

# Negative effects of long-lasting media attention to public issues on recipients: Conceptualizing issue fatigue

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## Abstract

A significant amount of political communication research is grounded in the dynamics of the media's and the public's attention to public issues, assuming that the news media draw the public's attention to issues, thereby fostering an informed and participating citizenry. However, there is evidence from several countries that this mechanism is disrupted for issues with high shares of news coverage during a period. Against this background, this article scrutinizes the idea that recipients become fatigued from these issues in the news. Having transferred findings on overexposure from other media stimuli to the news environment, issue fatigue is defined as a negative cognitive and affective state consisting of decreasing issue-specific information processing involvement, perceived information overload, and increasing boredom, annoyance, and anger toward an issue. Issue fatigue can lead to the avoidance of information about the issue, thus serving as a new explanatory approach to avoidance of media information at an issue level. Further consequences, causes, and the development of issue fatigue are discussed.

## Keywords

overexposure, media avoidance, media use, news exposure, news issues, issue fatigue

## 1 Introduction

The Coronavirus, Brexit, and Donald Trump's presidency are examples of socially and politically relevant issues that are extensively covered by the news media, sometimes to the extent that people may feel bored or fatigued. In the United Kingdom (UK), news avoidance has increased driven by boredom, anger, or sadness over the ongoing Brexit issue (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). Similarly, Coronavirus news fatigue is publicly discussed. While the issue continues to be topical and highly relevant, public attention to news on it has declined (Bedingfield, 2020; Burack, 2020).

The media's attention to public issues has been studied under various concepts, for instance, media hypes (Vasterman, 2005) and storms (Boydston, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014). The issue-attention cycle

refers to a pattern of media attention to an issue that consists of four to five phases. The first phase comprises the discovery of the issue, which is followed by a growth in coverage (second phase). After its boom (third phase), the coverage declines (fourth phase) before finally disappearing (Waldherr, 2014). Previous research has assumed that media coverage of an issue also drives public attention, and vice versa (Boydston et al., 2014; Geiss, 2015). However, a few studies have addressed that at some point, the public loses interest in the issues that the media continue to cover (Henry & Gordon, 2001; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Apart from that, not much attention has been paid to audience perceptions of issues during the issue attention cycle; the effects that intensive and long-lasting coverage of a news issue has on people's mindsets concerning the issue remain unclear.



Research in neighboring disciplines has demonstrated that individuals become fatigued from health messages (So, Kim, & Cohen, 2017) and worn out by advertising (Craig, Sternthal, & Leavitt, 1976) when exposed too often. Similar mechanisms have been found for social problems and human interest stories during media hypes; parts of the population become chronically fatigued and avoid these issues (Beyer & Figenschou, 2014; Kinnick, Krugman, & Cameron, 1996). Given the regular incidence of ongoing political issues in the news, some researchers have posited that news recipients become fatigued by ongoing issues as well (Kuhlmann, Schumann, & Wolling, 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016).

However, research has not yet conceptualized thoroughly fatigue from news issues. This is a special case of fatigue which is all the more relevant since fatigue in the news media environment has detrimental consequences beyond those of advertising wearout and fatigue from persuasive health messages. First, issue fatigue occurs with issues that are particularly important for politics and society and remain on the political agenda for a long time, such as Brexit, Coronavirus, and the war in Syria. Second, an increase in citizens' avoidance of these issues caused by fatigue is problematic since a politically informed and participating citizenry is the foundation of a functioning democracy. If broad segments of the population withdraw from ongoing political issues, political decisions may be made without the vigilance and legitimation of citizens (Elvestad, Blekesaune, & Aalberg, 2014). Third, issue fatigue occurs in those who regularly consume news as opposed to news avoiders, who feel generally overloaded and tune out from news completely (Elvestad et al., 2014; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). Issue fatigue thus contributes to the current discourse about the overall turn away from news media (Strömbäck et al., 2020) by adding a focus on (ongoing) issues and their avoidance by generally news-consuming citizens. For this reason and because of the lack of a theoretical investigation of fatigue from news issues, we develop a conceptualization of issue

fatigue and sum up our main assumptions in propositions. We also elaborate on the causes and consequences of issue fatigue and derive assumptions about its dynamics. Relying on existing research on fatigue and overexposure phenomena, we assume that when the media devote a high share of coverage to the issue during a period, there is a chance that some people may become cognitively and emotionally fatigued, thus potentially avoiding the issue, although politics and the media continue focusing on it.

## 2 Theoretical conceptualization of issue fatigue

Extant studies on issue fatigue (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016) found that recipients expressed their fatigue by claiming that they no longer wanted to hear or see anything about those issues. This implies that, at some point in time, they were exposed to an issue to a certain extent, but after a period, became fatigued and potentially avoided it.

In the following sections, we derive the definition of issue fatigue as an individual's negative mental state that emerges as a result of perceived overexposure to an issue intensively covered by the news media during weeks or months. Before issue fatigue's dimensions are explicated, we address why issue fatigue is different from other approaches used to explain media avoidance, and we introduce the idea that overexposure to news issues is the breeding ground for issue fatigue.

### 2.1 The differences between issue fatigue and existing approaches to media information avoidance behavior

Communication research and psychology have identified cognitive and affective explanations of media avoidance. At the cognitive level, consistency theories postulate that individuals avoid or ignore information that is inconsistent with their beliefs or attitudes (Donsbach, 1991). For political media content, predictors of non-exposure or avoidance include disliking political information in general

(Bode, Vraga, & Troller-Renfree, 2017; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013) and a negative perception of the news media coverage (Zerba, 2011). At the emotional level, negative emotions, such as threat and anxiety (Goodall & Reed, 2013), lead to the avoidance of health information. Lastly, several cognitive-affective phenomena cause the avoidance of informational media content. Reactance as a negative cognitive and / or emotional reaction to exposure to different media stimuli has been found to correlate with avoidance behavior (Marcinkowski & Došenović, 2020). Fatigue from health messages – which has cognitive and emotional components (So et al., 2017) – leads to avoiding mediated health information. Finally, news overload can lead to information avoidance strategies, such as selective scanning (Lee, Holton, & Chen, 2019; Song, Jung, & Kim, 2017).

As will be explained in the following sections, issue fatigue is a cognitive-affective state that leads to issue avoidance. Nevertheless, it is a new approach to media avoidance because it focuses on issues in the news as objects of avoidance: It is different from disagreeing with information about an issue as a cause of avoidance (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) and also from a general lack of involvement with the issue (Kim, 2008). In addition, avoidance caused by issue fatigue only emerges after a period of repeated exposure. Issue fatigue is thus an explanation for media avoidance that is temporal and emerging over time.

*Proposition 1:* Issue fatigue is a temporal state, which occurs after a period of exposure to news about the issue. It represents a new approach to media avoidance at an issue level.

## 2.2 Issue fatigue as a consequence of overexposure

Overexposure is the key factor for understanding the emergence of fatigue from news issues. It was first discussed within theoretical models of repetition effects (Berlyne, 1970; Cacioppo & Petty, 1979, 1989; Stang, 1975), the concept of advertising wearout (Cacioppo & Petty, 1980; Calder & Sternthal, 1980; Craig et al., 1976),

for health messages (So et al., 2017), and persuasive statements in news articles (Koch & Zerback, 2013). After a threshold point of repetition, the evaluation of a stimulus, such as an ad, can shift from positive to negative. At first, the stimulus is novel and perceived as interesting and stimulating. After several repetitions, boredom, tedium, and satiation are perceived, reactance is experienced, processing and learning are decreased, and the attitude toward the stimulus becomes more negative (Batra & Ray, 1986; Berlyne, 1970; Reithans, Swasy, & Marks, 1986; Stang, 1975). Based on this line of research, fatigue from persuasive health messages (Kim & So, 2018; So et al., 2017) has been conceptualized and investigated. It occurs because of excessive exposure to similar health messages, includes perceptions of overexposure, tedium, redundancy, and exhaustion, and can lead to disengagement with the messages (So et al., 2017).

Research has so far ignored the effects of repeated exposure to the same stimulus in the news media context; fatigue has not yet been conceptualized for ongoing political issues in the news.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we need to consider the specifics of news issues for overexposure effects. First, the stimulus is informative and not a persuasive one promoting a particular behavior. Second, issue fatigue results from exposure to the issue via various media messages on different channels, whereas advertising wearout results from repeated exposure to exactly the same message (Craig et al., 1976), and health message fatigue from overexposure to similar messages (So et al., 2017). Messages about ongoing issues in different media outlets over an extended period differ considerably from each other in a variety of aspects, such as in their events, viewpoints, and actors covered. However, the issue is the common core of these messages (Geiss, 2015), which causes fatigue.

*Proposition 2:* After a prior period of positive or neutral responses to an issue

1 News overload is the result of cumulative exposure to news (York, 2013); however, it concerns news in general rather than the same stimulus.

covered by the news media, recipients respond negatively to the issue after a threshold point of too frequent re-exposure. Consequently, issue fatigue emerges.

### 2.3 Dimensions of issue fatigue

Referring back to other overexposure phenomena, we apply the term fatigue to news issues. In health research, fatigue denotes an unpleasant experience consisting of physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions, which follows a phase of exertion and leads to an often temporary decrease in ability (Ream & Richardson, 1996). Research on repetition effects also shows that overexposure to stimuli, such as ads and health messages, has cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects on individuals (Bornstein, 1989; Burke & Edell, 1986; Claypool, Mackie, Garcia-Marques, McIntosh, & Udall, 2004; Rethans et al., 1986; So et al., 2017). The concepts of health message fatigue (So et al., 2017) and compassion fatigue (Kinnick et al., 1996) separate cognitions and emotions from behavior such as avoidance. Since issue fatigue must not necessarily lead to changes in behavior, as we explain in Section 6, we follow this assumption.

*Proposition 3:* Issue fatigue comprises cognitive and emotional dimensions, which can cause behavioral responses.

Below, we discuss how the three dimensions of decreased processing involvement, perceived information overload, and increasing negative emotions represent fatigue from news issues.

#### 2.3.1 Dimension 1: Decreased issue-specific information processing involvement

Findings on the effects of overexposure show that frequent re-exposure to a stimulus affects individuals' attention and information processing (Craig et al., 1976; Rethans et al., 1986). When recipients are too frequently exposed to information on the same issue, they possibly lose their initial motivation to engage cognitively with it, especially when it is perceived as monotonous rather than as novel (Berlyne, 1970). Thus, we assume that recipients' cognitive engagement with the issue decreases due

to frequent re-exposure to media content on the same issue.

The motivation to intensively process information about an issue is referred to as issue-specific information processing involvement (Perse, 1998; Schemer, Matthes, & Wirth, 2008). It is closely linked to general cognitive involvement (Donnerstag, 1996). Cognitive involvement refers to an individual's internal engagement with an object. However, it is used in a heterogeneous manner (Donnerstag, 1996), for example, as perceived interest, personal meaning, or expected consequences for oneself and, thus, personal importance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In the following, we elaborate on the role cognitive involvement plays for issue fatigue in terms of perceived relevance and cognitive elaboration (Jungkee & Rubin, 1997).

Whether an individual generally perceives an issue relevant – personally or for society – depends on their opinions of and attributions to the characteristics of the issue (Antil, 1984). Individual opinions and attributions can change over time when the issue changes in terms of events and developments, or they remain unchanged when an individual perceives no change in the issue's personal relevance. Despite stable levels of perceived relevance, the motivation to engage with the issue is likely to change. The concept of processing involvement as “issue-specific cognitive engagement” (Matthes, 2013, p. 367) at the state level captures the extent to which individuals strive to get information about an issue, know arguments about it, and think about the information (Matthes, 2013, p. 381) and, thus, how motivated they are to engage with the issue cognitively. Their processing involvement changes over time because of changes in the information received about the issue. When an individual recognizes the details of a message and their relevance, the need for further information emerges and leads to an increased motivation to engage with the issue (Burnkrant & Sawyer, 1983). However, when the information is perceived as repetitive rather than newsworthy (Berlyne, 1970; Silvia, 2006) – as assumed for information on a frequently covered issue – the moti-

vation to process the received information should be low.

*Proposition 4:* Issue fatigue manifests, first, in decreased information processing involvement.

Issue-specific information processing involvement decreases, while the general perceived relevance of the issue can, but does not have to remain unchanged.

### 2.3.2 Dimension 2: Perceived information overload

Regarding the changing news media environment, communication research has started to investigate the effects of significant amounts of information on recipients. The effects of information overload or news overload on recipients have been examined (Lee et al., 2019; Song et al., 2017; York, 2013) and discussed for issue fatigue (Metag & Arlt, 2016). In its narrow sense, information overload occurs when the amount of information exceeds the recipient's cognitive capacities to process it (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Jackson & Farzaneh, 2012). When the information load increases over time due to re-exposure, the perception of being overwhelmed by information (Ji, Ha, & Sypher, 2014) can emerge at some point. In addition to the quantity of received information and individual characteristics, such as general information processing capacity or motivation, the characteristics of the received information are influential for information overload. Information overload is facilitated by uncertainty, diversity, ambiguity, novelty, complexity, intensity, and negative quality (Eppler & Mengis, 2004; Jackson & Farzaneh, 2012; Schneider, 1987).

*Proposition 5:* Perceived information overload is the second dimension of issue fatigue.

### 2.3.3 Dimension 3: Increase in boredom, annoyance, and anger

An increase in specific affective dispositions toward the issue over time is the third dimension of issue fatigue. Emotions can be evoked by contact with a stimulus (Klauer, 1997; Konijn, 2015). Hence, recipients can associate specific emotions with the issue, which become activated when

repeatedly exposed to it. When individuals experience emotions repeatedly as a response to an object, the emotions can be considered affective dispositions (Scherer, 2005).

As explained in Section 2.2, overexposure to a stimulus can provoke negative affective responses. First, boredom can occur, which is the consequence of being dissatisfied and inadequately stimulated (Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993). This can happen particularly when news coverage is perceived as monotonous and repetitive rather than as diverse and novel and falls short of the recipient's cognitive capacities. Recipients feel they already know everything, which provokes boredom. Similarly, tedium and satiation are negative feelings about being re-exposed to the stimulus and are used interchangeably with boredom (Rethans et al., 1986; So et al., 2017). Annoyance emerges in situations in which situational factors hinder a person's goal (Roseman, 1984), which can happen during news exposure. Excessive repetition of display-ads causes annoyance among Internet users because it intervenes with the goal of information navigation (Todri, Ghose, & Singh, 2020). Similarly, interference with information goals can occur when recipients are exposed repeatedly to the same news issue against their will. Likewise, anger can arise when internal goals, such as not wanting to hear or see about an issue, are threatened (Kim & So, 2018; Song et al., 2017) and information is judged as unwanted (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010). Previous investigations have found that recipients perceive anger, boredom, and annoyance concerning ongoing news issues (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2019). In Section 5, we will elaborate more on the causes of these three affective dispositions.

*Proposition 6:* The affective dispositions of boredom, annoyance, and anger are indicators of issue fatigue. They solidify from emotions repeatedly experienced through single exposure episodes.

The interactions between the three dimensions are meaningful for issue fatigue as a concept in its own right. Per-

ceiving information overload involves negative emotions, for instance, distress, and it affects cognitive processing motivation (Lang, 2000; York, 2013). Emotions stemming from media exposure, such as annoyance, anger, or boredom, influence information processing and judgments (Schemer, 2014). All dimensions are the result of repeated exposure to the issue and constitute issue fatigue. It is important to note that all three dimensions need to be present when measured in real-time or retrospectively. Fatigued recipients do not need to have equally high levels of all three dimensions, but they need to perceive at least some level of information overload, experience at least one of the fatigue-specific negative emotions, and lack the motivation to engage with the issue to some extent. If one of the dimensions does not apply at all to recipients, they are not issue fatigued; instead, they perceive a combination of two dimensions. However, the simultaneous presence of all three dimensions of issue fatigue is probable due to their assumed interrelations explained above. The prevalence and contribution of each dimension vary among individuals and over time; it depends on individual characteristics, such as the cognitive capacity, the characteristics of the received news reports, and the intensity of exposure. The stronger the three dimensions are – as a result of overexposure – the stronger is issue fatigue. How the dimensions co-occur and reciprocally influence each other over time needs empirical study.

### 3 Definition of issue fatigue

Having cognitive and emotional components, issue fatigue resembles the concept of attitudes toward an issue (Breckler, 1984). However, we define issue fatigue as a mental state rather than as an attitude. Attitudes are defined as an evaluation of a psychological object, ranging from positive attributes, such as pleasant or good, to negative attributes, such as unpleasant or bad, or to the overall “degree of favorability”, respectively (Ajzen, 2001, p. 29). They are said to explain the avoidance of infor-

mation, like within dissonance approaches (e.g., Donsbach, 1991). However, issue fatigue does not equal the attitude toward the issue. Issue fatigue is a negative effect of re-exposure, which can emerge whether or not an individual is for or against an issue. An attitude is an “enduring pattern of evaluative responses” (Colman, 2015, para. 1) based on the attitudinal object’s characteristics; it is considered to be relatively stable over time (Ajzen, 2001). Issue fatigue is dynamic and develops over time. The exact amount of time for issue fatigue to occur depends on the interplay between exposure to the issue, the characteristics of the issue and its presentation in the news coverage, and the characteristics of the recipients.

Considering the temporal and situational nature of issue fatigue as well as its cognitive and emotional components, we propose to classify it as an individual’s mental state. A mental state refers to an individual’s fluctuating and situational sensitivities and accounts for their needs, motivational states, current thoughts, and consciousness (Cattell, 1963; Fridhandler, 1986). Thus, the comparatively shorter temporal state of issue fatigue encompasses cognitions and affect, and it can be activated by situational triggers, such as news media coverage of the issue.

Issues comprise several events which are perceived as belonging together (Kepplinger, 2001). In that sense, issues are “cognitive sense making tools serving as overarching categories or bins [...] into which news stories and the events they cover can be sorted” (Geiss, 2018, p. 85). Recipients assign a label to these overarching categories. They classify perceived sub-issues under one overarching issue (Geiss, 2018; Haas & Brosius, 2021; Kuhlmann, 2016). For instance, the Coronavirus is the overarching issue, while vaccinations, school closures, and travel bans are related sub-issues. Despite individual variability, perceived sub-issues and particularly issue labels are highly intersubjective and shared by recipients (Geiss, 2018). Issue fatigue could be directed both to the issue in general (as a label) and to specific sub-issues.

*Proposition 7* serves to define issue fatigue: Issue fatigue refers to an individual's negative mental state which emerges as a result of perceived overexposure to an issue that is intensively covered by the news media. Increasing boredom, annoyance, and anger, decreasing issue-specific information processing involvement, and perceived information overload characterize the state of issue fatigue. These three dimensions manifest as the recipient's expression of no longer wanting to hear or see anything about the issue.

Subsequently, we elaborate on the potential consequences and causes of the phenomenon.

#### 4 Consequences

Previous research on overexposure effects and the dimensions of issue fatigue suggests that the emotions and cognitions inherent in issue fatigue have behavioral consequences. Issue fatigue can trigger, most importantly, avoidance of the issue. This is supported by research in different contexts showing that individuals avoid media content that triggers negative affect while selecting content that elicits positive affect (Schramm & Wirth, 2008; Zillmann, 1988). The degree of motivation to process information about an issue is influential for information processing and seeking (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984; Donnerstag, 1996). Information overload can result in avoidance behavior (Song et al., 2017).

While some conceptualize avoidance as not using the media content in question at all or infrequently (Elvestad et al., 2014), others emphasize the distinction between active avoidance and non-exposure to media content (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). In psychology and communication theory, active information avoidance refers to the actual decision to refrain from relevant information (Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Howell & Shepperd, 2017). Avoidance can occur at the point of information selection; it can also emerge as a cognitive strategy during information reception when less attention is paid to the content or the reception is stopped (Bode

et al., 2017; Schramm & Wirth, 2008). In addition, avoidance of interpersonal discussions on the issue is a plausible consequence of issue fatigue (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016).

*Proposition 8:* Avoidance of news on and interpersonal discussions about the issue are behavioral outcomes of issue fatigue. Issue avoidance can be both continuous during a period and occur from time to time during a period.

Further consequences are plausible. We know from research on persuasive messages that overexposure can lead to resistance-reactions, such as reactance and counterargument (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979; Kim & So, 2018; So et al., 2017). Reactance emerges because of recognizing the persuasive attempt and perceiving it as a threat to one's personal freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Although news coverage is not persuasive per se, recipients could perceive the coverage of the same issue as a persuasive attempt with increasing exposure (Koch & Zerback, 2013), especially when the coverage is merged with a certain opinion (i. e., manipulative moralizing, Luhmann, 1970). Consequently, recipients turn to alternative views on the issue, such as those provided by alternative media, eventually (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019).

*Proposition 9:* Turning to alternative views on the issue is a potential outcome of issue fatigue.

However, also positive effects of issue avoidance due to fatigue are possible. Several studies have found that exposure to political news renders recipients in a negative mood due to negativity and conflict, leading them to disengage with news (Boukes & Vliegthart, 2017; Kinnick et al., 1996). When news users perceive fatigue from an ongoing news issue and avoid it during news exposure, they potentially focus their attention on other issues and stories, thereby avoiding negative cognitive and affective states. Avoiding issues could thus be a strategy to make news exposure less harmful and therefore functional for personal well-being. In addition, avoiding a specific issue allows recipients to turn to other current issues. Lastly, recipients can

avoid the issue as a coping strategy to take a break; their fatigue decreases, and they return to news about the issue afterward (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

*Proposition 10:* Issue fatigue can have beneficial consequences for recipients.

## 5 Causes

Since the news media are a central source of information about current political issues, recipients' exposure to news coverage on the issue is the main driver of issue fatigue. Three factors are relevant: The intensity of exposure, objective news coverage characteristics, and the subjective perception of the news coverage.

In line with research on repetition effects and the first empirical approaches to issue fatigue (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016), the intensity of exposure to the stimulus, and thus the reception of media information on the issue, is considered the central driver of issue fatigue's emergence. Studies on advertising wearout posit more precisely that three intensity-related factors are relevant for a shift in the stimulus' evaluation into a negative direction – the frequency of exposure, the intervals between the exposure situations, and the overall duration of exposure (Burke & Edell, 1986; Corkindale & Newall, 1978). Recipients can be exposed to news on the issue either directly or indirectly via interpersonal discussions (Bandura, 2001).

However, in contrast to advertising stimuli, we have to consider that content on an issue covered in the news changes over time. This is why, second, the characteristics of the information received must be considered as a cause of issue fatigue. Research on information overload, issue fatigue's second dimension, points to effects of information characteristics, such as complexity and ambiguity (Jackson & Farzaneh, 2012; Schneider, 1987). Texts are perceived as less interesting when they are difficult to understand (Silvia, 2006). Issue-specific information processing involvement, the first dimension, is likely determined by the characteristics of

the information, such as a lack of novelty in news reports. According to Berlyne's (1970) and Stang's (1975) experiments, novelty and thus the stimulating potential of the stimulus determine how pleasing it is perceived along with repeated exposure. A perceived lack of novelty in an issue's news coverage can be due to reports with high shares of repeated information on the issue or / and several reports from various outlets covering the issue-related events simultaneously. Both likely trigger boredom and decrease the motivation to engage with the issue. In addition, political news characteristics, such as negativity, can provoke negative affective reactions (Schemer, 2014). Thus, negativity and conflict in the issue's news coverage could cause issue fatigue, particularly the negative emotions of anger and annoyance. This is in line with previous findings that redundant information causes fatigue from health messages (So et al., 2017) and that conflict and sensationalism result in compassion fatigue (Kinnick et al., 1996; Moeller, 1999).

Third, recipients likely perceive subjectively certain characteristics of the news coverage (Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Previous approaches showed that negative evaluations of the issue's news coverage regarding quality, credibility, and impartiality (Kuhlmann et al., 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016) related to issue fatigue. Since recipients encounter the issue via news coverage for a period before becoming fatigued, negative perceptions and evaluations of the issue's news coverage likely precede and affect their stance toward the issue.

*Proposition 11:* The intensity of exposure, news coverage characteristics, and negative evaluations of the issue's news coverage lead to higher levels of issue fatigue.

## 6 Reflections on the dynamics of issue fatigue

In this section, we elaborate on issue fatigue's emergence process and discuss several questions. First, the extent of an individual's exposure to a new issue on

the media's agenda is dependent on several individual factors, such as interest and perceived importance (Antil, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). When an individual does not consider an issue relevant, initially, their issue-specific information-seeking behavior and cognitive processing are low (Donnerstag, 1996). Hence, either a minimum level of perceived issue-relevance or incidental exposure to information on the issue despite a lack of relevance (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013) is a precondition for the emergence of issue fatigue.

During the initial period of media coverage, issue fatigue has not yet emerged. Boredom, annoyance, and anger are mostly absent, a certain level of information processing involvement is present, and recipients do not experience information overload. However, the cognitive and emotional dimensions of issue fatigue can develop throughout exposure to intensive and ongoing news coverage. Once associated with the issue, the negative emotions are more accessible and they can be activated easily when the recipient is re-exposed to the issue (Fazio, 1990; Klauer, 1997). The emotions turn into affective dispositions. Simultaneously, the recipients' information processing involvement decreases, and they experience information overload increasingly. Consequently, recipients possibly take countermeasures, in particular avoiding the issue.

However, several questions remain unanswered, most prominently regarding the determinants of the issue fatigue emergence process. Since wearout effects are dependent on three intensity-related factors – the number of repetitions, the interval of repetition, and the overall duration of the period of exposure (Corkindale & Newall, 1978) – we assume that these factors are equally important for the emergence of issue fatigue. Scenarios in which a recipient is moderately exposed to an issue, but over a long time, and one in which a recipient is exposed to an issue extensively over a short time, both allow for the emergence of issue fatigue.

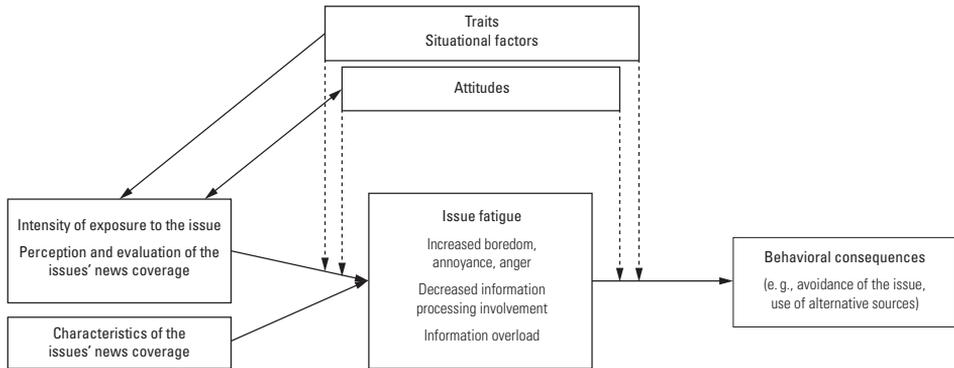
The attitude toward the issue is influenced by the intensity of exposure, according to the mere exposure effect (Za-

jonc, 1968) and repetition effects (Berlyne, 1970; Calder & Sternthal, 1980). At the same time, it influences the intensity of exposure to the issue (e.g., Donsbach, 1991). Furthermore, the attitude likely moderates the associations between the intensity of exposure, evaluations of the news coverage on the issue, and issue fatigue. We assume that a negative attitude toward an issue fosters the emergence of issue fatigue for two reasons. First, emotions and cognitions (Mather & Fanselow, 2018; Storbeck & Clore, 2007), as well as emotions of the same valence (Pe & Kuppens, 2012), interact. Therefore, negative thoughts and emotions, for instance, disapproval or sadness, could elicit the negative emotions inherent in issue fatigue. Thereby, they accelerate the emergence of issue fatigue or increase it more quickly than initial positive cognitions and emotions. Second, recipients involved with the issue perceive dissonance when confronted with counter attitudinal information (Donsbach, 1991). The perception of dissonance, in turn, might cause anger and annoyance associated with the issue, further decrease the motivation to engage with the issue, and cause the perception of being overwhelmed by information about the issue. The possibility that self-reported issue fatigue is a rationalization of both dissonance and avoidance due to dissonance should be explored by further study.

As for information overload (York, 2013), we suppose that further individual characteristics, such as the level of news enjoyment (Nash & Hoffman, 2009), play a role in issue fatigue, with high levels decelerating the emergence of issue fatigue.

Individual and situational factors might also influence the associations between issue fatigue and behavioral consequences. Situations, for instance, watching TV news in a group, are assumed to play a role when the presence of others hinders an individual from changing the channel (Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2011). In terms of traits, a strong duty to keep informed (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001) potentially hinders recipients from avoiding the issue. Since issue fatigue's effects can vary over time, its effects on

Figure 1: Model of the dynamics of issue fatigue



Source: Own illustration.

avoidance and other behavior might also vary.

Disengagement should lead to reduced exposure to the issue. Since the amount of exposure is the main driver of issue fatigue, issue fatigue could decrease with avoidance behavior. However, incidental and forced news exposure (Kim et al., 2013) eventually hinder avoidance. Even short episodes of contact with an issue, such as unintendedly stumbling on a post when scrolling through social media, could provoke negative emotions, feelings of information overload, and reduced information-processing involvement. Thus, despite information avoidance behavior, issue fatigue could re-occur as long as the issue remains on the public and media agenda.

### 7 Conclusion

In this article, we outlined issue fatigue as a concept that is rooted in the interplay between media attention to political issues and citizens' attention to these issues. Building on previous research on overexposure and fatigue phenomena, we defined issue fatigue as a negative cognitive and affective state consisting of decreasing issue-specific information processing involvement, perceived information overload, and increasingly perceived boredom, annoyance, and anger toward an issue. Issue fatigue develops because of repeated

exposure to information about an issue, and it can lead to disengagement with the issue. Issue fatigue differs from other overexposure phenomena because it concerns a non-persuasive stimulus in the news media environment. It serves as a new explanatory approach to avoidance of media information at an issue level.

The concept of issue fatigue can be viewed in the context of issue attention cycles (Waldherr, 2014). For some issues, media attention does not drive public attention during the whole issue attention cycle. When extensive news coverage endures longer than the public's attention span, some citizens are likely to experience issue fatigue.

The role of news media in a democracy is to provide citizens with information on current affairs and to enable opinion formation (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). Against this backdrop, it is problematic when news coverage leads recipients to become fatigued from relevant political or social issues and to avoid them or even turn away from news media generally. Thus, the question arises as to what extent news media and journalists should focus on the public's stance toward ongoing issues. We argue that, from a normative perspective, journalists should strive to select issues not solely based on the public's interest (Welbers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok, & Schaper, 2016) but fulfill their democratic information function by

continuing to inform citizens about these issues. Therefore, we propose that journalists should be sensitive to the possibility that issue fatigue can arise in their audience. Since being issue fatigued means being less motivated to process information and perceiving information overload and negative emotions, journalists could think about different ways to tailor the information they provide about ongoing issues, for instance, reducing the share of repeated information in news reports and increasing the intervals between the publications of reports about the issue.

Linked to these considerations is the question of what kind of issues can elicit issue fatigue. We argue that the affective and cognitive dimensions of issue fatigue are not tied to a specific type of issue; therefore, issue fatigue can potentially occur with any issue whose share of the total news coverage is high during a longer period. People's fatigue from political issues is particularly relevant since an increase in avoidance of these issues or further consequences, such as turning away from traditional news media, could be detrimental to democratic processes relying on an informed and participating citizenry.

When it comes to political issues of societal relevance covered by the news media, correlations between issue fatigue and people's attitudes toward the news media and politics are plausible. Priming effects can occur when negative associations with the current issue are activated in the recipients and influence how they evaluate the performance of political actors and the news media's handling of the issue (Arlt, Schumann, & Wolling, 2020; Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Zhongdang & Kosicki, 1997). Thus, issue fatigue has the potential to increase the number of citizens who tune out substantive political discourses.

The theoretical arguments presented in this paper call for empirical research. Qualitative studies, for instance, diary studies and interviews, would be particularly suitable to address the assumptions and open questions on issue fatigue's dynamics (Gurr & Metag, 2022). The aim should be to explore issue fatigue's emer-

gence process, including its relevant factors and their interplay. Subsequently, longitudinal quantitative studies, such as panel surveys and mobile experience sampling (Masur, 2019), should investigate the presumed causal relationships between issue fatigue and its causes and consequences. A combination of survey or experience sampling with content analysis allows for studying the interplay between objective and subjectively perceived characteristics of news coverage and between these two factors and issue fatigue.

### Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Grant 176356. We would like to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful comments and efforts toward improving our manuscript.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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