

Information Wellbeing: Does Being Informed Have to Make us Anxious?

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Abstract

Young people often report negative affective experiences in their encounters with news online, often claiming they feel overwhelmed by information. In parallel, the rates of news avoidance and news non-use have grown, with people saying they feel the need to turn away from news altogether.

So, does being informed really come at the cost of your wellbeing? And are there healthy and sustainable models to keep up with the news in an increasingly tech-mediated information landscape? In this study, we propose and examine the concept of *information wellbeing*: the state of being both highly informed about current events, and having low news-related anxiety. We conduct a mixed-method study of sixteen people with high *information wellbeing* to identify four cross-cutting themes: socially oriented news engagement, coping strategies, active news engagement, and personal characteristics. We then deploy a large-scale survey ($N = 828$) to understand whether these habits predict information wellbeing more empirically. Surprisingly, we find no evidence of a tradeoff between news anxiety and news knowledge at the population level. We observe, however, that less than one in six people exhibit high *information wellbeing*, with 83.9% of participants having low news knowledge or/and high news anxiety. Further analysis shows that, among people with high news anxiety, those with a pronounced sense of news duty and interest in the news also tend to have high news knowledge, while those who are younger and use more social media tend to have lower news knowledge. These results illuminate a faltering information ecosystem that is not meeting population needs – both at the informational and affective level.

1 Introduction

In a democratic society, people need to be normatively informed about current news events to take civic action like voting, protesting, and organizing. Closely following the news is associated with desirable civic behaviors, including less partisan voting, and higher civic awareness [3, 4]. At the same time, people often say they feel ‘overwhelmed’ by information, citing engagement-driven news spread on social media and the 24-hour news cycle as the culprit [11, 18]. During the Covid-19 pandemic, high exposure to the news was consistently linked to heightened stress and anxiety [16, 17, 22]. Feeling such news anxiety can cause people to detach from news altogether, in turn reducing long-term informedness and civic capacity [14, 20].

Encountering news and political information online can have deep emotional impacts on news audiences, and particularly on young people. Hassoun et al. [7] establish that youth audiences assess truth and credibility online through a lens of ‘information sensibility’: teens feel so overwhelmed by information online that they rely on social cues like follower counts or comments to gauge content saliency and credibility. Others found that young adults have highly emotional and often negative reactions to how the news and politically salient information is surfaced to them on social media feeds [6]. Recent work has begun to examine how digital platforms shape people’s emotional experiences with news. In particular, HCI scholars have investigated potential designs restore agency on social media as a way to combat perceptions of a lack of control over affective information exposure [5, 10]. These studies effectively establish that keeping up with the news can be emotionally demanding. However, much less attention has been paid to understanding how some people remain well informed while sustaining a healthy relationship with news.

In today’s information environment, how can people remain normatively informed while sustaining a healthy relationship with the news? This work seeks to define a new concept, *information wellbeing*, which is the state when someone is informed about current events while effectively limiting their news anxiety. As opposed to prior studies, which tend to foreground either the democratic responsibility to be informed [4], or the need to sustain individual wellbeing [8], our approach considers the maximization of both concepts to be most desirable. In related work, Smith et al. [15] find such tradeoffs between political knowledge and political anxiety, but it is unclear whether similar patterns exist for news knowledge – and what can be done to improve them.

To establish this concept of *information wellbeing*, we ask three research questions:

- (1) RQ1: Is there a tradeoff between news knowledge and news anxiety?
- (2) RQ2: What are the characteristics, attitudes, and practices of people with high information wellbeing (high knowledge, low anxiety)?
- (3) RQ3: Which characteristics, attitudes, and practices are most strongly associated with people with high information wellbeing (high knowledge, low anxiety)?

To answer these questions, we conduct a mixed-method study with a qualitative interview and a quantitative survey component. We first interviewed sixteen participants with high *information wellbeing* – they score in the top 25th percentile of a news quiz, and they report no more than moderate *news anxiety* – to understand how they remain both well informed and minimally anxious about

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the news. These interviews informed the development of a survey instrument, which we then deployed ($N=828$) to examine how these themes relate to news knowledge and news anxiety in a broader population.

Overall, we find a weak negative population-level correlation between news knowledge and news anxiety. People exhibit diverse relationships with the news, with less than one-sixth of participants exhibiting high information wellbeing. Qualitatively, participants with high information wellbeing described relational, active, and adaptive approaches to engaging with news. Quantitatively, these themes were differently associated with news knowledge and news anxiety, suggesting that sustainable engagement depends not only on exposure to news but also on how people engage with it.

This paper makes three contributions. First, we introduce the concept of information wellbeing, capturing the joint goal of remaining informed while limiting news-related anxiety. Second, we identify the characteristics, attitudes, and practices associated with high information wellbeing through a mixed-method investigation. Third, we provide empirical evidence that sustainable engagement with news is shaped not only by news consumption, but also by how people engage with the information they encounter.

2 Methods

We employed a mixed-methods design to investigate information wellbeing. We first conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals exhibiting high information wellbeing to identify candidate constructs that may contribute to remaining informed while limiting news anxiety. Insights from these interviews informed the development of the survey instrument which we deployed it at scale to examine how these candidate factors relate to news knowledge and news anxiety.

2.1 Qualitative Interviews

2.1.1 Participant Recruitment and Screening. We employed purposive sampling [12] to recruit individuals exhibiting high information wellbeing. To identify these participants, recruited participants using a two-step process consisting of a screener survey followed by 45-minute semi-structured interviews. Participants were paid \$13.55/hour for completing the screener survey and \$26.67/hour for the follow-up interview. We operationalized high information wellbeing as the combination of high objective news knowledge and limited news anxiety. Full details of both measures are described in section 2.2.2 Survey Development.

Participants meeting both criteria—that is, those in the top quartile of news knowledge and exhibiting limited news anxiety—were considered to have high information wellbeing and were eligible for interviews. Of the 224 participants who completed the screener survey, 56 (25.0%) met the news knowledge criterion, 94 (41.9%) met the news anxiety criterion, and 27 (12.1%) met both criteria.

We successfully interviewed 16 participants. Our interviewees included 7 women and 9 men; 6 Democrats, 5 Independents and 5 Republicans; 10 White and 6 Non-White; mean age 41 ($SD = 9.5$).

2.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews. We conducted 45-minute semi-structured interviews with participants who met our screening criteria. The interviews sought to understand participants' broader

information ecosystems, how they stayed informed, their motivations for following the news, their emotional responses to news, and the ways they managed the relationship between staying informed and maintaining their wellbeing. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as described below.

2.1.3 Qualitative Analysis. Our qualitative analysis proceeded iteratively throughout the study. The two lead authors iteratively open coded an initial subset of six interviews, meeting regularly to discuss emerging codes, interpretations, and recurring patterns. We organized these open codes using a mind map to identify broader concepts across participants' characteristics, attitudes, and practices. These emerging concepts informed the development of our survey instrument.

Following the initial survey development, one of the lead authors continued open coding across the remaining interviews while revisiting earlier transcripts and analytic memos. Throughout this process, all authors met regularly to discuss emerging interpretations and refine codes and themes. This iterative process informed both the qualitative findings presented in the paper and the continued refinement of our survey instrument.

2.2 Large-scale Survey

2.2.1 Survey Development. Building on the emerging concepts identified through our qualitative analysis, we developed a survey instrument to examine information wellbeing at scale. Whenever possible, we relied on validated survey measures from prior literature. When no suitable measures existed, we developed new survey items inductively based on participants' accounts.

For example, one of our qualitative themes suggested that people who were more analytical might respond less emotionally to news: we therefore included an established scale for the big five personality test as part of the study. Similarly, users referred frequently to their motivations for reading the news, and thus we leaned on existing scales to measure news-specific uses and gratifications in a survey form.

Other survey items we arrived at more inductively, and used a pilot survey ($N = 110$) to adjust final item selection. For example, our items to measure social engagement with news (e.g. "How often do you discuss the news with others?", "I have people I feel comfortable discussing the news with") were primarily based on the interviews directly rather than taken from literature. In these cases, we visualized a heatmap of sub-item correlations and plotted the factor loadings for the pilot survey results, which were used to trim down and divide items as appropriate.

Another key aspect of our survey is how we measure the desired outcome: *information wellbeing*. We consider information wellbeing to be the joint state where people are normatively informed about the news, while being able to limit news-induced stress and anxiety. We therefore construct two primary survey outcome variables: *news knowledge* and *news anxiety*.

To measure *news knowledge*, we rely on an approach often used in the social sciences where people are asked to distinguish between true news events and plausible but false news events. We use an approach most similar to Angelucci and Prat [1], where each week we select ten true news stories and ten false news stories. Survey participants are then asked, for each story, whether the

story “definitely happened,” “probably did happen”, “probably did not happen”, or “definitely did not happen.” The scores are then added up (positive scale for true news events, negative scale for false news events), such that each participant receives a score of up to eighty out of eighty. In the analysis, we consider a score ≥ 60 to be a well-informed citizen: this score corresponds to someone who is, on average, correct but not confident about every guess.

To measure *news anxiety*, we adapt a previous measure for *political anxiety* to the news domain [21]. Informed by theory and our formative interviews, we use the same core question (“On a scale of 1–10, how much anxiety does each of the following give you?”) and enumerate items that relate to news anxiety as identified by our participants and the related literature. We pretested this measure on Prolific ($N = 100$) to compare the measure to other existing news-related scales, including *political anxiety*, *news overload*, *news avoidance*, and *problematic news consumption*. The *news anxiety* scale was internally consistent (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.9$) and at least somewhat correlated to *news overload* ($r = 0.51$), *news avoidance* ($r = 0.22$), and *problematic news consumption* ($r = 0.54$). The measure was strongly correlated to *political anxiety* ($r = 0.78$), which is expected given they follow the same format, but we felt the *news anxiety* measure better captured the affective experiences raised by our participant interviews.

2.2.2 Survey Deployment. Following the development of the survey, we deployed the survey to $N=828$ participants. While the majority of the survey is exploratory, we pre-registered a hypothesis to detect a small correlation between *news knowledge* and *news anxiety*. We conducted a power analysis to be able to detect a pearson correlation as small as $r=0.1$ with 80% power, yielding a minimum sample size of $N=782$. Assuming a drop out rate of 5% (due to failed attention check or other error), we proceed with a target sample size of $N=824$ participants. An additional variable to consider in our study is the changing news cycle: events change on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. Therefore, to normalize somewhat across different news cycles, we collect survey responses over the course of four weeks (206 responses each week). We update the relevant news items from one week to the next, such that they always represent top events from the past week.

3 Information Wellbeing Attributes

From the qualitative interviews, we identify four recurring dimensions of high information wellbeing: socially oriented news engagement, personal coping strategies, active investigation of information, and stable personal dispositions.

Many participants engaged with news in socially oriented ways, treating informedness as a shared and relational practice rather than an individual responsibility. For example, P13 rarely sought out news directly, instead encountering it through conversations with her husband and son, while P3 described how news circulated through a close-knit family call/group-chat where articles were routinely shared and discussed. These practices helped participants regulate the emotional tone of news consumption, as they emphasized respectful conversation, knowing when to de-escalate, and selectively engaging with people who supported calm and meaningful discussion.

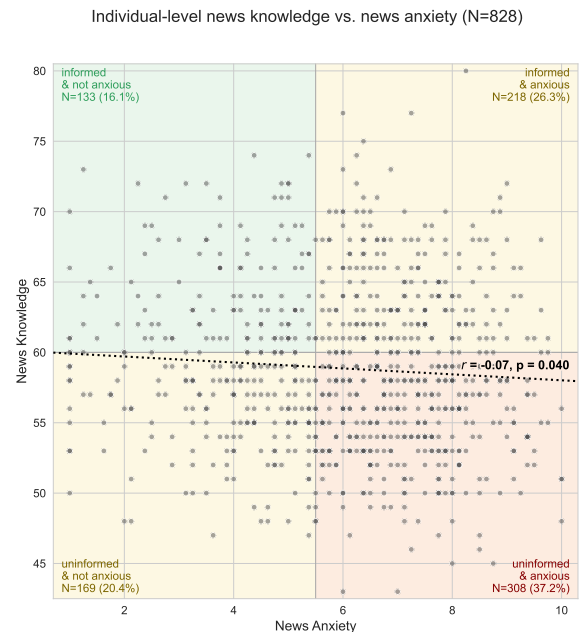


Figure 1: Figure shows the relationship between *news knowledge* (y-axis) and *news anxiety* (x-axis). The figure is divided into four quadrants, using a cutoff for *news knowledge* that corresponds to ‘accurate but not confident’ about every answer, and the midpoint for *news anxiety*. Overall, the most populated quadrant is *low information wellbeing* (bottom right), followed by *informed but anxious* (26.3%), then *disengaged* (bottom left), and finally *high information wellbeing* (top left).

Some participants relied on personal coping strategies to limit the emotional impact of news, especially during periods of heightened stress. Rather than disengaging entirely, participants actively calibrated how, when, and how deeply they engaged with information. For example, P14 described how she would limit her engagement depth to issues that felt too negative, unable to act on, and personally less consequential. Similarly, P5 continued to follow major local and global events but managed emotional strain by skipping distressing content, reducing time spent on highly distracting platforms, and stepping away through offline routines such as religious community involvement.

Participants often engaged with news in active ways, which helped them feel a greater sense of agency over current events. For instance, P4 described keeping small note cards as a personal repository for processing news, using them to record names, claims, or events she encountered and later verify their sources, compare accounts, and occasionally watch press conferences firsthand. Similarly, P11 described intentionally researching issues that directly affected his life—such as immigration enforcement in his city—which helped reduce uncertainty. Across participants, this active engagement often involved seeking context, following stories over time, and attending to the human stakes behind abstract events.

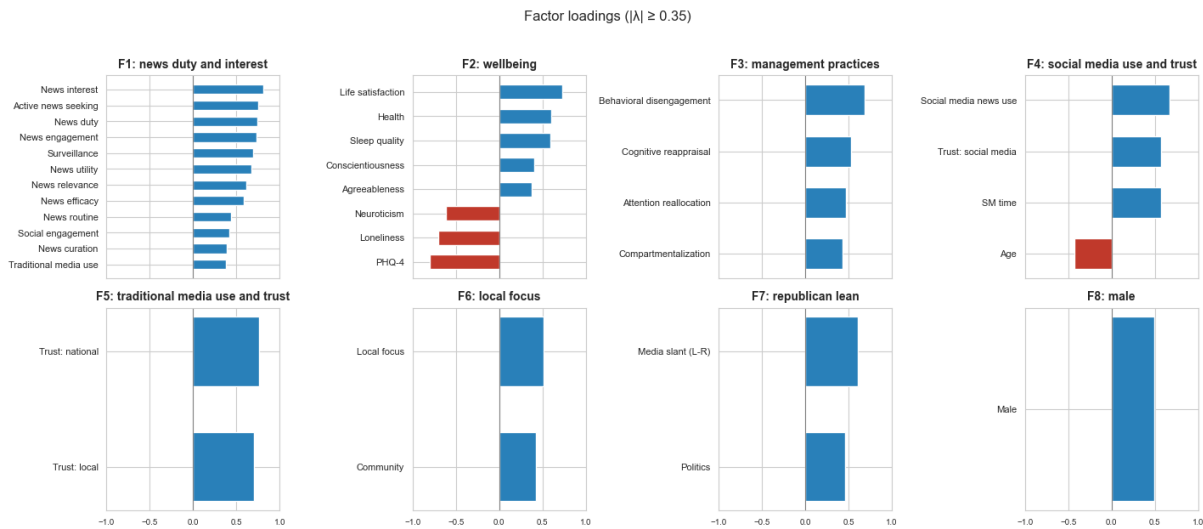


Figure 2: Figure shows the main loadings (λ) for each of the eight factors identified by the exploratory factor analysis

Finally, participants' information wellbeing were also shaped by personal characteristics that interacted with their practices of news engagement. P9 described experiencing little emotional impact from news, attributing this to a stable personality trait rather than deliberate regulation. While he observed others becoming emotionally overwhelmed, he tended to remain detached, which allowed him to stay informed through curated headline feeds without distress. In contrast, P6 reported moments of emotional activation when engaging with political news, but described a strong capacity for psychological flexibility—seeking out counterarguments, and revising his views when presented with new evidence.

4 Survey Results

To analyze the survey data, we first evaluate whether there is any population-level tradeoff between news knowledge and news anxiety, then conduct an exploratory factor analysis to understand how latent variables correlate with news anxiety and news knowledge.

4.1 Correlation between news knowledge and news anxiety

RQ1 seeks to understand whether people with higher news knowledge also have higher news anxiety. In other words, is there any indication that knowing more about the news comes at the cost of being more anxious? We calculate the pearson correlation between news knowledge and news anxiety. Across the four waves of the experiment, we find a very weak negative correlation between news knowledge and news anxiety ($r = -0.07[-0.14, -0.002]$, $p = 0.04$). Contrary to our expectations, people who have higher news knowledge have marginally lower news anxiety than the average.

Given the weak correlation between *news knowledge* and *news anxiety*, we next consider them as distinct dimensions that jointly characterize people's experiences with news. We define four quadrants, shown in Figure 1, using the cutoffs defined in Section 2.2.1. As a reminder, these normative quadrants consider someone to

have low *news anxiety* if their average response is moderate or lower, and high *news knowledge* if they, on average, answer every question correctly but not confidently. Using these cutoffs, 37.2% of respondents ($N=308$) had low information wellbeing, 26.3% were informed but anxious ($N=218$), 20.4% were disengaged ($N=169$), and only 16.1% had high information wellbeing ($N=133$).

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Based on our qualitative insights, we collected many variables in the survey, including personality types, demographics, general wellbeing indicators, media environment, attitudes, and practices. Some of these variables are closely correlated with each other, predict news knowledge and news anxiety similarly, and likely come down to the same latent construct. For example, news interest, a perceived duty to follow the news, and perceiving the news as useful to one's daily life are all closely correlated. To identify the latent factors that explain why certain variables tend to co-occur, we run an exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

The exploratory factor analysis identified eight factors, which we label as *news duty and interest*, *wellbeing*, *news management practices*, *social media use and trust*, *traditional media use and trust*, *local focus*, *republican lean*, *male* (See Figure 2).

As a final step, we correlate each latent factor to the news knowledge and news anxiety dimensions, as depicted in Figure 3. People who score highly on the *wellbeing* and *male* factors have lower news anxiety, and those who undertake *news management practices* tend to have higher news anxiety. Having high *news duty and interest* and high *traditional media use and trust* is correlated with both high news knowledge and news anxiety. People who have more of a *local focus* and higher *social media use and trust* tend to have lower news knowledge and higher news anxiety. Finally, individuals scoring higher on the *republican lean* factor show lower news knowledge and lower news anxiety.

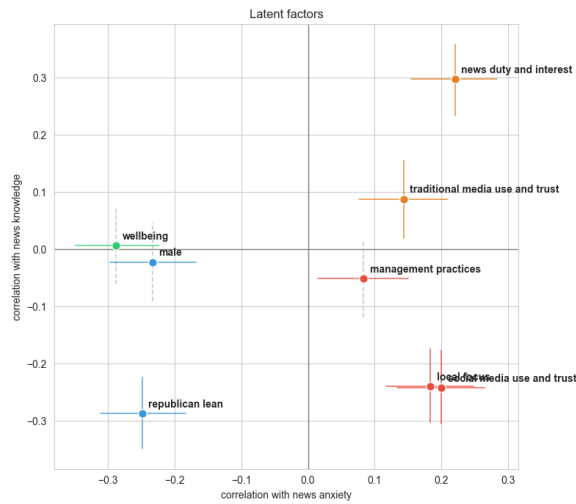


Figure 3: Each of the eight factors identified by the exploratory factor analysis, correlated with news knowledge (y-axis) and news anxiety (x-axis).

5 Discussion

In this work, we seek to understand how people might achieve *information wellbeing*: the state of being both well-informed about current affairs, and feeling minimal news-related anxiety. We argue neither high *news knowledge* nor low *news anxiety* is enough alone. Individuals who are informed but chronically stressed, or calm but uninformed, both have an unhealthy relationship with the news.

This conceptualization necessitates some simplification. First, being ‘informed’ is inherently contextual: our news knowledge measure captures awareness of the week’s top national and international stories, and would miss people who are deeply informed about local or topic-specific news. Experiencing news-related distress may also serve a pragmatic purpose, as people who learn about an emergency situation must experience enough anxiety to seek shelter, and anxiety about current affairs may lead people to be more politically engaged [13]. Nonetheless, we maintain that there is a minimum level of informedness that is desirable, and that this informedness ideally ought not to take a long-term emotional toll.

The first novel finding we identify is that, contrary to our expectations, there is no population-level tradeoff between news knowledge and news anxiety. Instead, we found a very weak negative correlation between news knowledge and news anxiety, suggesting that those who have higher news knowledge have slightly lower news anxiety. The positive interpretation of this finding is that one can be informed without also being anxious.

The largest quadrant of people surveyed have low news knowledge and high news anxiety (N=308, 37.2%). Only about one-sixth of people meet our definition of having high *information wellbeing* (N=133, 16.1%), suggesting that most people do not have a sustainable relationship with news media. Additionally, more than half of participants (N=526, 63.5%) have average news anxiety that is moderate or worse. Overall, breaking our participants into quadrants

elucidates the degree to which maintaining a healthy relationship to news media is challenging. Importantly, our interviews suggest that high information wellbeing is not simply a matter of *how much news people consume*. Participants who met our criteria remained highly engaged with current affairs, but described a range of *ways of engaging with news*, including actively investigating claims, calibrating when and how deeply they engaged with distressing stories, and relying on trusted social relationships to process information.

The exploratory factor analysis suggests other variables that may explain where people sit on these quadrants. Unsurprisingly, the *wellbeing* factor correlates only to news anxiety: people with generally higher wellbeing feel less news anxiety. One single-item factor (*male*) is also associated with lower news anxiety, which aligns with the scientific consensus that women have a higher tendency towards anxiety disorders than men [9]. Perhaps counter-intuitively, news management practices, such as deleting social media applications, correlate with higher news anxiety. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this work, we cannot know whether news management practices cause higher news anxiety or — more likely — whether people who already have high news anxiety are more likely to adopt these practices. For example, the factors *news duty and interest* and *traditional media use and trust* were strongly correlated with both high news knowledge and high news anxiety. Prior work identified that those with lower perceived news duty tend to be more news avoidant, citing that the emotional toll of following the news overshadows their news duty [2, 19]. Our quadrants track this empirically: those with a high news duty stay more informed, yes — but at the cost of higher anxiety.

We find that young people who use and trust social media more have overall lower information wellbeing. Past work found that young people have a particularly hard time navigating online information, and feel a lack of agency over their information consumption [6, 7]. Conversely, this finding also suggests that those with the highest *information wellbeing* are those who spend less time on social media, have less trust in social media, and are generally older. In all, it is concerning that those with the least sustainable relationships to news and information consumption are the next generation; and those who use the most technologies. This finding may suggest that the next generation is not being given the tools to adequately manage their relationship to news and information.

Our findings do not offer a single silver bullet for staying informed with no anxiety. Only about one in six participants had high information wellbeing, and our survey did not surface simple practices associated with higher news knowledge that did not also entail higher news anxiety. We do find, however, that improving one’s wellbeing more generally may also have positive knock-on effects on news anxiety. Our interviews point in the same direction: participants with high information wellbeing combined several practices, including discussing news with others, actively investigating stories, and calibrating when and how deeply they engaged with the news. Together, these results suggest that information wellbeing depends less on how *much* news people consume than on *how* they engage with it, and that interventions should support sustainable engagement — for example by supporting reflection, contextualization, social discussion, and healthy boundaries around news consumption.

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A Appendix

Table 1: News anxiety Scale Items. Respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 (No anxiety at all) to 10 (A great deal of anxiety).

Survey Item
Uncertainty about what may happen in the future based on the news
The negativity or disturbing nature of events covered in the news
Conflicting or contradictory information across news sources
Not being sufficiently informed about important issues or current events
Missing important news or not keeping up with current events
Not being sure which news is important or trustworthy
Other people being misinformed or misled by the news
Events in the news having direct negative consequences for you or people you care about