter trying to make a deadline makes all the difference when I am now on the other side of the phone facilitating a media request for my organization. Even though I wasn't conducting research on my workplace the way that some journalism graduate students research the newsrooms they intern in, these two project components married well. The information I gathered as part of this project has made me more mindful of our own audience engagement and how we frame external communications, especially about difficult subjects like the pandemic.

I am really proud of how this research project evolved and ended. I think when I first approached this research topic, I saw the process as me asking a question then finding an answer. What I've learned over the past few months is that when doing research, you are really asking a question inspired by the many questions asked by many scholars before. At the end of the research process, you may just have more educated

questions instead of cut-and-dry answers. Each of the interviews I did brought a new perspective and new information to the “table” of my research project and while there is a wealth of knowledge in researching a topic, it was necessary to have a real conversation with eight strangers in order to really feel like I was making breakthroughs. Working on my research questions has led to fascinating conversations and the sharing of ideas with faculty, students and professionals in the industry. My research project may be drawing to a close but there is still much to be done in the study of news avoidance and I am proud to be a wave in that ocean of cumulative knowledge.

APPENDIX III: STORY

Headline: Intense news coverage leads to increase of “news dieting”

Subhead: *Exploring ideas about how to feed news to an audience that just can't eat another bite*

Christine Blasey Ford touched off a landmark cultural moment in September 2018 when she testified to the U.S. Senate Judiciary committee and to the nation that she had been sexually assaulted by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in 1982. Ford, and eventually two other women, testified against Kavanaugh and were grilled for traumatic details of their experiences in a highly public space. The unfolding drama was extensively covered in the press and introduced larger discourses about sexual assault, power, and government. And yet I, like many other friends and colleagues that I spoke with about the ongoing hearing, turned off my TV. I muted news alerts on my phone, avoided newspaper outlets and talk radio stations. What caused this “news diet”? Compassion fatigue.

Scholar Charles R. Figley defined compassion fatigue in [a 1995 paper](#) as “...a state of exhaustion and dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, and socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress.” My choice to avoid or limit my consumption of news related to the Kavanaugh trial was not out of a lack of interest or because the subject didn't merit attention. In fact, I and like-minded friends thought it was incredibly important and deserved national if not global attention, debate and journalistic coverage. We all had stories of unwanted sexual attention; we shared Ford's experience. We just couldn't stand the news barrage.

Each new piece of coverage on an unfolding, emotional news story like the Kavanaugh hearing required emotional energy for myself and many other Americans to

hear and talk about. Just as a nurse may feel compassion fatigue after providing nearly non-stop care for her patients for years, my friends and I felt emotionally spent from caring deeply and almost daily consuming news media related to current events. The COVID-19 pandemic is an all too familiar example of when a news topic that involves deep emotional investment is suddenly everywhere you look.

Beyond anecdotal evidence, [Pew studies](#) have found that during periods of political and cultural turmoil, the majority of Americans report feeling exhausted by the news. While news avoidance patterns are present in the behavior of a much larger sector of the population, another [study](#) found news avoiders who specifically “consume news less than once a month or never at all” were 3% globally and 8% in the U.S. One [study](#) went as far as to claim that over half the American population resists news when defining a news avoider as someone who “...consume relatively little news, spend almost no time watching cable TV news channels, and avoid news magazines and news Web sites entirely”.

News avoidance from compassion fatigue is a problem, and it’s only getting worse. Fighting it requires understanding, planning and creativity. Over the past three months I spoke with audience engagement leaders in mid-size to major U.S. newsrooms about their strategies against it and what they think works.

Know what your audience *is* reading

Studying analytics and google trends data to find out “why they’re reading what they're reading,” was a strategy cited by respondent D, a Senior News Director for Digital at a major US city newspaper.

The ever-increasing value of writing in response to metrics was echoed by respondent K, Senior News Director for Digital at a major US city newspaper. K 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.”

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 approach.

Know your audience

Respondent T, in charge of talent relations for an American news aggregate that distributes primarily via newsletter, 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. “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.”

Provide solutions

Solutions-based journalism was presented by several as another way to combat news avoidance. 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 explained 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 to search out news when they are in search of information.

Create community and connect with it

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, Senior Director of News Strategy for a middle-market American daily newspaper. 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.”

Metrics: hard but necessary

When asked if their strategies been successful and how is that success measured, communicators fell into two categories: “I don’t know” and “I think so but we don’t have the data collected to prove it.” Success in audience engagement was measured through analytics and subscriptions, not comments. The general rule of thumb in their measurement was that the eyes, ears, clicks and subscriptions that stories got, the more successful they were.

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.”

Comments: less help than you’d think

Success was infrequently measured through digital comments, even though comments might seem to be an obvious metric. 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, Director of Digital Strategy for a middle-market American daily newspaper. “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.”

Newsletters as curation: less is more?

The most interesting and promising strategy that I spoke with a respondent about was shifting news distribution to a daily newsletter. 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. 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”.

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.

In a 24-hour Golden Corral of news media, respondents seemed to indicate that there may be an increasing desire for less and more nutritious news media from consumers. Generalizing respondent's 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."

Conclusion: are we listening?

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. Personally, a key takeaway from this research for me is that the line of communication between producer and consumer is blocked. 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. In especially 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. Journalism straddles the line between being a democratic service for the public good and above influence, but also being a money-making product in a producer-consumer interaction.

APPENDIX IV: PROJECT PROPOSAL

Strategies to Combat Compassion Fatigue-Induced News Avoidance

A Professional Project Proposal
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Hannah Musick
Dr. Jeannette Porter, Committee Chair
Fall 2019

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Abstract:

This proposal outlines research into how news organizations are (or are not) changing the presentation and dissemination of their print and/or online content to consumers to contend with compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance. The format of the study will be semi-structured interviews with strategic communicators in major US newsrooms about what strategies their communications teams are forming or adopting in response to compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance, as well as the self-evaluated success of those strategies.

Introduction

On September 27th, 2018, Christine Blasey Ford testified to the U.S. Senate Judiciary committee staff and to the nation that she had been sexually assaulted by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in 1982 (Britzky, 2018). Ford, and eventually two other women, testified to their experiences and were grilled about the details of their traumatic experiences in a highly public space. It was a landmark cultural moment for America, a subject that was extensively covered in the press and that was relevant to larger discourses about sexual assault, power, and government (Hodge, Benjamin, Somers & Gulinson, 2019; Traynor, 2019). I, like many other friends and colleagues that I spoke with about the ongoing hearing, turned off my TV. I muted news alerts on my phone, avoided newspaper outlets and talk radio stations.

My choice to avoid or limit my consumption of news related to the Kavanaugh trial was not out of a lack of interest or because the subject didn't merit attention. In fact, I thought it was incredibly important and deserved national if not global attention, debate and journalistic coverage. So why weren't my friends and I knew actively consuming news related to the hearing? Compassion fatigue, "...a state of exhaustion and dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, and socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress." (Figley, 1995, p. 253).

It has been claimed that the Women's March was a reaction to Donald Trump's announcement to run in 2015 and then successful presidential campaign in 2016 (Just & Muhr, 2019).). The Kavanaugh hearing fell 11 months after Alyssa Milano posted her now landmark #MeToo tweet that really popularized the movement started originally by Tarana Burke (Jerkins, 2019). In the interim between #MeToo going viral and the

Kavanaugh trial, scores of high profile men were in the news after women empowered in part by the movement came forward with allegations ranging from sexual harassment to sexual assault. This timeline of tension around gender, sexuality, and partisan values contextualizes how the Kavanaugh trial was like a match in a gas-filled room.

Each event that dominated news coverage from Donald Trump's presidential campaign announcement until the Kavanaugh hearing was for myself and many other Americans important; they required some emotional energy or investment to hear and talk about, especially when topics felt personal. Just as a nurse may feel compassion fatigue after providing nearly non-stop care for her patients for years, my friends and I felt emotionally spent from caring deeply and almost daily consuming news media related to current events. When Kavanaugh arose, we had no compassion left to expend and the constant news coverage was overwhelming.

I was not alone in my experience of compassion fatigue with both the current events and the related news coverage. In Dr. Eve Rittenberg's opinion piece "Trauma-Informed Care — Reflections of a Primary Care Doctor in the Week of the Kavanaugh Hearing" for The New England Journal of Medicine, she said, "Many of my patients named the Kavanaugh hearings as a source of dread...the news in which they are immersed has resonated deeply and brought back memories of their own experiences." (Rittenberg, 2018, p. 1).

Rittenberg's reflection on compassion fatigue in light of the hearing was not an anomaly, either. I and many others voluntarily participated in news avoidance during this period of compassion fatigue. Beyond anecdotal evidence, Pew studies have found that

during periods of political and cultural turmoil, the majority of Americans report feeling exhausted by the news (Gottfried, 2016).

For individuals working in news media responsible for audience engagement monitoring and strategy, compassion fatigue and the resulting news avoidance deserve attention. Combatting news avoidance as a product of compassion fatigue requires understanding, planning and creativity. As a researcher, my goal is to conduct semi-structured interviews with the strategic communicators at national news organizations about if, and if so how, these increasing reports of compassion fatigue and news avoidance are effecting the communication strategies of these outlets.

By compiling and synthesizing the strategies of some of the leaders at national news organizations in regards to compassion fatigue, this proposed document would be a source of valuable information to both strategic communicators in newsroom environments as well as a contribution to growing research (Park, 2019; Song et al., 2017; Toff & Palmer, 2019) about news avoidance and compassion fatigue. Learning about these concepts and how to alleviate them for both journalists and news consumers alike has the potential to decrease compassion fatigue and to make the relationship between news producer and consumer more functional and successful for both parties.

Combatting compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance in a news audience is important for both consumer and producer. Journalists are also highly susceptible to news/compassion fatigue (Smith, Newman, Drevo & Slaughter, 2015) so shining a light on this issue is beneficial to all involved. News consumers need to be proactive in taking

care of themselves and news producers need to tailor their content and/or content delivery to the needs of their target audience.

Professional Component

For the professional component of my graduate project I intend to work 30 hours a week for a minimum of 14 weeks per our project parameters as an intern for MU Health Care. I am coordinating with Jesslyn Chew, public relations manager for MU Health Care, to create and fill an internship position that will both meet my professional component requirements and also fulfills the needs of the institution. I will be working on promotional materials for MU Health and will be expanding upon my multimedia content production skills as well as learning how to write and disseminate print and multimedia press releases. Ideally in the future I would like to work as a strategic communicator creating multimedia content for healthcare professionals. The skills I learn in this position will help to prepare me for the career I want to pursue after graduation and builds upon my established skill set. Once a week I will send field notes to my committee and I will summarize my on-the-job activities, reflect on what skills I am acquiring and what I am learning, and note any issues that may arise. The promotional materials I produce while working at MU Health are meant to be seen by the public and will be available for my committee to see.

My professional component and my research are related but will be quite independent of each other. My internship will allow me professional, resume-building strategic communications experience and my research will expand on an important topic in the academic world of strategic communications. My in depth interview informants will not be sourced from MU Health. The only direct connection that may occur is that

compassion fatigue is a term that originates from health care and may inform related content that I produce for MU Health.

Literature Review

In order to fully understand the scope and vision of this proposed project, we must first understand the different terms that will be used and their etymologies. The main concerns of this literature review are with compassion fatigue, news avoidance, and their relationship in the literature with each other and with strategic communication strategies.

The term compassion fatigue (CF) is first attributed to Joinson in 1992 within research about the emotional toll of working in nursing. The definition of compassion fatigue is “a state of exhaustion and dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, and socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress” (Figley, 1995, p. 253). Documented physical symptoms of CF include exhaustion, difficulty sleeping and increased use of destructive coping mechanisms such as alcoholism (Figley, 1995). CF on a mental and emotional level has also been associated with anxiety, hopelessness, loss of compassion, cynicism, dread, and hypervigilance, (Figley, 1995; Joinson, 1992; Orlovsky, 2006). CF has even been demonstrated to have a negative effect on spiritual health (Harris & Quinn Griffin, 2015). CF also effects individuals’ personal and professional lives. A study found that CF can limit productivity and leads to more sick days and lower workplace satisfaction (Pfifferling & Gilley, 2000). CF doesn’t just affect the sufferer; in care situations it can decrease the quality of care a patient receives (Mathieu, 2012).

How a researcher refers to CF may change but the core concept remains the same. Figley stated that CF is “identical to secondary traumatic stress disorder (STSD) and is

the equivalent of PTSD” (1995, p. xv). Other terms used interchangeably with CF are secondary traumatization, vicarious traumatization, secondary survivor, and vicarious traumatization (Figley, 1995; McCann & Saakvitne, 1995; Remer & Elliott, 1988; Saakvitne, Gamble, Pearlman, and Lev, 2000).

The literature reveals that certain individuals are more susceptible to CF than others. CF is not about having enough empathy, but rather feeling drained of empathy. Risk factors include having high levels of empathy (Naijar, Davis, Beck-Coon, Carney Doebbeling, 2009); having a preexisting anxiety diagnosis, mental health issues, personal trauma, and being selfless (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006; Lerias & Byrne 2003;).

CF, though originally conceived to describe a phenomenon specific to caregiving situations, is not limited to a caregiver and patient relationship. Anyone in a position that requires empathy, compassion, and or exposure to trauma (firsthand or secondhand) is a likely candidate. Persons in the healthcare industry, first responders, social workers, and journalists have shown a high tendency to experience CF (Conrad, Kellar-Guenther, and Yvonne, 2006; Dworzniak, 2018; Saakvitne, Gamble, Pearlman, and Lev, 2000).

Within journalism research, CF has been linked to and studied in journalists who cover traumatic events as well as found in news audiences (Maier, 2015; Moeller, 1999). One study found that the main reasons why mass media contributes to CF were sensationalism, simplistic explanations of complex situations, an abundance of reporting on “bad news,” and a lack of solution-based journalism (Kinnick et al., 1996, p. 690). This proposal, however, is concerned first and foremost with the strategic communications decisions that are being made that determine how, when, and what kind

of news media are being promoted to the public through what venues not necessarily the change in content or framing within a story.

We are living in a time where distrust of the media is rampant (Reuters, 2018). News media are full of death and destruction (Woodstock, 2014), and funding for the traditional forms of news is drying up (Westley & Severin, 1964; Sobal & Jackson-Beeck, 1981). As the relationship between news producers and news consumers grows tense, some people are choosing to stop consuming news altogether. Or, at least, to go on a news diet.

In the simplest terms, news resisters are those which make up a portion of the population who do not consume, or limit their consumption of, news media over a prolonged but indeterminate period of time. There as yet exists no agreed-upon, universal definition of news resistance within the literature of journalism scholarship; even different titles such as news resisters (Woodstock, 2014), news avoiders (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010), and nonreaders (Westley & Severin, 1964) are used interchangeably. News avoidance is an individual choice (Woodstock, 2014) the reasoning for which we are only beginning to understand (Toff & Palmer, 2018). Woodstock proposed that news avoidance can be measured and understood as a spectrum of behavior instead of as a static identity (2014).

The earliest pursuit of news resisters began with a profile drawn up by researchers about the “non-reader” of newspapers (Westley & Severin, 1964). They found non-readers to be, “...low on the scale in occupation, income, and education; either quite young or old; more likely to be a farmer than a city dweller; and relatively disinterested in social life.” (Westley & Severin, 1964, p.45). In 1974, Penrose, Weaver, Cole, and

Shaw returned to look at non-readers in their partial-replication study, this time in North Carolina. They found that in ten years, non-readers surveyed much the same as they had in 1964 except for that there were more non-readers than there had been previously.

Age has emerged as a common divide between news consumers and news avoiders (Benesch, 2012; Westley & Severin, 1964; Zukin, 1997). In a European survey, online newspapers are read especially by young adults, followed by youths and adolescents (Fortunati, 2014). They also found that students, usually a younger set of the population, consumed more digital content. A potential difference in news resistance for younger generations has to do with how involved they are in social institutions (Westley & Severin, 1964).

Education has also been a noted marker in news avoidance when research first was being conducted (Westley & Severin, 1964) and has remained so (Benesch, 2012). This pattern in news avoidance is consistent with broader findings about news consumption as well; lower levels of educational attainment have been linked to less news consumption (Fortunati, 2014). Avid news seekers occupy the opposite end of the educational spectrum than news avoiders and tend to be more educated than the general public (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010).

Gender has exhibited a strong correlation with news avoidance (Benesch, 2012; Toff & Palmer, 2018). Studies have emerged that point to a gendered difference in the way people consume (or don't consume) the news (Fortunati, 2014). In a 2009 phone-survey study across five European countries, women were found to "...read significantly less than men any kind of news, whether print, online, free, and mobile" (Fortunati, 2014). Causation for this gender gap in news consumption and avoidance is speculative

but women with children were far more likely to avoid news (Benesch, 2012). Women are more likely to turn to news when they are in search of information (Lee, 2013).

Education and gender are a powerful cross-section of news avoidance. “With rising levels of education, news consumption among men increases considerably, whereas news consumption among women increases only to a moderate extent...” (Benesch, 2012). The news-democracy narrative would suggest that there is a connection between being civically active and consuming the news, but this did not always prove true in research (Sobal & Jackson-Beeck, 1981; Woodstock, 2014). News resisters and political party affiliation do show a marked difference in news reception, though (Pew, 2018). Republicans and younger Americans were more likely than Democrats to report news fatigue (Pew, 2018), a common complaint and precursor to news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2018b).

From the literature, it can be concluded that as of the most recent and longstanding research on news avoidance, news avoiders are most likely to be (but are not exclusively) young women (Toff & Palmer, 2018) with children and little education (Benesch, 2012). The motivations of news resisting behavior have been found to be distrust and sense of place, time constraints, care taking, mental health, affective polarization, and news fatigue (Ariely, 2015; Westley & Severin, 1964; Woodstock, 2014; Toff & Palmer, 2018). News resistance was predicted to become and continue as a major concern for journalism (Toff & Palmer, 2018b). While news avoidance patterns are present in the behavior of a much larger sector of the population, news avoiders who specifically “consume news less than once a month or never at all” were 3% globally and, in the U.S., 8% (Newman, 2017). One study went as far as to claim that over half the

American population resists news when defining a news avoider as someone who “...consume relatively little news, spend almost no time watching cable TV news channels, and avoid news magazines and news Web sites entirely” (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010).

Not all news avoiders choose to limit their consumption due to experiencing compassion fatigue from news media, but the literature about news avoidance motivations does point to the physical and emotional burdens of caretaking as being a main complaint of especially female news avoiders (Toff & Palmer, 2018). The increasing academic interest in news avoidance has led to the introduction of a new term: news fatigue (Gottfried, 2016). A 2018 Pew survey found that the number of Americans who felt exhausted and “worn out” was 7 in 10 (Gottfried & Barthel, 2018). News fatigue differs slightly from CF-induced news avoidance in that news fatigue doesn’t attribute its cause in any detail or specificity whereas CF induced news avoidance is specifically attributed to news coverage of potentially traumatic, overwhelming events (as opposed to an inundation of too much news on any subject). While research has been conducted establishing a connection between caretaking and news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2018) and the connection between CF and mass media news coverage (Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996; Moeller, 1999), to my knowledge (Gabbert, 2018) this is the first explicit research beyond anecdotal exploration proposed on the specific phenomenon of CF-induced news avoidance.

CF has been shown to be more likely to affect women, though there is more research to be done on the connection between gender and compassion fatigue outside of healthcare (Cocker & Joss, 2016). Educational attainment has also been linked to a

greater likelihood of experiencing CF (Boscarino, Figley, and Adams, 2004). Women have been shown in studies to exhibit more empathy and to excel in jobs related to social skills (Cortes, Jaimovich, & Siu, 2018). Many of the same reasons why women are more likely to be news avoiders are the same reasons they are more likely to experience CF: traditional, patriarchal gender roles gender women as empathetic caregivers in the home and in society, which leaves little time or compassion left over for traumatic events in the news. Compassion fatigue also has been found to correlate with youth, lack of job experience, and educational attainment, all of which were key factors in news avoidance populations (Liddle & Creamer, 2019).

In combatting CF, studies have been done in a healthcare setting showing that even if there is awareness of CF and employees are at high risk of experiencing CF, there is a lack of “workplace based strategies to reduce CF in these occupational groups...” (Cocker & Joss, 2016, p.4). Just as nurses experiencing CF are more likely to take more sick days and avoid being in situations that will drain their empathy reserves, so too a news avoider with CF will try to avoid consuming news that could require expending empathy.

In an interview for Utah Public Radio, Patricia Smith, the founder of the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project, said her advice to people struggling with CF due to news consumption was to “Limit. Limit what you’re viewing. Limit what you’re reading. Limit what you’re seeing. It’s all about boundaries, personal boundaries.” The onus of alleviating news induced CF, at least in a general sampling of online advice, is on the news consumer. However, what could news producers be doing to alleviate CF in their consumers?

The argument that news consumers need to be the gatekeepers of their own news consumption fails to acknowledge the fact that the digital nature of modern news makes it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid news. A 2017 Gallup/Knight study also found that Americans are now relying equally on social media and newspapers and that younger adults (50 or under) are more likely to consume news online than through any other source.

Incidental exposure in time interstices indicates that total news avoidance is becoming harder, if not impossible, with the emergence of digital news media platforms (Dimmick et al, 2010; Edgerly, 2017; Toff & Nielson, 2018). Time interstices are "...the gaps in the routines of media users between scheduled activities" (Dimmick et al, 2010) and incidental exposure in this context refers to when people are exposed to news unintentionally when they are using social media and digital news media platforms (Yamamoto & Morey, 2019).

Trauma-informed communication is "...getting to the core of what our clients are trying to communicate in a way that can move people, but without further traumatizing the survivors, and in turn, triggering other survivors" (Rally, 2019). Studies have found that incorporating trauma-informed communication has shown a "...reduction in seclusion, reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms and general mental health symptoms, increased coping skills, improved physical health, greater treatment retention and shorter inpatient stays" (Sweeney, Clement, Filson, & Kennedy, 2016).

News sneaks into our consciousness through the interstitial moments that fill our commutes, workouts, and elevator rides. It is not enough for an overwhelmed news consumer to stop buying a newspaper, because the strategic communicator for a news

organization has already bought ad space on their Facebook feed or in their Google search results for news content. What, then, is the current level of awareness and strategy happening on the part of such strategic communicators? To what extent- if at all in real time- are advances in communication such as trauma-informed communications changing the way news is marketed towards the public? That is a significant gap in news avoidance and CF literature that this proposed research would contribute to filling.

Research Questions

RQ1: Are strategic communicators at US news outlets aware of CF-induced news avoidance?

Since this proposed research would be breaking ground when it comes to studying the roles of strategic communicators in major US news outlets in relation to CF and news avoidance, it is of value to first find out how cognizant such individuals are of the phenomenon. Whether subjects are aware of or not aware of CF-induced news avoidance is relevant because it acts as a gauge about awareness on a larger scale because major news outlets have the position and authority to potentially exert great influence over smaller news outlets.

RQ2: What strategies are they utilizing to address CF-induced news avoidance?

The details of strategies being implemented in major US news organizations to combat CF-induced news avoidance would be valuable information for the strategic communications and journalism communities. Sharing what has worked and not worked to combat CF-induced news avoidance could be evaluated by other news organizations and potentially adopted. This research also has the potential to shed light on the effectiveness of trauma-informed communication.

RQ3: Have their strategies been successful?

RQ4: How is that success measured?

RQ3 and RQ4

may be the most difficult to answer depending on how easy or difficult it is for news media organizations to measure CF-induced news avoidance in their audiences. The reasoning for asking these last two research questions is twofold. First, it could affect

whether or not the strategies used by a certain news organizations are worth trying to replicate by other news organizations. Second, it could provide information about best practices in measuring difficult-to-quantify audience engagement analytics.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping theory is officially based on research that began with Kurt Lewin, a German-American psychologist, in 1943. Shoemaker and Vos say, “Gatekeeping is one of the media’s central roles in public life: People rely on mediators to transform information about billions of events into a manageable number of media messages. This process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.1). Shoemaker and Vos break down gatekeeping and explain that it is concerned with information about events that becomes messages and, if those are published messages from a news organization, becomes news items.

In gatekeeping theory, gatekeepers have a great deal of power and potential influence over their audience. “Gatekeepers determine what becomes a person’s social reality, a particular view of the world. Although a single gatekeeping decision may itself seem trivial, both varied messages and common messages emerge every day, making the gatekeeping process complicated and highly significant” (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.3). Gatekeeping is not a function just for editors or just for reporters. Instead, gatekeeping theory considers everyone who is involved in creating and distributing a story from the reporter to the person who hits the publish button on a web story, to be a gatekeeper and to be using gatekeeping. Because of this theoretical framework, the interview subjects in my research are understood to be influential gatekeepers in their news organizations.

Methods

The research method to be used for this research project to gather data is semi-structured interviews from 30 minutes to an hour long with a pre-set list of questions in an interview guide that can be deviated from if necessary (see Appendix A). The interviewees would be communications professionals on staff with major US news organizations that are responsible for planning and executing strategic communication strategies for their organization's print and/or online news. The decision to interview this particular demographic was made because these subjects and organizations have the greatest potential to influence by example the journalistic and strategic communication practices of other US news organizations.

Choosing to hold interviews for thirty minutes to an hour long is based on previous scholars' recommendations and experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These time parameters are also determined by the researcher's personal assumption that any amount of time less than thirty minutes would not be sufficient to get through the interview guide and no maximum amount of time is placed on the interviews so as to avoid limiting the data collected in a session. In this case, ideal newsrooms would be those that have national or even international audience since they have a great deal of influence and are large enough that they are more likely to be able to afford communications staff with specific roles.

The range set for this study would be 8-12 interviewees. This decision is informed by previous research done on how many interviews are required to find saturation in a qualitative research setting with a heterogeneous group of subjects (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). In the field of qualitative research there exists as of yet no definite, agreed upon

number for how many interviews to conduct to satisfy the research questions. In many cases, twelve is the minimum number of participants for a homogenous group of interviewees, and that is the minimum recommended for reaching saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In this case, however, the range is set lower because the target demographic for interviews may be a small pool of professionals to pull from, possibly less than 12. Usually when three interviews have yielded no new results, saturation has been reached (Francis et al., 2010).

Appendix A is an interview guide. The questions are listed in an order that seems like a natural flow of thought from topic to topic, starting with more surface level questions and definitions and then moving into deeper topics. However, the interview guide is just that: a guide. The questions can be deviated from, or re-arranged, as the interview progresses. The questions are not meant to be exhaustive but to be prompts that will motivate the interviewee to go on at length.

Interviewees will be found through their online presence and affiliation with leading newsrooms as well as through committee connections. The interviews, whether conducted in person or via phone or video call, will begin as much like a casual conversation as possible in order to make the interviewee feel at ease and comfortable sharing with the researcher. Establishing trust and building rapport seems an essential part of the interviewing process in order to gain the most honest and sincere feedback (Fontana & Frey, 1994). During the course of the interview I will take notes and also record the conversation audio for later review. Within a week of the interview, I will transcribe the audio and write up a memo on the second page of the interview guide and record my general impressions, take-aways, and synthesize the notes taken during the

interview. I plan to use a transcription service such as Otter.ai and then to go through and manually correct so that the transcriptions are accurate.

Once my research has been conducted in the Spring of 2020, I plan to write up an article detailing my findings and pitch it to publications such as the IRE Journal, the Columbia Journalism Review, the Nieman Journalism Lab website, Poynter, and Editor & Publisher Magazine.

Possible Interview Subjects

The exact job title for these desired interviewees is not an established role in news organizations and may change from outlet to outlet. Director of Communications or Audience Engagement Coordinator both often have fitting job descriptions but can vary. Instead of by title, subjects will be selected and identified by being staff at news outlets who are responsible for audience engagement and content marketing/promotion. Specific duties of such a staff member might be deciding what news stories are going to be marketed to/pushed at which consumers, curating the personalized news content suggestions that are made for consumers in search engines or via news apps, or strategizing how potentially traumatic, triggering or intense news stories are promoted to consumers. I will locate and interview an inside informant (Weiss, 1994, p.20) in a news organization before the end of December to help identify the appropriate job titles and interviewees. Heather Lamb, the editor of Vox Magazine, suggested these titles: social media producers, engagement editors, public editors, audience development strategists, SEO specialists, website editors and project managers.

I plan to reach out to and hopefully interview an appropriate interviewee at these major US newsrooms: The New York Times, the Huffington Post, the Washington Post, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, NPR, USA Today, the Associated Press, the LA Times, the Wall Street Journal, etc. Companies that own several newsrooms, such as Gatehouse Media, also have potential. All of these organizations have a prolific web and social media presence and are in the top 100 of news organizations that have the greatest audience reach online (Feedspot, 2019). Connections with appropriate subjects will be

made through email (see Appendix B) and, when possible, through referral by committee members or contacts in the journalism industry.

1. Jordan Cohen is the Executive Director of Communications at The New York Times. He has held this position since March and has worked in communications for the news outlet for over eight years. According to LinkedIn, his work has required him to “Integrate with social media marketing and audience teams to coordinate maximum engagement of Times stories...Enhance coverage of tentpole events and breaking news with inventive and engaging communications strategies.” His experience with audience engagement as well as being in a position of leadership indicate he would be a suitable interviewee.
2. Ari Isaacman Bevacqua is the Director of Communications at The New York Times. She creates “...experiments, measure outcomes and communicate learnings across the Times...building new ways to reach audiences with product and technology...constructing paid promotion opportunities with marketing...partnered with senior editors to ensure that audience development tactics maintain editorial judgment.” Bevacqua’s role as director as well as her involvement with marketing news to a targeted audience makes her an ideal candidate.
3. Shani George is the Director of Communications at The Washington Post. She has held that position since 2016 and thus has overseen the newspaper throughout Trump’s presidency and the #MeToo movement mentioned above as prime times for CF induced news avoidance. She also has been on the team during The Washington Post’s controversial and innovative Super Bowl commercial.

4. Ebony Reed, who recently was teaching at MU, is the New Audiences Chief at The Wall Street Journal. On her LinkedIn, she identifies herself as a "...strategic change agent with a multitude of successful experiences in revenue generation, innovation strategy and editorial content at news companies." Reed's experience with audience engagement and strategy makes her a great candidate. Reed is also referred by Dr. Porter, which increases the likelihood of an interview and, if she knows of someone else on staff at WSJ who is a better fit for this research, she can be a connection.
5. Porter Berry is the VP and Editor-in-Chief for Fox News Digital. We has served in this position for over a year. In a press release from Fox News, president of Fox News Jay Wallace said Berry had a, "...keen understanding of the news business along with his extensive experience across production and audience engagement..." Berry is responsible for growing Fox News's digital reach and promotion of their online content to consumers.
6. Nicki Britton is the Director of Communications for the Houston Chronicle. This is "...a position she assumed in 2012 after seven years in the Houston Chronicle newsroom, where she served as a digital features manager for chron.com. While in that role, she led the launch and content strategies for the niche websites 29-95.com, MomHouston.com and Perry Presidential.com as well as online lifestyle and entertainment coverage."
7. Jason Jedlinski is the Digital Product Executive for Gannett/USA Today. He was worked in strategic communications within news for years and has been recognized for his contributions to USA Today's personalized, successful

development of how they market their news content to consumers (Willens, 2018). They are developing and implementing digital frameworks that will use audience data to determine branded content and suggestions.

8. Mizell Stewart III is the Senior Director of News Strategy for USA Today. On Linkdin he says, “I work with leaders and teams to transform organizations and communities, combining a lifelong passion for news, storytelling and community service with expertise in digital content strategy, social media, investigative journalism, leadership development, organizational change and fiscal management.”

Conclusion

Awareness of and continued research about the phenomena of compassion fatigue-induced news avoidance and the strategies that are used by strategic communicators to combat it come full circle to its origins. Compassion fatigue, which arose from studying nursing in the 1950s, has progressively been studied in a variety of contexts and now has enhanced our understanding of journalism and news audiences. When communicators in journalism newsrooms are aware of and strategizing against compassion fatigue in their content production, both the news producers and news consumers stand to benefit.

Journalists are bound to a creed of honoring democracy, pursuing truth, and making decisions that fuel the greater public good and in an unexpected way, actually adjusting the creation and delivery of news may serve that purpose when it comes to compassion fatigue and news avoidance almost as much as the content of the news. Compassion fatigue began as a healthcare issue and in the journalistic context, it becomes a mental healthcare issue that strategic communicators in journalism may have the opportunity to alleviate. When news media is improved for those it has been failing to serve, it is improved for everyone.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

- 1) Could you spell your name and confirm your title?

- 2) What is your daily role in this operation? (Encourage for relevant specifics)

How long have you been doing this?

- 3) Have you noticed people (audience and/or in general) avoiding news coverage before?

- 4) Are you familiar with the concept of “news avoidance”?

(If necessary, define for the respondent.)

News avoidance is when people choose to not consume, or limit their consumption of, news media over a prolonged but indeterminate period of time. It’s an individual choice and there can be a lot of reasons behind going on a “news diet”, so to speak. Instead of an all or nothing mindset, it is more of a spectrum.

- 5) During times of intense news coverage, such as during a natural disaster, do you notice news consumption changing noticeably for your audience?

If so, how do the consumption behaviors change?

- 6) If/when you observe news avoidance in your audience, how do you measure it?

7) What strategies do you/your organization follow to combat news avoidance in your audience?

9) How do you define and measure “success” in combatting news avoidance?

10) Have you observed that “compassion fatigue” affects your audience’s news consumption? If so, how?

Compassion fatigue has been identified as a common cause of news avoidance. CF is a lot like mental, emotional, and even sometimes physical burnout from caring too long and too deeply. An example of this in relation to news is – national disaster example.

11) (Briefly explain/describe “trauma-informed communication” in a mass media context)

Trauma-informed communication in a mass media context is using best practices in communicating about potentially traumatic or sensitive material in a way that doesn’t encourage re-traumatization or emotional distress. An example would be writing “died by suicide” instead of “they killed themselves” or not including explicit or unnecessary details about how someone self-harmed or the details of a sexual assault.

Do you follow any of these practices in your operation? If so, are they successful at parrying news avoidance?

12) Do you have any other observations on news avoidance, compassion fatigue or trauma-informed communication in your organization's operations?

13) Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think is relevant to this topic and important for the field to know?

Appendix B

(Email draft to potential interview subjects.)

Dear [insert name],

[Name] recommended that I reach out to you. I'm a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism researching news fatigue and I seek your expertise. May I interview you via phone on this topic as part of my research project?

As you know, the nature and volume of today's news sometimes causes readers/viewers to sometimes limit or cut off their news consumption. For my research, I am conducting interviews with media staff, such as yourself, who are responsible for audience engagement and content promotion, to find out your thoughts and professional experience with this topic.

Specifically, my research seeks to gather the strategies or best practices being used in major news organizations to engage with their audiences despite news avoidance. Your input would be of value to journalism studies but also has the potential to impact how news organizations contend with news avoidance on a grander scale. I can be flexible and work with your schedule and the semi-structured interview would be conducted via phone and would approximately take 30-45 minutes. Your identity and that of your news organization would remain anonymous.

If you can think of any colleagues working in news media who I should also interview, feel free to recommend them!

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to your response,

Hannah Musick