ISOJ 2023: Day 2

Panel: *How to respond to news avoidance and reconnect with audiences through new approaches*

Chair: **LaSharah Bunting**, CEO and executive director, **Online News Association (ONA)**

- **Jay Rosen,** associate professor, **New York University**, and author, **PressThink**
- **Dmitry Shishkin,** independent media consultant **(UK)**
- **Talia Stroud,** founder and director, **Center for Media Engagement, UT Austin**
- **Ben Toff,** senior research fellow, **Reuters Institute (UK)**

LaSharah Bunting All right. So I am super excited to be here. Hang on, let me get my notes and everything. So thank you for joining us. I know so many of you are either going to be heading out soon for your flights home, so I appreciate you taking a moment.

So the rates of people who avoid news is high and it's increasing. More people feel overwhelmed and powerless and fatigued from the headlines. At the same time, the public's trust in journalism remains low. Our panelists are exploring ways to more deeply understand and overcome this complicated, yet urgent issue. Joining us today is Ben Toff, senior research fellow at Reuters Institute; Dmitry Shishkin, an independent media consultant in the UK; Talia Stroud, professor and founder and director of the Center for Media Engagement here at UT Austin; and Jay Rosen, associate professor at NYU and author of "PressThink." We're going to kick it off with Ben, who will set the stage for the conversation, helping us to understand what news avoidance is and why this is happening.

Ben Toff Uh, great. Thank you so much, LaSharah. If I can get my slides up there… Here we go. Thanks so much. I'm going to start with a bit of a puzzle that LaSharah sort of alluded to already. We live in a world in which news and information is more abundant and accessible than ever before. It's easier than ever to find out information in your pocket. You have this device, this incredible device, that gives you access. Yet there's a large segment of the public for whom they say access almost no news whatsoever. About one in ten Americans say they access news less often than once a month. There's a significant percentage of people who say that they are actively avoiding it.

So the Reuters Institute has been publishing this large annual survey of news audiences around the world, the Digital News Report. Since 2017, they've been asking how often people say that they actively avoid the news. We see about four in ten Americans say that they are often or sometimes avoiding the news, and that number has been increasing both in the U.S. and in several different places around the world. So at the same time, we're also seeing a bit of decline in many places around the world, both in terms of active avoidance but also in terms of interest in news more generally. This sort of puzzle about what's going on: this media environment in which it's easier than ever to access news, and yet there are more people seeming to be resistant to it. That's kind of where we started with this project and with Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute, and Ruth Palmer at IE University in Spain. The three of us have been working on studying news avoidance since 2016. We have done over 160 interviews with news avoiders and

analyzed a lot of survey data. We have a book coming out on the subject of this year. I'm going to try to distill all this into just sort of some basic points around what is news avoidance, who are the news avoiders and why they avoid news to sort of set the stage for the conversation today.

So as I mentioned, the project began at The Reuters Institute as kind of an offshoot of the Digital News Report. We've tended to use a couple of different terms to focus on different aspects of news avoidance, and we've tried to differentiate between what we call selective news avoidance and what we call consistent news avoidance. Selective news avoidance is the one that I've kind of showed you some evidence of already. It's this idea of people actively avoiding the news. It's a very common phenomenon. I think probably many of you in this room can relate to the experience of feeling sort of overwhelmed by information, fatigued by information in the news. It is quite common; as I said, about four in ten Americans say that they often or sometimes avoid the news. But notice there's a couple of different pieces of this. Just because you say that you often avoid the news doesn't mean that you're actually consuming no news at all. The sort of general question doesn't necessarily differentiate between the topic in the news that you might be avoiding. So maybe you're just avoiding news about Donald Trump or news about COVID-19, news about crime or war, but you're actually consuming lots of news in your day-to-day life in general. The other thing you have to know about selective news avoidance is you have to be encountering a lot of news to feel like you're actively avoiding it. So that's why we focus on what we call consistent news avoidance as a related phenomenon. Because it turns out that actually a lot of people who say they often avoid the news, they consume news almost as often as everybody else. So that measure — as alarming as some of the numbers might seem — it doesn't necessarily mean that they're not consuming news.

Consistent news avoidance, on the other hand, are these people who are consuming almost no news at all. So the threshold that we use is less than once a month or less frequently, never. This idea of sort of limited overall news consumption sustained over a period of time. This is, we think, the more normatively concerning form of news avoidance. There's a lot of research that suggests that following the news, having a regular habit of following news, is closely intertwined with people's ability to engage in political life.

I should say, too, that consistent news avoiders, these aren't completely separate categories. About 60% or two-thirds of people who are categorized as consistent news avoiders are also selectively avoiding news. So if we asked them, they'll say they are intentionally avoiding it. At the same time, that leaves about a third or 40% of people who are in this consistent news avoidance category who say that it's not necessarily because they are intentionally avoiding news that they're almost consuming none of it at all. We think those people are just as important to be paying attention to as the other news avoiders.

All right. So who are the consistent news avoiders? It would be one thing if it was sort of randomly distributed across the population, but it's not. There are some systematic patterns in terms of who tends to be in this group. They tend to be people who are sort of least advantaged in society: lower socioeconomic status, less educated, less formal schooling, people who are younger. There's also a gender gap that we see across a lot of countries. Women tend to be somewhat more likely to be in this news avoider category, particularly women who are primary caretakers. Additionally, it's very intertwined with the forms of media that people are using to access news and information. So news avoidance tends to be higher among people whose main source of news comes from social media. Part of this is reflected in the kinds of things we heard in talking to news avoiders who

would often emphasize they didn't feel like it was important to develop a habit around finding news because when they went online, they felt like news would just find them. Or they felt like they didn't need to pay attention to news deliberately on their own because if they ever want to know what was happening in the news, they could just Google it. They could pull out their phone and look for information. While I think both of those ideas are probably very relatable to people in this room, it's one thing if you have a clear sense of how to make sense of all the sources of information you're finding when you go about using these tools; it's another thing if you don't really have much of a track record or history or a relationship with news organizations. A lot of news avoiders will tell us they feel like they just don't know what to believe when they actually go ahead and try to Google for information, which for many of them, they feel like what's even the point. So they sort of go about continuing to consistently avoid it.

The third thing is there's a very clear connection to politics here as well. So in the U.S., there are much higher rates of news avoidance on the right, people who consider themselves conservative or Republican. But there's also a larger segment of people for whom what they're expressing is not just simply avoidance or aversion to the liberal mainstream media, but about politics altogether. They're politically disengaged completely. In our data you can see… The image doesn't show up that great here. About one in four people who say they don't know where they stand in terms of the left-right spectrum, fall into this consistent news avoidance category, versus only about 6% of people who place themselves on the right, versus 2% of Americans who place themselves on the left. So you do see that left-right divide, although it's not quite so strong in other countries. But you see a much larger segment of people who are just disengaged from political life altogether.

In our survey data, we also asked how interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics? You see this huge divide between people who consume a lot of news, who are extremely interested in this kind of information, versus people who are in this news-avoider category who are not interested at all. For a lot of people, the idea of news is so intertwined with the notion of politics and political life that their avoidance and aversion to it is kind of one and the same.

So a few things about why news avoiders tell us they're avoiding new. We can sort of categorize the responses that people gave us into two different kinds of statements. One was emphasizing, it's not news, it's me, and the other was it's not me, it's news. So on the "it's not news, it's me" side of the equation, there's a lot of people who talked about there's almost nothing they felt like news organizations could do to kind of win them over. They would describe themselves as not a news person. They're just not interested. It has to do with their personalities, and they would contrast themselves with other family members or other people they knew. They just felt like they've never been interested or curious about this kind of stuff. Others talked about feeling like news was or feeling their lives were just too stressful with the circumstances too demanding. They were working full time, taking care of multiple kids with aging parents, health issues — they just didn't feel like they could find the time to fit news in. Versus others who really emphasized the problem being news itself. Too much doom and gloom. They felt like they couldn't trust the information in the news. They felt it was too difficult to make sense of or understand it. News is too tedious, too trivial, not relevant to subjects in their lives.

Of course there's a lot of overlap between some of these feelings people have about news that have to do with their kind of subjective sense of what is a relevant and worthwhile way to spend their time. That intersects with the sort of reality of circumstances in their lives. So how people… People often sort of describe these different explanations and they're

sort of jumbled together as being it's partly about news, is partly about me. It wasn't sort of any single thing. There is this sort of disconnect between people's perceptions of what is valuable and worthwhile in the news and in their own everyday lives.

So I'll just close with a few highlights around some of what we think may have potential to reengage news avoiders who are disconnected. One of them has to do with being mindful on how news feels to people in the audience. So I think there's a lot of times we tend to focus on individual pieces of news content or in individual news organizations, reporting without necessarily taking stock of how this stuff accumulates over time or aggregates in terms of people's experiences or general sense of what it's like to actually pay attention to news in a digital environment. So paying closer attention to what that experience is like, I think is very important on an emotional level — not just about the information that people are engaging with.

The second thing is something that I haven't spent a lot of time talking about, but which is a big part of our book, which is the role of what we call news communities. So for many people in this room, I'm guessing you have a lot of friends and family who also pay a lot of attention to news. They value it and see it as important. It kind of reinforces the notion that it is important to pay attention and develop that kind of habit around following the news. But for a lot of the news avoiders that we interviewed, they didn't have those kinds of communities. They didn't have those kinds of social influences, helping them make sense of news, helping them to find enjoyment in paying attention to the news. So all the costs, all that sort of negative aspects about news, which I'm guessing many people will also find familiar and relatable… They had fewer ways of kind of overcoming those things. They didn't get many of the social benefits from news that people who, probably like those of you in this room, do derive from. So we think there may be potential for kind of working to develop and strengthen those news communities where they're lacking and where they're missing as another strategy to kind of build engagement among the news avoider population.

Then lastly, I think there's potential in terms of packaging and delivering news that really meets people where they are. So we did a series of follow-up interviews with some of the news avoiders that we talked to, and there were a small handful of them who actually did change their behaviors over the few months in between the first time we talked to them and later. One of the common threads in those who changed their behaviors was that they had found forms of news or individual sources of news… It could be a podcast or satellite radio or a particular outlet that really spoke to a set of things that they did care about that allowed them to find some enjoyment and some interest and some connection to news that they previously hadn't really experienced. We think there's a way that… For a lot of news avoiders, they just didn't really see much difference between all the different sources of news that are out there. But for many people who are highly engaged in news, it's not that we like all news, we like very specific outlets of news and very specific forms of news. So helping audiences navigate that and finding forms of news that work for their daily lives, that work for the circumstances and context in which they trying to get by, and actually speak to the things that are most relevant to them. We think that there's real opportunity there to engage with news avoiders by paying closer attention to people's distinct experiences. I think what is often the case is news organizations sort of deliver their product to the public as sort of take it or leave it. So I'm going to leave things there and I hope that we have plenty of time for a real conversation.

LaSharah Bunting Thank you, Ben. Thank you so much. So Dmitry is going to help us understand what newsrooms need to be doing around user needs to help address this issue.

Dmitry Shishkin Well, thank you for the invitation, first of all. Thank you for the invitation. I think what you're going to see is I've never presented in the States so very important moment for me personally. I'm Dmitry. I have been an editor all my life. Well, at some point of time, I was married and working for the *BBC* longer than I haven't been married and not working for the *BBC*, so 21.5 years. I have been consulting independently for the last two and a half years, helping media organizations do digital better and helping tech organizations do content better. And user needs is kind of my thing. I call myself a collector, evangelizer and enforcer of user needs models in publishing. If you haven't come across this work, you should. Somebody referred to it as the Shishkin method, very impolitely for me to mention this, but anyway.

It all starts with this: Ben Thomson's Stratechery slide. A couple of years ago he basically said that success on digital can be easily achieved as long as you are operating between two axis — one axis is focus and the other one is quality. As long as you understand where you exist in the market and you're providing the best possible quality in that area, you will be okay because on digital there are myriad of niches to fulfill. The problem is that a lot of media organizations are not sure what their focus is, and a lot of media organizations, even if they think they know what their focus is, they don't provide the best quality in that particular niche. So many newsrooms tend to create the wrong type of content— not all of them, but a lot of them. That means that a lot of content that they create is not needed by people. I'm really being probably a little bit more superficial about this, but what I really want to say here is that I'm not talking about topics. This is actually about how you cover those topics. So in topics, cover whatever you want to cover, whatever you want to talk about. What I'm saying is that the way many newsrooms choose to cover those topics is wrong.

So this is a first-ever model that *BBC* created in 2016. The *BBC* user model that posited that there are six reasons why people consume news and "update me" is only one of them. But some other five user needs are very, very important. The map is of all the places where I have been to evangelize and talk about this and help *BBC*'s 41 different language teams really take advantage of this model. Actually 12 teams that we launched from scratch in Africa and Asia and Europe, considered the user needs model as a default strategy for themselves. So that was not only themselves that were taught to cover the news according to this model, but their product was actually built according to those user needs as well.

This is the most important slide. This is a really old slide now — 2016 or 2017. The red line is the number of articles created for every user need and the grey bars are the six user needs: update me, keep me on trend, give me perspective, educate me, divert me and inspire me. What you see on this slide is that 3,600 articles were created in "update me" format, and it's the least popular user need out of all of them. Again, not topics user needs themselves. People choose to engage with "educate me" content twice as effectively as they otherwise would have engaged with "update me" content. So you can still cover whatever you want to cover, but if you choose an "educate me" level, "educate me" angle or "educate me" user lens, your audience will double for that particular story.

Why is this important? Because over the course of the last two and a half years, I have done a lot of work with local, regional, international, niche, national publications, and the

picture is always the same. Majority of newsrooms do wrong type of content when covering the stories that they consider important. Wrong type of content, wrong volumes, wrong audiences, and we also now know that for the majority of people news is not the first screen product. I think news overall is like only 3% of internet. So we really need to be careful, and I'm really delighted to say that all of those companies that you can see now in front of your screens, they all have at some point of time experimented either with the *BBC* user need model or some model that they have created themselves or/and with my help. So you can see a lot of organizations, very different ones… I was really upset that I was not able to talk to *The New York Times* today to confirm that they indeed do have their own model. I found it in *The New York Times* investors deck, and I think they are not actually doing it right, but that's for another moment.

If you satisfy your audience's content needs creatively, consistently and strategically, growth will come. So going back to Ben Thompson's focus and quality slide. Understand your focus and create the best possible content for that quality. So I've done some work with a company called Smartocto, the editorial analytics company, and I weave together updates of the original *BBC* user need model. Now you see the latest, most comprehensive model that is based on all the models that exist in the world right now, some 20 plus newsrooms, and we have created this one. This is the most universally comprehensive basic model of user needs. There are four reasons why people consume news. One of them, they want to know something, another one they want to understand something, another other one is they want to feel something, and then the last one is they want to do something. The doing part of this model was not present in the original *BBC* system, and we see it time and time again on a regional level and on a local level. Doing something about news is becoming a really, really important part of… Actually if you go to the *BBC News* website, you see action-orientated articles which would never have been written in the past, but they are now.

So the full circle is that they… We also say that whilst there are four axis of news consumption that people prefer to consume news, there are actually eight user needs within them. One of them is two of them in each of the sections. So "update me" and "keep me engaged"; "give me perspective" and "educate me" for context; "inspire me" and "divert me" for emotion; and "connect me" and "help me" for action. So effectively, whatever you believe in covering tried to cover the same story through the lens of user needs. For example, this is an example of a Dutch commemorating their big, big, big flood that happened a few decades ago. This is an example of all the user needs stories covering that particular story. So effectively you can choose to pick whatever you want to do. You still will be commemorating the flood, but through the lens of eight different user needs.

Actually once you start going through different types of other models that are out there, there are lots and lots of very specific user needs that sit under those big four axis. Just to name a few of them: connect micro to macro, *Vox*; give me an edge, *Wall Street Journal*; let me take a meaningful break, *The Atlantic*; motivate me, *The Conversation*. So all of those things symbolize and signify the fact that whoever has created those models inside those newsrooms is thinking really hard about what content needs to do to their audience. Rather than just default to an "update me" model, which we know actually doesn't work for a majority of people.

You will be able to see it in some of the articles which I wrote about this, but this is an example of a dashboard that basically categorizes all of the content according to the user needs that you have created. What we see here is that in the "educate me" area, there are 480 something articles, which on average the engagement and the loyalty factor for those

articles are twice as high as for "update me" articles. I'm not saying that "update me" articles are bad; all I'm saying is that you need to be really measured in terms of selecting and making those commissioning and planning decisions.

If you are putting those articles on a quadrant model, this is probably one of my most favorite slides. One axis here… The vertical axis is engagement. The horizontal axis is reach. So obviously the bottom left is low engagement, low reach. The color is green and the green is "update me". Surprise, surprise. So that means that in a huge situation where you have to be constantly competing for attention with other people, you really need to be confidently making those choices in terms of what kind of stories you commission. Because if you're commissioning the wrong type of stories, you're actually wasting everybody's time and money. If you look at this specific example from one of the European regional broadcasters, you can see the bottom right, bottom left corner. Low engagement, low reach, and a lot of green stories there. But if you look, 75% of those are "update me" stories. So they think that "update me" stories are needed by the public, but actually, if you still take the stories that matter and cover them through a different lens, the response of the audience is much, much higher. You are going to be growing your audience much more consistently and strategically according to your product market fit and according to your reason to exist in the market. So I will leave you with news that you really ought to do a similar analysis for those types of user needs for your own organizations because I'm yet to find an organization which wouldn't have at least five remedial points after such an analysis has been taken for their stories. So my question to you is, before I pass it on to Talia, what are your audience's user needs? Do you even think about this? Thank you.

LaSharah Bunting Thank you, Dimitri. Talia is going to help us understand what this looks like on the local level.

Talia Stroud Thank you so much. What a privilege to be here this afternoon, and what a great way to spend a Saturday. Let me get the slides up here. OK. So what I want to do today is really think about news avoidance from the local perspective and how we might think about local audiences and engaging them. At the outset, you might think to yourself, "Oh goodness, well, isn't local media more trusted than national news? Why do we need to worry about local audiences?" Well, that's true, local news media are trusted more than national news sources, but if you look at the recent Knight Foundation survey report, it's still trusted by less than half of the public. So there's still a lot to be learned by thinking through how local news organizations can reach their audiences.

So to start, I want to take a step back and ask you just in general, why do people choose to do anything? I think the answer is because it meets their needs. Why are you here in this auditorium on a Saturday afternoon when you could be enjoying the sunshine outside? Well, we have a need for camaraderie. We have a need to learn something. We have a need to see Rosental and Mallary in their element here. These are all needs that we have that motivate us to be here. I think if we take a similar perspective to news, there's a lot to be learned. So why do people use local news? What needs are being met by it, and how can we really try to understand and unlock that in a way that helps to benefit the local news ecosystem overall.

So what I'd like to do today is talk a little bit about some research that we did at the Center for Media Engagement. Thanks so much to Lenfest and the Independence Public Media Foundation. We were looking in Philadelphia to find out what do people need there and is local media really meeting their needs? So to start, the first thing that we wanted to look at is what issues do people care about, and are the media talking about the issues that really

motivate people and concern them about where they live? So the first thing we did is we fielded a survey. We asked people in Philadelphia to tell us, what are the most important issues facing your neighborhood. It was open-ended; they could say whatever they wanted in response to that. So we went through all the data and figured out what is it that people there really care about in their neighborhoods. Overwhelmingly, in Philadelphia, the number one reason… 70% of Philadelphians say crime and safety is the most important problem facing my neighborhood. After that, around a third of Philadelphians talk about sanitation, trash removal and cleanliness. Around a fourth of Philadelphians are interested in the issues of traffic and parking and believe that they are important to their neighborhoods. Following that, you see drugs and infrastructure and roads. So these are the issues that are really critical to the public when they think about what's facing their neighborhoods. But are these the issues that are being discussed in the media?

So we wanted to do a comparison between what the public says is important in their neighborhoods and what the media are covering. So we scraped all sorts of newspaper articles from online. We did it for broadcast. We did it for digital only. We did it for radio. We analyzed are they using these same topics for their coverage, as the public is saying is of interest to them. Now, before I show you the results, just a couple of quick caveats. The first is I think we can all agree at the outset that we shouldn't expect to see 70% of articles in the Philadelphia media ecosystem about crime and safety. No one is saying that this correspondence should be one-to-one, but because this is the most important issue, we would expect the media to place a lot of attention on this. The second thing is to note that we asked people about their neighborhood and issues important in their neighborhood. Of course, local media have a lot more to cover than just the neighborhoods. They're covering the city. They're covering the state. So we have to keep that in mind that if there are some topics that are discussed more often, maybe that's not so bad because they might be issues of interest to the city or the state. But I think the real key part to this analysis, and the thing that you can take away from it, is saying are some of these top issues really not covered that frequently in the local media.

So this is what we find. Here you see two columns, one of the percentage of articles that mention terms related to the issues people find important, and the second, the same repetition from the slide before, which is what topics people find most important. First thing to note, crime is at the top of both lists. So this is a good thing. The media are covering an issue that people find important. But let's look at the next issues. Sanitation, trash removal and cleanliness named by a third of Philadelphians as important, are only covered in 3% of the media articles in Philadelphia. If you look at the next popular issues mentioned by residents of Philadelphia as important to them, from drugs to infrastructure to traffic to poverty, all of these are being covered far less frequently in comparison to people saying that these are issues that are important in their neighborhoods. So I don't think this is a report card in any way. I think, rather this is an opportunity for local news media to think about is one of the reasons that people avoid the news in our local environment, that they're not talking about the issues that people live every day that affect them in their day to day lives in their neighborhoods. Maybe this is an opportunity for doing some more features that really cater to the topics that people find of interest.

The next thing we did is look at where people live, and when we did that, we looked at all the news media coverage to say what locations are mentioned most frequently in the coverage. We mapped that against the population of Philadelphia. So where do people live and what locations are mentioned most often? So the chart on the right here is showing you where people live, and the chart on the left is showing you locations that were mentioned five or more times and where they're located in Philadelphia. What you see

pretty quickly is that people in northeast Philadelphia, although those are very populous regions of Philly, aren't mentioned quite as frequently in the coverage itself. So if you live in Northeast Philly — it's natural that people want to see the places that they live in the media they consume — this might be a reason why people are avoiding the news. They're not seeing themselves and the places that they frequent reflected in the coverage. You also note that those in Center and South Philly are covered more frequently than the number of people who live there. There might be very good reasons for this. This is where city hall is, for example. So this isn't meant to say a referendum on what things should be covered, but rather, again, inspiration. There's an opportunity here where there are more people in Northeast Philly than the coverage is dictating or is covering overall. So I think that the locations people are living in and whether the coverage is reaching them is a second way to think about are we reaching people where they are. Is this a possible reason that people are avoiding the news?

We also looked at what people thought about the local media. So this one might be a little bit tricky to see from where you are, but we were asking people what they think about whether there's enough coverage of their neighborhoods. Here, around half of Philadelphians say there actually isn't enough coverage of my neighborhood, and they're saying that people in my neighborhood aren't in the news. So this is an opportunity and I think a reflection of the idea that location isn't always covered in the same way that people would like to see it in the media that they're consuming. You also see here around 37% of people saying that stories about my neighborhood don't do a great job of what's going on here. So not only is it under-covered, but when their neighborhoods are covered, there's a significant chunk of people who are saying it's not doing a good job of showing what's happening here. We also asked people whether there was any media outlet anywhere in Philadelphia that was meeting their needs in terms of representing them. You see around a third of the public in Philadelphia believe that the media are covering issues that are important to them, that they are in touch with the community, and that they include people like me in their stories — only a third in Philadelphia answered that they strongly or somewhat agreed to those questions. So lots of opportunities to involve more voices and help people see the issues and the topics and the people that they want to see in the media.

The final one I really want to draw attention to, and it actually reflects nicely on Dmitry's comment earlier about the do sort of action or need that people have, and this is that only 23% of people said that there was any media outlet in Philadelphia that offered solutions to the problems facing their community. We see a lot of initiatives like the Solution Journalism Network, talking about how important it is to include solutions. I think we see evidence here that the public needs that, and if in a local media ecosystem there's not an outlet that's really meeting that need, this represents an opportunity for local organizations to meet that need. The next thing we did was we asked people about the local media outlets that they used most frequently. We asked them to tell us about their performance, from the scale of very poorly performing to performing very well. What we see in Philadelphia is that for most of the media outlets, it's kind of right in the middle. So people are rating them around a three between one and five. However, if you look at those outlets that received the highest ratings, *Telemundo* and *Northeast Times*, I think there's a takeaway here, which is these are two outlets that are really catering to specific audience needs, whether it's a Spanish language audience or whether it's the people in Northeast Philadelphia, which we saw earlier are underrepresented relative to their population in terms of location mentions. So I think this adds additional fuel to the fire that if you're meeting people where they are and thinking about their needs and who they are, people like that and there's a higher performance rating associated with it.

So I want to close this by saying, how can you find out what people you serve need? I have several strategies here. The first is the simplest, which is just ask them. Yes, it would be amazing if we could do these sorts of surveys in every single community out there. But if that isn't in the cards for you, you can do this in simpler ways. You can ask people in a comment section. You can even ask people on the street and really try to think about what is it that they're saying they need that your media outlet might be able to fulfill that need. The second is see what they're searching for on Google. In Google, you can look up and see what people in a particular location are looking for. Yeah, some of it might not be things that your organization is well equipped to handle, but there could be real gems in there that you could actually be helping and serving your community with needs that they're clearly articulating that they're looking for. Next would be to look at existing polls. Some places have this opportunity to look at polls where they're asking people, what's the most important problem? That can serve as inspiration. You can look at your coverage and find out whether or not you're meeting those needs. Next would be to use tools like Hearken, which allows newsrooms to allow their audience to submit questions to them, and then the newsroom can answer those questions for the public. We've done a bit of research with Hearken indicating that this really can be a helpful tool for communities and for newsrooms alike. The next is to monitor traffic patterns. I'm sure a handful of you are rolling your eyes, which you should. But when saying monitoring traffic patterns, I'm not saying like, "Oh, this article got the most page views, let's do more of that", I think it's a more in-depth look at what traffic patterns are telling you. So if you're reporting on Ukraine right now, what if you're looking at scroll depth on those articles to try to understand which one achieved the highest scroll depth and trying to figure out what it is that really met people's needs that led them to want to consume more and more of that. Then finally, compare where people live to the locations mentioned in the coverage to find out in your ecosystem, are there places that really aren't being served as much as they could be served. This could be inspiration for a new outlet. This could be a new beat in your news organization. So I hope this gives you some ideas for how to think about news avoidance and meeting people's needs at the local level. I'll be delighted to turn it over to Jay, whose work actually inspires and undergirds much of this.

LaSharah Bunting Thank you, Talia. That was wonderful. Jay is going to close us out by talking about those who are the producers of news avoidance.

Jay Rosen While we're waiting for the slide to come up, there's a notion I wanted to commend to Ben. Clay Shirky, my NYU colleague, says, "There's no such thing as information overload, there's only filter failure."

I am more of a consumer than a producer of news avoidance research. I've been reading about it since 2017, when the Reuters Institute in the UK, a very necessary institution, began to highlight news avoidance in its annual study, the Digital News Report. In consuming this research, I noticed something that I thought was missing, and in this short presentation, I want to bring this missing factor into view. It might be called, "the Makers of News Avoidance", by which I mean the people who want it to happen. I love this image from journalist Amanda Ripley: send out a search party for all the Americans who are avoiding the news, a category in which she includes herself. Her *Washington Post* column last year alerted a lot of working journalists to the topic of news avoidance. For the journalism teachers in the audience who want to bring news avoidance into their classroom, I recommend starting with Amanda's column, which is confessional but in a good way. She confesses that she, too, has been avoiding the news, and she's a journalist.

News avoidance research has a normal setting. There are typically three actors in it. First, the news consumers who are opting out — consuming less, avoiding more. Then there's the publishers and journalists asking, as we have here, what can they do in response. How do we fix it? Third, to complete this normal setting, we have the researchers trying to understand what's happening without oversimplifying it, like Ben. My simple suggestion is that we need to acknowledge a fourth actor, the producers of news avoidance. They benefit from it and want it to continue.

Perhaps the most famous actor in the fourth category, the makers of news avoidance, is Steve Bannon, the MAGA strategist and Donald Trump's special envoy to worldwide chaos. It's likely you have heard the quote I'm about to introduce; It's famous for its last line, but we need to examine all three parts of it. In 2018, Steve Bannon said to Michael Lewis, "The Democrats don't matter." Meaning he's not interested in winning power through conventional means. "The real opposition is the media," he added. This is his way of saying the MAGA movement wins by taking down the institutions of democracy. Finally, the line everyone quotes, including me: "The way to deal with the press is to flood the zone with shit." To me, flooding the zone means endless conflict, ugly threats, instant polarization, wild accusations, and Donald Trump's 30,573 false and misleading statements that were tracked by *The Washington Post's* fact-checker Glenn Kessler, from whom we heard earlier in this conference. My point is there's a connection between this kind of politics — flood the zone with crap — and the rise of news avoidance.

Look at this quote from Nic Newman, a researcher for Reuters Institute: "The subjects that people can…" Shoot, sorry, let me start over… "The subjects that journalists consider most important, such as political crises, international conflicts and global pandemics seem to be precisely the ones that are turning some people away." The most important news is the one that's most effective at turning people away. Maybe it's just a suggestion. Flooding the zone with shit about, say, vaccines is the input, and one of the outputs is news avoidance. Garbage in, garbage out. I will take this one step further and then I'm done.

Some of you may have heard the phrase the firehose of falsehood, which was employed by researchers at the RAND Corporation to describe a shift in the kind of propaganda the Russian state was pumping out starting in the late 1990 and early 2000. Let's look at some of its features: a high volume and multi-channel approach to propaganda, rapid continuous repetitive messaging; the number of arguments matters far more than the quality of those arguments; shamelessly willing to broadcast unconcealed lies; assumes a low trust environment and lowers it even further; no requirement for consistency — one argument can contradict another and it's fine. Finally, the point is not to persuade doubters or to rationalize the government's behavior, but to dismay, confuse and overwhelm people, and thus drive them from the public square, which sounds a lot like news avoidance. But it's avoidance with an author, a maker. The firehose of falsehood is what you flood the zone with. The firehose of falsehood is what you flood the zone with.

Both methods are well adapted to the internet age, with its competition for attention, its superabundance of content, and its zero marginal cost of distribution. Last word goes to Amanda Ripley in that same essay. She makes the connection for us. "The business model for news requires clicks," she writes. "And the easiest way to get attention is through a firehose of outrage, fear and doom." So to sum up this one-point presentation: there's something missing in the normal setting for news avoidance research. Not a cause of news avoidance, but a factor in it. The missing factor is the makers of news avoidance.

The people who want it to happen and the disturbing style of propaganda they have mastered. Thank you.

LaSharah Bunting Thank you so much, Jay. This information has been amazing. The question that I always have when I hear all this wonderful information is this is good to know, but I'm at X metro paper with a very limited budget and a very limited staff, where do I start? This is a huge issue that I maybe I don't know that I can overcome. So I'll start with you, Talia, if you could give some insight there and others may follow.

Talia Stroud Yeah, I think that that's a challenge because at the same time that the news audience is feeling overwhelmed, as Ben's amazing research tells us, newsrooms are also feeling overwhelmed with staff shortages and just the abundance of news that they have to cover. I think the real trick is thinking about how is it that you can listen to your audience with the means that you have available to you. So if you only have time to search Google at the end of the week and say, what are the main questions that people have asked in my community over the past week. That's great, and then you could bring it maybe to the Monday news meeting and say, "Hey, these were the top things that people were searching for. Is there maybe one of these that we want to tackle?" I think taking any small step in the direction of listening to what people in your community that you want to serve actually need is a step to overcoming news avoidance.

LaSharah Bunting I am going to throw it to you Dmitry. How about in the framework of what you were talking about, user needs? What are some practical sort of next steps people can do on Monday?

Dmitry Shishkin Well, firstly, you need to understand where you exist in the market, and because of that, you need to understand what you are to your readers and what you are not to your readers. So, for example, I remember the time when during the London Olympics, my friend, who was the editor-in-chief of the *Sports Information Agency* in Russia, brought six journalists to London. I was running *BBC* Russian digital team, and I only had one accreditation to the London games. So there is just no point of trying to compete with some aspects of the coverage. But we were in London, and we knew London better than anybody who'd come, so our coverage was actually through the lens of London.

I think it's really important because if you get senior executives from the same team and ask them to write a mission statement for the same organization, I'll guarantee you they will write different things. I'll guarantee you they will not be on the same page. This is actually a really big problem because then if you cannot describe yourself consistently, across all disciplines of the organization, then you're not going to be as effective as you want to be. Because of that, then you basically say, we will never be able to do… I'll give you an example: another client I consulted for believed that commentary on sports is the most important thing that he could provide. Our analysis showed that opinion pieces for sport was the least popular genre of their output, and they were consistently covering it day after day after day. Wrong type of content. So I guess you always just need to start with we about this, that and that, and then try to commission or try to push yourself. Actually, if you ask editors to give them an "update me" headline and ask them to create seven or eight alternative headlines representing other user needs, it's like kindergarten. Everybody just suddenly behaves as if it's the most fantastic thing because the editorial juices suddenly flowing. So just be very strict about this as well.

LaSharah Bunting One question I have for you Ben, as you were talking and also sort of reading some of the research you've done… Part of me wonders for those that are people who are news avoiders, how much of it is, "Well, I don't see myself reflected," "I don't see my story reflected," "I don't see my community reflected"? How much of it is really that?

Ben Toff Yeah, there's no question that for some individuals that is a big part of what they're expressing. I think you see that among groups that are underrepresented or misrepresented in the news who are really responding to that and that is part of what they're expressing. I think it's it goes beyond that. It's not only about that. I think for, a lot of individuals that we talked to, the level of disengagement with news was so complete that people weren't even necessarily aware of what was or was not represented in the local news or in the national news. They felt that level of disconnect. So they wouldn't necessarily point to that as the reason because they really didn't feel like they had an awareness of what coverage actually looked like. But for some, especially those for whom it was a much more deliberate and conscious decision to avoid it, that did come down to a major factor.

LaSharah Bunting So Jay, as I was listening to you talk, the optimism was slowly sort of draining out. Are we too late? Is this the way it's going to be for the foreseeable future with those makers and producers of news avoidance?

Jay Rosen I wouldn't go so far as to say it's too late. I would say it's an emergency, partly because "update me", as Dmitry put it, is in fact the way most editors see their job. That is how they define their job. It's going to be work to kind of retrain them if we decide to do that. But one of the things that happened during the pandemic was really instructive for this conversation. There was a period when people really, really, really needed information desperately because everything they were about to do that day was affected by this roaring disease. News companies, of course, realized that and tried to provide the kind of information people needed. You didn't need a special survey to find that out, everything was so obvious that there really wasn't any choice. But in doing that, there was like a recovery of the healthy and proper relationship between journalists and their public, where journalists were doing the job of giving people really important information which they could safeguard their families with. People were reading and searching for information they were getting, not all but some of what they needed. I think even though that ended and it sort of bled away and we're not in that situation really anymore, just the memory that can happen tells you where it's not hopeless. That was a period we can learn from.

LaSharah Bunting So on that thread, what is the most optimistic version of the future? Given everything that you all have talked about. I'll through that to Talia first, but I would love to hear everyone's views on that.

Talia Stroud I am an eternal optimist recognizing the important issues that Jay has raised for us today. But I think when we see a media ecosystem, where are the needs that they are fulfilling are so salient in these moments like facing COVID, that it can spark innovation. I think we see so many new media outlets taking shape and taking form that are so creative in the way they're trying to reach people and the way that they're really trying to cater and listen to the audience needs, that I'm actually really excited to be living in this moment and thinking through all of the ways in which news avoiders could be potentially reached. Like who's to say that there isn't a great service for the busy mom that feels like, "Oh my gosh, I just don't have any time for this"? I think there's really probably very creative ways that you incorporate the news with Muppets, or we can be more creative. I think there's exciting things on the horizon.

LaSharah Bunting I certainly see that in my TikTok feed — really interesting creative ways people are displaying the news for people who might not be certainly subscribing to their local newspaper or even watching the local news. Anyone else want to weigh in on that?

Dmitry Shishkin Well, I'd be delighted to see more write ups in the same manner how, for example, Ariel Zirulnick just recently wrote about user needs for *LAist*, or Emily Goligaski, before she left for Chater, wrote the same thing about user needs for *The Atlantic*. Those documents matter. They mean that internally there is a culture that is supporting that type of thinking. I created a *Vox* model based on *Vox's* editor-in-chief interview with Nieman Lab. Basically, there was a paragraph where she was citing things which, in my opinion, were exactly that: user needs for *Vox*. They all sit under "educate me" and "give me perspective" area. So six of them, very different ones, but actually all within context area. So I would be delighted to see lots and lots of examples of that type of thinking demonstrably out there.

Jay Rosen One thing that is happening that I think could provide a better future for news is in the past, each new generation of journalism students and young journalists pretty much wanted the same things that the bosses were giving them. They wanted to be investigative reporters. They wanted to be Woodward and Bernstein. They wanted a column like the columnists. Now the situation is a little bit different, where the generations of students being recruited into the newsroom are often — not always but often — being recruited because they meet a need for diversity that is very real in the news business. So they're told that they're being valued for their perspective, for their experience, for the backgrounds they come from. Often when they get to the newsroom, they find that they're also supposed to leave those things at the door in order to show that they can be professional and neutral and objective and so forth. This is a well-known contradiction, but I think we're at the point where the generations moving into newsrooms now are just not going to tolerate that anymore. It's kind of gotten beyond the editors and they have to respond to it because as I think Joe said today, they'll lose those people if they don't. That is a different dynamic between, let's say, old and young than when I started my career as a journalism educator. I think it's kind of a wild card, too. We don't exactly know what's going to result from that. We know it can be disruptive, though. Just look at some of the crises that *The New York Times* at the apex of the profession has had. So that's something that gives me… I wouldn't say gives me hope exactly, because we don't know what the results will be. But it's definitely something that's going to shake up these organizations.

LaSharah Bunting That's good. That is what journalism needs.

Ben Toff But I'll just add one other thing in terms of sort of cautious optimism around things that might give some hope is the ways in which technology might provide some new opportunities for when it comes to packaging, delivering content that better fits the needs and sort of a customized way to the different audience segments. Instead of just delivering one version of a story or one television segment about the news, it could be potentially a more efficient way of producing content that better meets the distinct audience and needs of these different groups. I think there's real potential there for better meeting the needs of news avoiders or other audience types. I mean I think highly engaged news consumers who are really into politics and what it means to keep them updated and help them understand the news is quite different from the rest of the public who are much more disengaged. The idea that you would serve both of these groups the same version of the story seems kind of insane that they would both respond to it.

Dmitry Shishkin We see a lot of examples of people would say we would cover that particular story in an "update me" format on the website, but for TikTok it will be an educate… Sorry. TikTok "update me" story and "educate me" for the main website. So rule number one is never generalize about your website as a whole. Always do that type of analysis on a section-by-section basis because it could be very, very different. Then also do exactly the same type of thing for all your off-platform activity as well.

LaSharah Bunting Great. So we're going to open it up for questions. Yes, ma'am.

Natalia Mazochi Hi. Hello. That was a very enlightening session. Thank you for this. My name is Natalia Mazochi. I'm from Brazil, and I live in a small town in the north coast of Sao Paolo, where we have a local newspaper. But actually, people there consume news from a humorous Instagram account. This humor Instagram account has way more followers than the local newspaper. It brings me the idea of the unbundling of news, and I wonder if you think not only in the perspective of user needs around the news, but also around other products that could be sold together with news? *New York Times* is doing it. And if you have examples of this at the local level? Thank you.

Dmitry Shishkin Can I start? Well, the great website is I think it's called answerthepublic.com. You put the place and it basically shows you the 100 most widespread questions that people from that place ask. So that's like 100 articles already created, right? But generally, I would say if somebody wants to create a food related user needs model with me, please let me know because it's been my passion to do something like that separately. Because when I was chief content officer of *Culture Trip*, we had a model for travel and travel has a very specific model: "inspired me", "help me plan", "help me book". Like all of the content that we were writing was basically satisfying those types of user needs. Any type of discipline will have their own collection of user needs on a local level, we absolutely know that doing is a really important user need section — help me feel a part of the area where I live and connect me with activities that are happening around there. So it would be a really good idea to start with those types of things and do it consistently and maybe do it for three months and compare it to your baseline before that. That would be my idea of how to do it.

LaSharah Bunting We'll go over to the side.

Mar Cabra Hi, my name is Mar Cabra and I lead a nonprofit that promotes well-being and mental health in the media called The Self Investigation. I want to ask a question related to this topic and building on Jay's presentation, quoting Amanda. I want to quote a sentence of that article that really struck my attention. It says, "The people producing the news themselves are struggling, and while they aren't likely to admit it, it is warping the coverage. News junkies tend to drink deeply from the darkness, mistakenly thinking it will make them sharper." So how about tackling and investing in journalists and journalism's mental health as a strategy to deal with news avoidance?

Jay Rosen I'm sorry. Can you repeat the last part? I didn't quite understand the end of the question.

Mar Cabra My question? Yeah. So I guess the question is: could one of the strategies to deal with news avoidance be invest and promote mental health and well-being in the media?

Jay Rosen Promote mental health?

Mar Cabra Yes, and invest in the journalists' mental health. The makers of news avoidance's mental health.

Jay Rosen Well the mental health of journalists is something that has taken a huge rise in importance. This used to be a non subject. I can remember it never coming up at all. In fact, it was worse than that. It was worse than silence because you were considered to be sort of like not professional and not up to the task, if you weren't able to keep working no matter what. I remember right after November… September 11. Sorry. I was chair of the journalism program that day, a mile and a half from where the disaster occurred. A lot of our students were not only freaked out by the events as anybody would be, but some of them felt they couldn't be journalists because they didn't run into the danger. This is like a crazy notion that we said, "No, that's not at all what you should be doing." Their parents, of course, weren't so thrilled about that either. So this subject of mental health has gone from nothing into an alive and very real problem within newsrooms. To me it's a sign of a kind of humanizing of the newsroom as an environment. It's has taken a long time, but it's finally here, perhaps in conjunction with this generational shift that I talked about earlier. So I think the mental health of journalists is super important and some of the values of the profession have to change for that to become the issue that it really is. I don't know if that addresses your question at all, but it's something that's a striking change over decades.

Ben Toff I'll just say in the years that I have been studying new avoidance and I've had a lot of conversations with journalists about the subject, and I very often get the response from the journalists that will say, "Oh, that's me. I'm definitely one of those people." Even though this is what they do all day long, they feel like they themselves need to find ways of taking a break and avoiding news. The thing that I would say about this is it's not a bad thing. I think that's actually a very healthy response and I think we need a better… That's one of the reasons I started my presentation by making this distinction between selective news avoidance and consistent news avoidance. I think there's a lot of ways in which curating your own exposure to news and finding strategies for not having it feel as overwhelming, that as individuals there are very healthy responses that we can do. That's not as extreme as sort of consistent avoidance altogether and a lack of engagement from all news that I think is more problematic. I think sort of accepting the fact that there are a lot of positive, healthy responses to deal with the problem of the information environments and the sort of feelings that people have around it is wholly appropriate. I think if journalists can figure out ways of dealing with it themselves, they can maybe help the public do the same.

Dmitry Shishkin May I? Two 30 seconds timer. Firstly, we collectively need to really do something about this horrible phrase of feeding the beast. It's a horrible, unhelpful concept. It doesn't help anyone. We all overproduce massively. Nothing will happen to your traffic if you suddenly do a third less. In fact, when I was at the *BBC*, we collectively… *BBC Brazil* is a good example and *BBC Thai* is a good example; collectively they went down from 100 articles a week to 60 articles a week. The audience doubled at the same time. Why? Because they started commissioning better stories. That was point number one and point number two I forgot. But I will remember that… But feed the beast is just a horrendous term.

LaSharah Bunting So we have about 5 minutes left. I'll throw it to you.

Audience Member This is such a wonderful and engaging panel. Thank you so much for it. I had a question thinking about the user needs model and whether you have any advice for how to responsibly square that with your journalistic imperative and mission. And any tactics you have for helping people to adopt it? Like, you can tell people aren't finishing your stories, they aren't reading them, but there are certain stories that you will do if your mission is to hold the powerful to account or to help people understand the world; you have this imperative to do those stories. So I'm curious how you think about how to factor those two things together.

Dmitry Shishkin Well, I've just finished something with a set of regional broadcasters in Europe, and we started with asking them the questions, what they consider to be the most important values that they bring to the audience in terms of coverage and in terms of what they want to be known for. Then I asked them to bring the good examples of that, and they couldn't because the kind of one thing was in one bucket and the output was in another bucket. You really need to have… I was managing editor for one of the *BBC* teams for two years, and it's the most underappreciated job in journalism because you are doing all of the under-the-hood stuff that nobody sees. But you really need to have very single-minded, very decisive leadership to actually make it work because it probably will take you about a year to make it all happen. You do a lot of workshops. You show them what good looks like. You show them examples. My point about the topics that you want to cover but cover them differently still stands. You basically need to say, if you think that this is important to you, but maybe you could consider writing a story in an "inspire me" format followed by a "connect me" story, for example, on the same subject. Don't share premature results, but you sit on it maybe for six months or nine months, and then show how the improvements slowly were being taken on a case-by-case basis. There is another example from Asia where one of the companies I helped wanted to be known as a business and economics publication. When we did their initial research, we realized that only 20% of their output was about business and economy, everything else was about something else. So you need to start with as basic things as that, and then you kind of apply user needs thinking to that.

Talia Stroud If I might add just a little observation on that, too, which is a lot of news organizations that we've worked with at the center, they seem to consider their business objectives in conflict somehow with their journalism objective — well, this is important to our values to cover, and even if people don't read it, it's very important to our values. I would just say encourage your newsroom to get out of that way of thinking because you can have articles that are exactly in line with your mission and your journalism intentions, and you can find ways to make those even better. So you can find ways to make those more engaging, to have business benefit if you want to put it in those sorts of terms. So I would just challenge any time you're thinking in a way that presents two polls, either it's good for democracy or it's good for business, to say, "No, we don't want to think like that anymore. We want to think about things that can be good for both sides."

Jay Rosen Further to that, I think it's important, a little shocking, but it's important to realize that the news system we have is not designed for human understanding. It's designed to produce a flow of content every day. So just trying to dismantle that would have some good benefits.

LaSharah Bunting So we'll close it out with a question from Sewell.

Sewell Chan Thank you. Hi. Just a question for Ben. Is the problem of consistent news avoidance, can it be separated from the problem of problems of education and access?

Does the way out require alliances with libraries, museums, parks, and other elements of the public square? Can journalists alone help reduce the problem of news avoidance? Even if we do all the things that Talia and Jay and Dmitry are suggesting, which I think are totally worthwhile, is that going to be enough?

Ben Toff I mean, the short answer, I would say, is probably, no, it's not enough. There is some… it's very true that the problem here is much larger than anything that's specific about the changing media environment. There's always been consistent news avoidance in the world. There's always been this kind of stratification along lines of class and other factors around who's accessing, paying attention to news and who's not. The thing that I think I would focus on is the sort of opportunities that may present themselves, given the sort of changing nature of the way that news is delivered that maybe allow for some possibilities around reaching some of these segments of the public that maybe were much harder in the past. I think the other part of it is that people's habits around news have really changed. So I think that's really exacerbated some of these divides that have always existed in some form, but maybe have been exacerbated to a larger, larger extent as people don't have the same kind of habits as they once did. They don't have the same kind of connection to digital news organizations or have the same kind of appreciation for what it is that journalists do. So it is definitely much larger… It's intertwined with these much larger trends and issues that there is only so much that any individual news organization or user, in general, can do to kind of respond to some of these problems. But I think that doesn't mean there's nothing that can be done.

LaSharah Bunting Well, thank you so much. Thank you. This has been a great conversation. Thank you for your attention. Appreciate it.