26th ISOJ How to Avoid News Avoidance and Burnout of Journalists and Audiences

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- Benjamin Toff, associate professor, University of Minnesota, and director, Minnesota Journalism Center
- Sandra Vera Zambrano, associate professor, Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico)
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Summer Harlow Our next panel, it's a research panel. Again, it is How to Avoid News Avoidance and Burnout of Journalists and Audiences, and it's chaired by Kate West, an assistant professor of instruction, right here at our very own UT Austin. So let's welcome Kate and the panelists to the stage.

Kate West Hello, good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for sticking around, coming back after the coffee break. We really appreciate it. I don't know about you guys, but I have been blown away today by all of the guest speakers that have graced this stage, and I really can't think of a better time for this panel to come up within this conference talking about news avoidance and talking about burnout among journalists. Because at this time, in this conference, you know, we've heard about companies having to lay off journalists. We've heard about the difficulty in being able to talk to sources. We've heard about the difficulty journalists are just facing across the board. And I think it's really important that we talk about the mental health of our journalists, and how we can make sure as news organizations and as journalists, we can make sure we are keeping journalists mentally healthy.

As Summer mentioned, I'm Dr. Kate West. I'm an assistant professor of instruction here at the University of Texas. I primarily focus on broadcast journalism, but I also teach one of our first classes dealing with preparing students for the mental health challenges associated with our wonderful profession. And I wanna be able to introduce our wonderful panel that we have today as well. This afternoon, we are going to be hearing from Dr. Benjamin Toff, who is an associate professor at the University of Minnesota, and the director of the Minnesota Journalism Center. Today he's going to talk about digital platforms that might be driving the news avoidance. Dr. Sandra Vera Zambrano is an associate professor with Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. She's going to be talking to us about why journalists continue their careers despite financial instability and declining prestige. And finally, Dr. Stephanie Edgerly, a professor and associate dean of research at Northwestern University. She is going to be talking about a survey she conducted with journalists here in the US about news avoidance and having them explain it and offer their thoughts, if anything can be done about it. And knowing journalists, they probably had a few thoughts about things.

But I really want to talk today about a call to action for our newsrooms across the country, and what we can all do to help our journalists not only working in the newsroom now, but coming up who will be in our newsrooms to be able to be prepared for what to expect. I spent 20 years as a broadcast journalist working in various newsrooms across the country as an anchor, and a reporter, and at times a producer. And when I think back on how many times someone came up to me after covering a story and said, “Are you okay? Do you need to talk? How are you doing?” That happened in 20 years, twice. For those of you who

are journalists in this room, raise your hand, who's a journalist out here, a working journalist? I see a couple. It's hard to see with all the lights. How many times have you been asked, after coming back from covering a difficult story, “Are you okay? Do you need to take a break?” We aren't asked that. And as I moved from being a journalist to being a teacher in the classroom here at the University of Texas, I started to see a lot of our journalists, our students, who would go out to get jobs, and they would be leaving the field, quitting the business, three to five years after becoming a journalist. And for those of us who work in news, when we think about five years into this business, we're just developing sources. We're just really starting to figure it out. And I just kept thinking, oh my gosh, we're going to continue to see a revolving door of journalists if we don't do a better job of preparing our journalists for the mental health challenges associated with our jobs. And so I looked for a book to be able to put in my classes to help prepare them. And all I could find were research and books dealing with the mental health challenges associated with being a foreign or war correspondent, which makes perfect sense. They deal with so much. But when you actually think about it, most of us started working in local news. I started in Clarksburg, West Virginia. We start in small spots, and that is where students coming out of journalism school, that's where they go before they make it to the New York Times, or the Washington Post, the Atlantic, or become a foreign correspondent. And so I thought if we can prepare these journalists, soon to be journalists, for the mental health challenges associated with our profession, then they will be better prepared when they are covering a fatal car accident, a fire, a shooting, mass shootings. For how they're going to feel, what they're going to think, and how they are going to be able to deal with it. I loved when we had the panel covering Trump 2.0, and we heard the journalists kind of show how their coping skills were. They kind of laughed about it. One enjoyed a hug from their two-year-old. Eugene mentioned just seeing his dog. We had these coping skills because a lot of us in this room are probably Gen Xers. We grew up with, you just kind of get over it and move on. The thing is, our Gen Z folks are not willing to do that. And so we have a whole new style of journalist that's coming up in this profession. And as newsroom leaders, we need to be prepared for how we're going to be able to deal with them. Because the main struggles our journalists are facing are stress, then that leads to burnout, and moral injury is something we are dealing with more and more as we become a divided country and we are dealing with politics that maybe we don't agree with.

So I want to encourage newsrooms to implement and start implementing some changes within their newsroom. And this comes from talking to journalists and from myself and my colleagues' own experiences. You may look at this and say, “Well, we already do some of these things.” But I ask you, how consistently do you do debriefs and check-ins with your reporters after they've come back from a tough story, one week down the road, one month down the row? You might have newsroom mentors, but does it stay consistent? So let's talk about a couple of these things. Debriefs, and check-ins. When you come back from covering a tough story, what if you sat down with that journalist to be able to talk to them about it? How are you doing? Do you need to talk about how you're feeling, what you saw, what you heard? We deal with people's worst days. Why not? And then newsroom mentors. Oftentimes when you're a new journalist, you start out, you get paired up with a more seasoned journalist. But how often do those relationships continue? Do you continue to check in with that person? Or does life move on and you just kind of did your job of pairing somebody up, and then move on? I think it's really important that we continue to be vigilant about making sure our younger journalists are receiving help from more seasoned journalists, not only feedback on their work, but dealing with newsroom politics. Any of us who have worked in a newsroom know there's lots of different political aspects to how newsrooms are run, how we can go about talking to people, have them help out. Rethinking how we cover a story. Do we need to go knock on the door that everyone else

is going to go knock on to talk to the family who maybe lost a child. Is there a bigger issue to this story that we could cover? Making that door knock is nothing any of us journalists want to do, but we do it because we know it's important. In-house therapist is another big thing, and I'm so thankful that I've been seeing more and more news organizations bringing in therapists prior to journalists going out to cover big stories or post-big stories. When we had the big mass shooting at the Uvalde School, just a few years ago, so many news organizations brought in therapists to talk to the journalists post-coverage. But what I want to encourage is, right after coverage, yes, you may feel something. It will be difficult. But for so many of us, we don't decompress from covering these difficult things until a month, six months down the road. And at that point, the news coverage oftentimes maybe has moved on, and the therapist is no longer there. I think it is really important, instead of just offering five free therapy sessions as part of your health insurance coverage, to actually have an in-house therapist that is there at least one day a week for journalists to go speak to. Think about the hours you work as a journalist. None of us work a nine to five. Taking a break, I didn't have lunch. There was no lunch break. I ate lunch in my live truck. When would I have ever had time to go actually make an appointment to see a therapist? We just don't have that luxury as journalists because we are committed to what we're doing. But we also need to be able to talk about how we're feeling with this. And I think it is really important that as we move on in this field, we really need to think about providing that service in the newsroom. We have action plans for breaking news, for breaking weather, for all sorts of situations. But do you have a mental health action plan in your newsroom if something bad happens? Your journalists are out covering difficult stories. You need to have a plan for how to help them, not just post, but again, weeks, months after. Look at the journalists that covered the LA wildfires just the other month. I just spoke to one of the reporters at the NBC station, and she was telling me, you know, their coverage is going to continue for years because of the climate aspect of things. And what she's dealing with is tough. And so, you need to think about the long-term coverage.

And then the previous panel talked about this, providing a living wage. I can't tell you how many of my students, one, they get offered a job. Double-check and think, should I even do this? I had a student last week who was offered a producing job at a station in Tampa, Florida, paying $20 an hour. When we ran the numbers, it comes out to about $40,000 a year. She was going to turn it down, and I said, look, that's actually about $10,000 more a year than most of my students are being offered. That's not much to live off of. And we all in this room probably have worked for very little because we're passionate about what we do. The thing is, this next generation, they are not willing to just take anything, and I'm really proud of them for that. I made $12,500 a year at my first job in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and I was just thankful to have a job. Because there were a stack of other resume reels that would have gotten my job if I didn't take it. But that is not how this next-generation is working, and so if we want to keep good journalists, we want to keep them from being turned out on the job, these are some things that we need to be able to do. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time on that. And the next one is Dr. Benjamin Toff.

Benjamin Toff Thank you so much, Dr. West. It's a pleasure to be here. I'm going to talk about news avoidance, but specifically about digital platforms as it relates to news avoidance. I'm going to start by telling you a little bit about who I am. So a lot of what I study is the public's relationship with news. I published a book on news avoidance about a year ago. I've also done a fair amount of research on trust in news. And more recently, though, I've been trying to work with newsrooms around testing different kinds of strategies for mitigating some of these problems, to understand what works, what doesn't work, to build trust and increase engagement. You know, we all know, and as the last panel

discussed, there's been rising rates of news avoidance across the world, in some places doubling in the percentage who are actively often avoiding the news. Now, there's a lot of different factors associated with that. We know it tends to be found at higher rates among younger people, slightly higher among women than men in many places around the world. It tends to people from lower socioeconomic classes, people who are less interested in politics in general. But there's also an element of this that is very tied to digital platforms. Digital media use tends to also be associated with news avoidance. And that's really what I'm going to focus on. But the problem of news avoidances is a very complicated, complex, intertwining of multiple factors. In our book, we talk about the role of identities, ideologies, as well as infrastructures. Infrastructures being those pathways that people are using to access and engage with news. So there's this combination of both who we are, what we believe about our place in the world, as well as those tools and pathways that we're using that we are relying on increasingly to find access and navigate content. And it's that last piece that is the subject of this particular project that I'm going to focus on.

So about a little over a year ago, I started talking with the Texas Tribune about a number of these projects where we could work together to try to test some different kinds of experiments to build trust or increase engagement with news avoiders. And this particular aspect, I should say all these projects have been supported by the Google News Initiative and the nonprofit Alliance for Trust in Media. This particular project is looking at young adults through some of the engagement the Tribune has been doing on TikTok and Instagram. Because I'm based in Minnesota, I also brought in MPR News, which has been developing a fair amount of this content for over a year itself, what they've called a “reverb” on their Instagram and TikTok feeds. What we decided to do when we set out to study this was conduct a series of focus groups in part because each of these organizations has been experimenting with their own strategies for developing this content and wanted to better understand how audiences were thinking about the kind of content they're producing. So in October and November we conducted ten focus groups, six of them in Houston and three different cities around the state. I'm sorry, six of them in Texas, three different cities around the state, four in Minnesota. And we use third-party recruitment agencies to actually find and screen participants for these groups, regular users of these platforms, under 35 years old. And in the sessions themselves, we focused on what their daily habits and routines are like, what their preferences were around news, delivered in these spaces, and their specific feedback around concrete examples of this content produced by each of these organizations and others. This is just an example from MPR's content, from Reverb, but we used a mix of both static images and text, along with short and longer form videos, mix of different tones and styles, and some of the things that came out of these groups are very specific to like different approaches to creating this content, which we can also talk about, but I'm actually going to focus more on a sort of more general context for how these audiences were thinking about the appeal of these platforms. What is it that was drawing them to spend so many hours of the day in these spaces, that I think have some really useful lessons for news organizations to think about in terms of engaging with these audiences. There's a lot of things that we found that I think are noteworthy. These platforms, as a source of discovery of information, some of what was discussed in the last panel, that personalization aspect, a tool for social connection, the sort of building of community or even relationships between people who are on the platforms and between the news organization and the audience.

But I really want to focus on these last two in my remaining time. The degree to which so many of the people talked about their use of these platforms as a tool for mood management, as well as the sort of specific aspects of the user experience that was a major part of the appeal. So, when it comes to mood management I think this will sound

familiar to you. These are some of the comments that people talked about in terms of why they found themselves spending so much time on these platforms. It's just a way to be mindless, as Eugene put it. It's like, well, I have nothing else to do, so I'll just look. Or like you said, when you're in an awkward situation, you just keep scrolling, as Sylvia put it, or Abby. I always check it when I wake up. I look at it when I'm bored throughout the day. So the sort of mundane roles that it plays in people's lives. But also, people often talked about it as a way to relax, a way to wind down. They just think it's a good way to wind down, especially after work, especially if you have to use a lot of brain power, it's just relaxing. I'm going to TikTok just to laugh. I think my “for you” page is really funny sometimes, so if I wake up in the morning and it's funny, I'll just keep scrolling. But before night, it's kind of to wind down. I'm used to scrolling before going to bed and eventually I'll knock off. Now another version of that of course is escapism, and people were pretty explicit about this. I mean I think especially in these past few weeks, I've been really needing it. Remember this is in the context of around the election. You don't want to drink, you don't want to do drugs, so your phone also has a numbing effect. I'm joking but you know what I mean. It's kind of a way to numb your brain and just like, I'm just going to look at 10 hours of dogs in pumpkin costumes or whatever on there. I think it's become a new substance for escapism. Now this is a very distinct contrast from the way that many thought about news, which mostly people talked about in sort of very negative terms as draining, anxiety-inducing. I hope I don't hurt anybody's feelings politics stresses me out, so a lot of times it's not like a joke about the upcoming election. If it's actually serious, I just scroll through, like I don't even want to raise my blood pressure by watching it. So this was the context that a lot of people were approaching their encounters with news in these spaces. And so often, sort of in contrast to a lot of the news content that we're finding there.

The other piece of it has to do with the user experience. And many people talked about the specific features of getting information in this very, what they perceived as efficient way on the platform that was part of the appeal. So people talking about even using TikTok, for example, instead of going to Google anymore. They would just go to the TikTok search bar and put whatever they're trying to find. It's easier that way. People are talking about the scrollable option around it that is part of the feel, being able to sort of feel like you have control over just flipping through, taking in a lot of information all at once in a very efficient way. Of course, that efficiency around it is part of the obstacle for news organizations. The platforms themselves try to keep those users in those spaces as much as possible. So people talked about how they were very unlikely to go to the link and bio page on Instagram to actually follow up to get more of the content. And others talked about just how unappealing trying to access news directly from news websites often was. Lucy talked about encountering paywalls, where she referred to them as the news organizations blocking her from being able to actually access the content. Ryan talked about trying to go to actual news websites and finding that the video either never loads, or it's just frozen, or it ad city, and I see more ads than the actual whatever they're covering. So obviously people would see news in contrast to the benefits of getting information in these spaces and staying in those spaces.

Now each of these, I think, do have an asterisk next to them, because as much as these were both a big part of the appeal of the platforms for accessing information, including news when they did encounter news, it's also the addictive aspects of these platforms that many people talked about in a very negative way as repelling them. And I do think that this is part of what is also driving some of these expressions of news avoidance. A lot of people really talked about how addictive these platforms were, a bad habit they're trying to kick, the double-edged sword of the algorithms. Jimmy’s saying TikTok is just taking over so much of my life. It's just a little too much. And they also talked about complex strategies

they had adopted to try to actually limit their time on these platforms. So, Byron, talking about actually downloading an app that would require him to take 15 second breaks to breathe or meditate before actually consuming any of that content. Isabel talked about using the limits in the phone to actually prevent or be more aware of how much time they were spending in these spaces. Renee actually talked about letting her own phone die as a strategy to not actually be on the platform. And I was just struck by how much people had this very love-hate relationship with the, you know, series of hours they were spending in these spaces. And because they had become so dependent on actually seeing the news, when they did see news in these places and not going elsewhere for it, the platforms themselves were also driving a lot of their resistance to news itself, and what that meant is that many were not seeing much news altogether. Penny for example had this to say, at the end of every session I'd ask people directly, you know, imagine you could speak to publishers, editors from news organizations, what do you want them to know about how to reach people like you on these digital platforms? And Penny went on a bit of a rant, but she said, you kind of have to move with the social media times. I think you have to find a short effective way to deliver the news. People are not reading. Literally people are not reading. People are doing a lot of short form texting and stuff like that, and it's like even just pushing out these articles, you're not going to get people because people are not stopping to read them. People don't even stop to read captions anymore. How are you going to put out a whole news report when people don't want to read a two paragraph caption?

So, some takeaways. You know, as I've been thinking about how to make sense of all of these findings, I went back to read a very classic article in communication by Bernard Berelson, who in the 40s conducted a study interviewing people in New York City in the midst of a newspaper strike. That's a very famous article called What Missing the Newspaper Means. And he was trying to understand what was it that people valued about their local newspaper, and if you have not read this article I encourage you to find it. It's easy to find if you Google it. Because it's so striking the things that he highlights about what it was that people valued about newspapers. People talked about it as a tool for daily living, for social prestige, social contact. They talked about the act of reading itself being pleasurable and the degree to which it was a socially desirable way to pass the time. He talked about the compulsive habit associated with newspaper consumption. And even fear of missing out, and not so much in those terms, but he did talk about, this is a direct quote from the piece, one man reported he felt uneasy, quote, because I don't know what I am missing, and when I don't know, I worry. But also things like this. Some respondents were gratified at the newspaper strike because it provided them with a morally acceptable justification for not reading the newspaper as they felt compelled to do under the stress and strain of wartime conditions, my health was beginning to fail, and I enjoyed being able to relax a little. So much of what's in this article from 1948 feels very, very familiar today, but it's about newspapers. It's not about TikTok or Instagram. And what that tells me is so much of the ways in which the appeal of the newspapers in the 40s, what we've long associated with news consumption, is really about these other aspects of news consumption that have largely been supplanted by these platforms. And news on these platforms is largely secondary. It's absent in many cases from many people's feeds. People often feel informed enough with what they are getting. And when they do seek out news, too often they do not feel empowered by that information. They feel that much more lacking in power.

And so solutions I think have to involve developing new kinds of habits and routines, preferably less dependent on those platform algorithms because that is of course the other major challenge here in terms of reaching these audiences in these spaces. But I do think

there's opportunity here, given the degree to which people really express a desire for alternatives. It's not that they were so satisfied, despite all these things that they do like about the platforms, and prefer them to the other modes of getting news and information, they see all the hours that they're spending in these spaces, and they don't actually necessarily like it. And so I think that there are ways of satisfying those needs of audiences. But it has to come from recognizing that it's the experience of the news consumption, it's not just the information that people are looking for in some of these other areas. So I will leave it there and turn it over to my next presenter.

Kate West Thank you, Benjamin. All right, we have Dr. Sandra Vera Zambrano.

Sandra Vera Zambrano Thank you. I would like to start by saying that I'm really, really thrilled and thankful to be here. This conference is so inspiring. It's been two days of wonderful thinking and sharing. And I'm really honored to be part of this. So let's start. Many of you were journalists. I was wondering how many of you are journalism students? This is probably going to be helpful, what I'm going to say. And if you're journalists, it's kind of late. So I came to think about journalists and how they managed to do such a wonderful job with their doubts, their fears, sometimes even their physical integrity, as we saw yesterday, and sacrifices that most people don't even imagine. We were thinking about exile and other things that we've been talking about. And that is precisely the predicament. Even when everything seems to fall apart, you journalists and journalism students, take a deep breath and make the show go on. Anywhere in the world, this study comes from, like, a French-American comparison, but it seems to be regular in other countries as well, there is a semi-conscious, self-convincing routine that today is a new opportunity to make it happen.

So who and why would someone pursue a career in journalism today? Well, Matthew Powers, who's a professor in UW in Seattle and I have spent over 10 years searching for an answer. What we propose is a sociological approach about what journalists are and not about the work they do. Most of the research in journalism is based on what people do and not who they are. And we focus on who you are. So this image that you see here is a journalist. It's an AI-generated image from a real journalist in France who loves doing radio, but only the moment when she's on air. Before, she hates journalism. After, she hates journalism. And she spends her life telling everyone she knows not to go into journalism path. So is this possible? It's possible because, you know, it's really hard to be a journalist. Yet, believes her efforts are worthy. So every journalist Matt and I met, that's the book we have, believe, they do believe that what they do is worthy. What they do is worth a candle. And that's exactly the illusio. Some other people would call it a call or a vocation. And that's exactly what helped us understand that journalists still believe that doing journalism is important against all the odds.

So we interviewed 76 journalists in Toulouse in France and in Seattle through longitudinal space. We saw them for like two or three times for 10 years. And we chose to compare France and the US because they are usually opposed in journalism models. So we wanted to see if there were opinions versus facts, or the weight of Paris in France, and a more metropolitan, diverse space in the US. Our bet, though, was not exactly to compare nationalities or countries or cultures, but to say, let's look for similarities in sociological terms. So what we suppose is that a French man coming from a popular origin, social origin, would have much more in common with an American woman coming from the same origin than their counterparts in the other side of the social spectrum. So I'm speaking very precisely about Toulouse and Seattle, which is not like capital, journalistic capitals. So it's

like local, but like well-sized big cities, spaces where we find a very less, reduced diversity of the social body.

So the first similarity that we found, and we didn't expect that, is that journalists in France and in the US still believe that what's worth doing of journalism comes from the 19th century. So those values that we appreciate in journalism today come from like many, many years ago. And that was interesting because journalism in the 19th century offered a great life. Glamorous, social ascension, you could become someone. And you could empower people with that. Tell stories, do whatever you wanted to do, and then help for the civic life. And there was a similarity that we didn't expect. The second one is that journalists are always looking for balance between economic and symbolic rewards. We surprisingly found that journalism is not necessarily a matter of passion or motivation only. If that was true, there would be many, many more journalists. But it's not a matter of money neither. There would be many, may less. As you just said, the income is really low compared to what they do and how many hours they work…And so do they do it for symbolic rewards, or do they do it economic rewards? And they need to find a balance, the right equilibrium. And the interesting thing is that it depends on the social origins, as much as whatever they do as ideal journalism. So to tell you an anecdote that you can see, people from lower social origins and from universities that were less prestigious, tend more to decode, this means giving information, write information to their communities, and they would always start by saying, “Well I'm not a Pulitzer Prize [unintelligible]…” They would always like apologize. I was like what do you do? What's like the best thing you've ever done? They would say, well you know there's this reform, and I tried to “translate.” That was the word they would use. But they would always like apologize, and that's something very striking. So it was like more for women, more for lower, like diverse population and universities. Universities happen to be a very, very huge predictor. Then we found the “dignify,” which are the people that are working on particular groups. So it could be, in the French case, talking about people with morbid obesity. So they would like follow them and work with them. Their concern was to not talk about the monster. So the idea was always defending someone in particular or a group in particular, but taking them away of whatever they could be like labeled on negatively. On the other side, we found the “discover,” which is like more watching dog seeming way of doing journalism and which is the way to ask for accountability, to hold the accountable, responsible. Or edify. “Edify” is to give another or a new explanation of something that's going on but thought in a larger scale. So if I have to name newspapers or the example of outlets, decode and dignify would be more like local, like closer to communities. Discover would be like the New York Times, and edify would be like The New Yorker. So it's different types of doing journalism. What's interesting is that this is really close to their social origins, and the context they live in. And this is a moment to make a small diversion, just to tell you that the balance between symbolic and economic and these different ideals of journalism are also very, very touched by non-professional matters. So, besides the context and besides all the professional things that are going on in the newsroom, if they work in a newsroom, journalists might choose to continue doing their work because they like the lifestyle, or they like whatever they thought they would do when they were young and that was my dream so I'll just keep moving. Or, this is only true in France because they finish at five and that gives them the chance to do other things afterwards. Or because they like writing, or because they have a family that really supports and is really proud of what they do.

And I'll just tell you a little, very small anecdote about someone who I really appreciated during the interviews, and I could see him for many, many times in Toulouse. And he was coming from a very, very low social origin. His father was a painter in construction, and his mother was a nanny at a pre-k school. And he was like not only the first people who have

gone to a university, but the first one who had gone to a prestigious university, and got a job. But he was earning the minimum wage, and he was working like 60 hours a week. And then in France, it's just like something huge, like not for the minimum wage. And I would ask him, like why do you keep doing journalism? And he would say, I am the only one in my family who stays clean and who can actually sit down for working. And that was really surprising to us to see that journalism could mean, like his family was super proud and he was super proud because he could like sit down, and that to us was just like very impressive.

So another similarity that we found between the French and the American is that every journalist knows exactly where they stand and how they contribute to their communities. So when we asked them how they adapted to technological economic constraints, they have three sort of different answers, so either they ignore, either they invest or they endure. And I'll explain. They are all linked to their social conditions. So imagine these offices in Toulouse, France Trois, so it's the regional TV broadcast, and there's a newly arrived news director who asks everyone in the newsroom to prepare videos and content for the website and Facebook. This is 15 years ago. I first met a man in his late 50s, 30 years of experience. His father used to be an engineer in aeronautics and a housewife mom. He studied at a prestigious university in Paris and then came back to his hometown to settle down. Very, very, very solid middle class. When I asked him how he perceived the news director's need to add videos. He looks at me as if I were crazy. He chuckles. And I just didn't understand, then he tells me. The funny thing is that the buddy, and he calls him “the buddy” like the news director, “the buddy” thinks I'm going to do it. And then just afterward, I have another interview. And I meet a woman in her mid-20s. It's her first regular job. She studied in the public regional university and was born and raised to a family of primary teachers who live two hours away from Toulouse. When I asked her exactly the same question, what do you think about these new things that you have to do, you have to do videos, she answers me very naturally, well, I just bought an iPhone. And it was so natural for her to increase her workload, and for the other man, it was so unnatural to increase the workload that we really, we could see like sociological differences.

Final similarity. There are no rules to quit journalism, but one. One leaves the profession when A, the balance between symbolic and economic reward is not fulfilled, and B, when the illusio is broken. What I believe is the most interesting thing about living journalism, for all these people that we saw 10 years after, and they were bitter, and they had lots of nostalgia, but they thought it was the best thing they could have done. For example, journalism might be the best option at the age of 22, but an absurd 10 years after when a woman wants to have children and live peacefully. In conclusion, why someone pursue a career in journalism today? Journalists have the illusio, or the call, or the vocation to manage disappointments. What is magical is that every single person does that differently according to one's position and disposition, meaning their context and their history. Optimistically, these different social horizons allow everyone to find a place in journalism and do their best, until they don't. And finally, as someone said yesterday, thank you for your service.

Kate West Thank you so much. We're going to have Dr. Stephanie Edgerly.

Stephanie Edgerly Hey, hello everyone. There we go. All right, so why do people consume little to no news? Ben gave us some reasons that people have for consuming little to no news. My focus is going to be a little different. I'm interested in how journalists are thinking about news avoidance. And here is an image that ChatGPT generated when I asked it to create an image of a news avoider. Really interesting, right? This is a, appears

to be a young person, a male, who is avoiding news, TV news in this case, by engaging in more pleasurable activities. This would be reading, even though we heard people don't read. This would be reading a book so they cannot see the TV and the news while also listening to music so they cannot hear the TV news, all while you see multiple devices that are in the background and within reach. So is this the image that journalists have in their head of a news avoider?

Well short of asking journalists to draw their own image, which don't put it past me. I love a drawing exercise. This was something my co-author Ruth Palmer and I were trying to get at by asking journalists a series of questions about their explanations for news avoidance and also their solutions. Now more specifics on this can be found in two published academic papers. If anybody really wants more details I'm happy to send you digital copies of both of these. Feel free to email me. But for my brief remarks right now, I'm gonna focus on three top-level takeaways that are based on a national survey of around 1,500 U.S. journalists that we did a couple years ago.

All right, the first finding that I want to share is in response to this question. So we asked journalists, in your opinion, why are some people news avoiders? And it's really important to specify what you mean by news avoidance, so we said, that is, why do some people consume little to no news? This was an open-ended question, so journalists could answer it however they wanted. They could write as much as they needed, and boy, some did. And we received over, just short of 1,500 responses. And when looking over all of the responses, we found overall there were three types of explanations or three categories of explanations that journalists gave. Or to use slightly more charged language, three sources of blame for news avoidance. The first are news avoiders themselves. It is their preference for entertainment, or their lack of care, or understanding. As one journalist said, they simply don't care what's happening in the world. Or another, people are comfortable with their ignorance. These are the things that explain their disconnect from news. This is where I would put the ChatGPT image also in this category. A second category of blame relates to characteristics of news. Here, journalists said there was some deficit with news itself or, and this is an important or, people perceived news to be deficit in some way and that contributes to their avoidance. So references to news being too negative, or too opinionated, or biased, or the lack of relevance in news were often mentioned here. The final category relates to the larger context that news circulates within. And this could be the macro environment like the polarization of society, or people's more micro environment, their everyday life. People are just too busy with the demands of work and family life.

Okay, so three categories or sources for blame. What was the most common? Well, we found that referencing the news as being the explanation or the reason for news avoidance was the most common with about 60% of the responses that we received mentioning news itself. Around 40% then mentioned the larger context, and around 30% mentioned news avoiders themselves. For those of you that are quick with the math, you might notice that this does not total to a tidy 100%. And that is because we allowed people to reference multiple explanations. So these were not mutually exclusive categories. All right, the second finding I want to briefly talk to you about is that we observed a connection with how journalists were thinking about news avoidance and their overall tone. Specifically, the most sympathetic responses tended to blame news or contextual factors. Here are just two examples on the screen for you. For time, maybe I'll focus in on the bottom one. Here, a journalist said, "'Because news is depressing as hell. I'm a media professional, so I feel obligated to consume the news. But I often don't want to.'" Right, there's almost this identification with why somebody would want to avoid news. We can contrast this with the more skeptical or even condescending responses that tended to

blame news avoiders themselves. You can see this through the use of almost distancing language, if you want to look at the top quote from a journalist. “I would say it's because they're unintelligent. Probably, they would say it's because they're concerned with their mental health.” Or you get the very interesting use of scare quotes, right? They don't wanna see “bad news,” right, or that they think the media is “biased.” Or you get some nice name calling, which no, I'm not going to read that quote, but it is there for you to read, that really tend to delegitimize the reasons that news avoiders are giving for why they would consume little to no news.

Okay, the last finding I'm going to leave you with is a little bit more forward-looking. So here we ask journalists, in your opinion, can anything be done to convert news avoiders into more regular consumers of news? Yes or no? Now before I tell you the answer, I want you to think in your head, what percentage saying yes would be cause for optimism? Or if you're a glass half empty kind of person, what percent saying yes, would be cause for pessimism? Got your percentage? All right, survey says, we found that about 66% of US journalists that we surveyed said yes, something can be done. To be honest, this was higher than I thought it was going to be. And in case you're curious, those journalists who said yes, they tended to be younger. They tended to have higher levels of education. And the finding that I think is super interesting is that they said they personally knew a news avoider. Against what I thought, we did not find any differences for your position in a news organization, or the type of news organization that you worked in, whether that was national, international, local, whether it was print, newspapers, online, TV, magazine, radio, no organizational differences. This was largely grounded in who you are, what are your individual characteristics, not your professional characteristics.

So I'm going to wrap up my initial comments there, but I do want to give a shout out that we did also ask as a follow-up question, people who said yes, an open-ended question of okay, so what can be done to convert these people into more regular consumers of news? I hope we can unpack that a little bit more in the conversation with the panel and the Q&A, but just as a little tiny teaser, because I'm a sucker for a word cloud, I want to show you the most commonly mentioned words that journalists gave us when answering this question of, okay, what can be done to convert news avoiders into more regular consumers of news? Okay, so with that, I will end my comments.

Kate West Thank you, Stephanie. All right, well, you can't leave us hanging. What is the answer? What is this solution that they were talking about? We saw local on there is a big one.

Stephanie Edgerly So many people said yes. So, you know, there's not one solution, but I will say journalists, and this is not surprising, tended to focus more on internal what can news do, which I think is often when you're wearing your professional hat, what you will focus on. And there were two big things that were repeated over and over again. And the first is one that we, both of them, we've heard often throughout the last two days, but the first was like, we’ve got to make news more relevant. And a lot of it was juxtaposed to politics, which I know is like a tight needle to thread here, but that a lot of politics, White House, Congress coverage is very inside baseball and alienating to people. And we need to figure out how to make news more relevant to people who perceive it not to be, or for people who it really isn't relevant. And then the second one, which I think is like really complicated to unpack, and there are many, many layers to this, but it was we’ve got to make news more positive. We have to figure out how to make news more empowering. If we're going to tell bad, horrible, important news, how can we follow it up with something that is more action oriented? Something that is more uplifting, not necessarily like, oh, look

at that cute little puppy. But how do we sort of be more mindful of striking this balance of positivity with negativity that is, of course, going to accompany news.

Kate West Yeah, and it doesn't surprise me that journalists are saying these sorts of things because when you go out to do a story, people love to tell you why they don't watch your newscast or why they don't read your publication. It's almost like they wear it as a badge of honor of I don't watch the news. So I love hearing that to make it more relevant. Benjamin, I want to talk to you about the findings you had because they were really relatable to what people said on why they're consuming social. You know, the thought process for a lot of journalists had been we need to meet people on social, promote our content, and be able to have them identify with our brand, like us, so that when the big story happens, they'll turn on our station, or look on our website, or read our paper. Is that no longer the case?

Benjamin Toff It's not that that's no longer the case. I think that instinct is right, you have to be in these spaces, given the number of, just the sheer volume of hours that this demographic is spending in these places. You have to meet them where they are. But I think you have to be strategic about thinking about what that relationship looks like in that space, given the context in which people are approaching getting information in that space, where it is such like fleeting, you know, split-second decisions, about whether to engage with that content. And often sort of limited to that space. And so you need to have clear, easier pathways for converting that audience to building a relationship with you outside of that space because they aren't even necessarily paying attention to the organization, the branding, the who you are part. It's all just content for the most part. And so really differentiating what is unique about the underlying reporting of what is being done here that is not just like all the other content that people are seeing in those digital spaces. As well as like, you know, too much of it, I think, is coming from a place of like, we're already producing all of this content, we're going to use this space to now promote it. And one of the challenges, one of the things that I found really interesting on the sources of discovery piece of the appeal of platforms is it's not that people were interested in like totally different kinds of content than local news organizations are actually producing, a lot of what they said they liked about seeing in these spaces were things like new restaurants opening their community, new businesses, new things to do in town, interesting people, slices of life. It's the stuff that local news outlets have long specialized in providing for their communities. It's just that most of the content they're getting like that is not from their local news outlet. It's from a local influencer or local creator. And there's no reason why news organizations can't be creating more of that content to serve those needs and those expectations about what those audiences want. It doesn't all have to be the hard hitting really negative news, but that's how you build that initial relationship so that they know who you are. One of the experiments we did with Minnesota Public Radio in parallel with this study was a field experiment where we asked a group of young adults to actually follow NPR News on Instagram over the course of the election. And there was a big reduction in just the percentage of people who said they weren't familiar enough with who NPR was to know whether they could trust them. And in addition to that, there was a big increase in trust towards that organization just from seeing that content more regularly. And so it is about being in that space, but it's also about providing content that is meeting the needs or expectations of the audience in that space.

Kate West Great. And Sandra, I want to talk to you about the fact that, you know, as journalists, we get into this position, this, you know, this profession because we're passionate about this. This is what we want to do. But how do we keep our journalists from getting burned out so quickly?

Sandra Vera Zambrano I think the first thing to think about is to be aware of. And I think that younger generations are very, very aware of what's going on and what's going to become the after, like in work, and that wages are low, and that schedules are just like 16 hours per day, that it could be very difficult. So I think the first thing is to know, and the other thing is not to only believe that passion can hold everything. So as they say in French, like, it's not like relationships are not built of love and water. So it's just not only about love and waters, just love, and an income, and a real life afterward, and like a whole balance. And I think younger generations are very aware of like not having to sacrifice themselves. And that our generation, at least I think our generation, was very based on sacrifice. Oh, you're in journalism. Oh, you are going to work a lot. Oh, you're going to earn very little. Oh, and if you move to Mexico, oh, your life might not be totally guaranteed. And we accepted that as part of the passion, but passion does not allow people to remain forever. It's very difficult. Just like to be aware. .

Kate West It's still the best profession any of us can ever do. Hey, let's thank our panel, everybody. Great job. Thank you.