



By: *Harvey Morris*

# In a year of crisis some victims of news fatigue are simply switching off



The coming festive season offers the opportunity for a brief respite from news fatigue and crisis overload, stress syndromes that the experts tell us have been exacerbated by a year of headlines on the worsening state of the world.

Time perhaps to switch off the smartphone, or at least silence the alerts, and enjoy a few days of news-free tranquillity.

In stable and relatively prosperous parts of the world, such as Britain, there is at least the luxury of ignoring world events for a while, unlike in those places where violence and suffering is generating the headlines.

Psychologists say a break from news can be positively therapeutic, as was confirmed by a British listener to a recent BBC World Service **item** that discussed news fatigue. "I had a two-week break," she told fellow listeners, "and felt mentally cleansed and de-stressed."

In the past year, ongoing concerns about a stalemated war in Ukraine have been trumped by the daily bombardment of developments in Israel and Gaza. Meanwhile news consumers have been confronted with the enduring existential nightmare of whether climate change or AI killer robots will get them first.

At a time in which sources of information are proliferating, as are the means to deliver it, crisis overload presents a challenge to so-called legacy media as well as to policymakers in politics and business.

## Clickbait environment

Data shows that, while some people are simply switching off, others are moving to an increasing variety of platforms where the news they consume may be less than reliable. It is a 'clickbait' environment that magnifies the negative, the dramatic and the just plain false.

In its latest digital news survey, the Reuters Institute **reported** growing dependence on news intermediaries such as Tiktok and other video channels, despite near record high

public disquiet about misinformation and algorithms.

Amid this proliferation of news sources, the Institute's researchers nevertheless found that the proportion of global news consumers who said they avoided news, often or sometimes, was close to all-time highs.

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In a previous analysis, they reported that interest in news had decreased sharply across all markets, from 63 per cent in 2017 to 51 per cent in 2022.

Many respondents said news had a negative effect on their mood. Trust in the news rose somewhat during the Covid pandemic but was once more in decline.

Part of the news fatigue dilemma is that today's instant access to constant updates on smartphones and laptops creates an environment in which people are not as much better informed as they are distracted and confused by events beyond their control.

Added to that is the fear that hostile state actors can abuse the news in order to disorient the public.

## Hierarchy of concerns

The European Union has imposed measures against Russian state entities accused of using fake web pages and fake social media accounts to manipulate information as part of a hybrid campaign against Europe.

Even where information sources can be trusted, a surfeit of negative news can create a hierarchy of concerns in which some crises are overlooked or forgotten.

## Even as the attention of news addicts is diverted from Ukraine to the Gaza conflict, other issues are largely ignored

Ukraine's supporters are worried that the declining attention now paid to developments on its frontline with Russia will undermine the Western public's support for its defensive war.

More than a year ago, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told a audience of marketing professionals in France: "The end of this war and its circumstances depend on the world's attention...Don't let the world switch to something else!"

But even as the attention of news addicts is diverted from Ukraine to the daily horrors of the Gaza conflict, other issues, such as the world's top-ranking humanitarian crisis threatening 18 million Sudanese, are largely ignored.

The phenomenon of news fatigue and crisis overload in an ever more connected world is one that affects business as well as politics.

## Headline adrenaline

Previewing predictions for 2024 consumer trends, a spokesman for the UK-based market researcher Mintel said: "Soaring prices and political instability will continue to fuel global uncertainty, while climate change concerns are at the forefront of consumers' worries [and] AI is adding a new layer of uncertainty."

Mintel foresaw a trend for brands to highlight more human-to-human relationships as an escape from an increasingly virtual world in which the onslaught of social media was contributing to stress and burnout.



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Psychologists who study the news fatigue phenomenon acknowledge that bad news has always had the ability to cause stress. This had been exacerbated by the habit of 'doomscrolling' through revolving updates, a term popularised during the pandemic.

Edinburgh University's newspaper, The Student, recently conceded that there was no simple way to step off the hamster wheel of information and media consumption.

"However, replacing screen time with a simple hobby; a walk, a craft (or even some long-form content of a book or documentary as opposed to the small-info-bites of Instagram reels) will make the transition easier and your brain will thank you!"

In countries such as the UK there appears to be a near even split between those who consume the news avidly and those who are inclined to switch off, preferring to ignore the news rather than being consumed by it.

Maybe everyone should aim for a middle way, rationing their consumption, while opting for sources that offer a deeper understanding of issues rather than constant shots of headline adrenaline.

Perhaps it is worth adopting as a New Year's resolution.