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At the Crossroads of Fear, Confusion and Hope. COVID-19 News as the Motivator of Affective News Usage and Sense-Making Practices

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ABSTRACT


This study explores Finnish media users' emotional and affective experiences of being exposed to news and communication regarding COVID-19 during the pandemic. To identify their emotions and subsequent affective news usage and sense-making practices, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews, which we analysed qualitatively using thematic categorisation. The interview data revealed five most common emotions – fear, confusion, frustration, anger, and hope – and connections between these emotions and various affective news usage practices. Ten distinct affective practices also emerged, among them a thirst for up-to-date knowledge, self-protection from news and conflicting opinions, adaptation to the new everyday life, resistance to restrictions and people with clashing opinions, and acting responsibly for the common good. We then analysed how the experienced emotions and affective practices influenced the trust in and willingness to engage with mainstream media during the pandemic. When the news coverage engendered strong affective reactions, interviewees felt compelled to criticise the mainstream news, especially if their trust in traditional news media was already low before the pandemic. Accordingly, if they found the news coverage overwhelming and intimidating, they sought counter-information for an alternative interpretation of the experience of disruption to everyday life.


KEYWORDS

Emotions; affective practice; news exposure; media users; COVID-19; engagement; trust

Introduction

The need for topical and trustworthy information and news increases during sudden and unexpected events, such as health crises. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the demand for real-time information and news was urgent because the extent and severity of the health effects of the virus were unknown. During the outbreak, professional journalists played an important role in disseminating up-to-date information and helping people protect themselves (see Klemm, Das, and Hartmann 2019). In a previous study, people based their interpretations of an evolving situation

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on the information and frames that professional news media created, and then they acted according to them (Van der Meer et al. 2017). Despite the central role of news media, the contemporary hybrid media system enables numerous other actors to produce information in ways that suit their own goals (Carlson and Lewis 2019; Chadwick 2017). This was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic as rumours, stigmas and conspiracy theories became globally widespread and millions of people were exposed to deceptive material, especially on social media (e.g., Islam et al. 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) described the situation as an infodemic – an overabundance of information that made it difficult for people to distinguish between trustworthy and unreliable sources.

To examine how Finnish media users coped with the sudden, unexpected situation in the crossfire of overabundant and conflicting information, we analyse their emotional experience of exposure to COVID-19 news and communication. News exposure refers here to the extent to which individuals come into contact with news content (Hermida 2016). Besides the concept of *news exposure*, key threads of our analysis include *news fatigue*, referring to anxiety when feeling that the exposure to news is becoming too overwhelming (Fitzpatrick 2022; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017), and *news avoidance* being intentional behaviour, distancing oneself from news exposure (Chan, Lee, and Chen 2024; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). In this article, these concepts are approached as distinct phases of prolonged engagement with news and information during the sustained state of emergency caused by the pandemic.

Finland offers an interesting context for this research owing to the high general trust in the professional news reporting on COVID-19 in the country (Jallinoja and Väliverronen 2021). Finland was “the country with the highest levels of overall trust” (69%) at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and is still holding the highest score among 47 markets on six continents (Newman 2024, 10–11). Reunanen (2022a: 77) has suggested that “in Finland increasingly polarized debates (over COVID-19 restrictions, and EU policy) may have increased the majority’s trust in experts, institutions, and indeed the news media”. At the same time, Finns criticised the conflicting communication about the situation and neglect of citizens’ opinions in the COVID-19 news (Mäkinen 2023; see also Hakala and Ruggiero, 2022). Although Finns mainly found the communication comprehensible, disagreement between the authorities showed a lack of interaction and cooperation, which engendered suspicion and distrust in the official information (Stenvall et al. 2022). According to a recent audience survey, trust in the COVID-19 news coverage among Finns was divided by age and level of education. Furthermore, trust was the lowest in the 25–34 age group, where one-third of respondents did not trust the COVID-19 news and communication (Grönlund et al. 2022). Despite these sceptical voices, the COVID-19 virus has had a consequential effect also in Finland, resulting in over 12,290 deaths by December 2024 (THL 2024). Worldwide, COVID-19 has emerged as the most significant global health crisis since the influenza pandemic of 1918 (Casella et al. 2023), resulting in more than 7 million reported deaths (WHO 2024).

Although there has been extensive research into the use of COVID-19 news, audiences’ affective practices engendered by the news and information concerning the outbreak have received minimal attention (see, however, Eisele et al. 2022). In

this study, we follow Wetherell's conceptualising of affect as affective practice, which "focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do" (Wetherell 2012, 4). Applying the concept as practice, we are allowed to examine the emotional embodied reactions and action that COVID-19 news usage and sense-making produced in media users (see Murru et al. 2018). Affective news can be defined using Papacharissi's (2015, 34) idea of affective news streams, which are "collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments". As Papacharissi (2015) suggests, affective news not just provide an extra layer for storytelling but also for the audiences to find their own place in a developing news case. We thus approach affective news usage and sense-making practices as concrete reactions and action to the news that has engendered certain emotions in a subjective manner. Our study contributes by offering new insights into how the experienced emotions that media users associated with the COVID-19 news affected their news usage and sense-making practices and influenced their public engagement and trust in mainstream media.

Theoretical Framework

In the past decade, the concept of the emotional public sphere has emerged as an alternative to the hegemonic rationalist models (e.g., Papacharissi 2015; Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018). According to the fundamental Habermasian concept, the public sphere is a common space in which informed citizens discuss, argue about, question, and participate in the political life of their community (Habermas 1989). In a functioning democracy, people's use of and trust in the news media is critically important to their ability to participate in public discussions (Stiernstedt 2021). However, one of the many challenges with this conceptualisation is that people often seek information from sources that align with their existing attitudes and beliefs, rather than relying solely on mainstream news media (Strömbäck et al. 2020). This would weaken not only their public engagement but also the democratic order. Research has revealed a linkage between a lack of trust in news media and greater use of non-mainstream information sources (e.g., Beckett and Deuze 2016; Strömbäck et al. 2020).

Scholars have highlighted the emotional aspect of the public sphere, shedding light on the importance of affect and emotions as indicators of social and moral values and as powerful motivators of political mobilisation (Massumi 2015; Nussbaum 2013). Actively participating citizens bring to public discussions not only their beliefs, expectations, and argumentation capabilities but also their legitimate and socially relevant affective concerns (Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emotional aspect that was prominently emphasised throughout the mediatised public sphere was fear (e.g., Ribeiro and Schwarzenegger 2022). During a pandemic, a certain amount of fear is crucial for risk awareness and to motivate individuals and societies to act responsibly. Yet fear can hold a paralysing power which hinders action, or it can be instrumentalised for radical, counterproductive reasons (Wagner and Reifegerste 2022, 20). According to Nussbaum (2018, 1), "fear too often blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope, and impedes constructive

cooperation for a better future". This held true during the COVID-19 pandemic when a strongly divided public discourse unfolded, as we will outline in this paper.

The emotional public sphere can be approached as the emotional substrate of democratic politics – the domain of public emotion in which the activities of the political public sphere are inevitably embedded, whether the emotions are publicly expressed or not (Richards 2018, 2040). As Richards (2018, 2041) pointed out, the direct source of these emotions is not political; the mobilisation of these emotions around political issues and their influence on individuals as citizens is what constitutes the emotional public sphere. In the context of our study, we believe that emotion-driven activity, such as affective news usage and sense-making practices, reshapes the emotional public sphere and acts as a motivator of public engagement. Some specific types and examples of these kinds of practices can include, for example, acquiring information regularly to cope with the frightening situation, participating in discussions on social media to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the community, and obeying restrictions to prevent the virus from spreading.

Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest in emotional and affective aspects in journalism studies in terms of the news production, text, and audience engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). As journalism and society have changed alongside technological innovations, and everyday life has become profoundly mediated, the emotional dynamics involved in news production and consumption have become increasingly important (Beckett and Deuze 2016). The hybridisation of the media environment and technological affordances have deepened our relationships with information, data, and social media (see Beckett and Deuze 2016). In audience studies, there is still limited knowledge of the qualitative features of audience activities, emotions, and affect (Das and Ytre-Arne 2017; Kolesch and Knoblauch 2019). Many studies have instead relied on statistical analyses of audiences focused on class, gender, age, or lifestyle (Kolesch and Knoblauch 2019). Drawing on this scarcely explored research area in audience studies, we refer to Kolesch's and Knoblauch's (2019, 252–263) concept of audience emotions, which they developed in relation to audiences that are bodily co-present at an event. Although the COVID-19 news audiences were not in each other's immediate presence in the same sense that audiences in a soccer stadium or theatre are, their emotions were directed towards a common focus of attention and simultaneously towards themselves as the audience within the frame of the pandemic. Audience emotions are thus not only a reaction to what is happening but also perform and reflect specific situational complications, communicating an embodied evaluation of them. Audience emotions are material and cultural manifestations which merge the social and individual dimensions of the blurred boundaries between affective dynamics and discrete emotions (Kolesch and Knoblauch 2019). We find audience emotions important because of their social dimension, which is linked to individual experiences of exposure to COVID-19 news.

In this study, we understand emotions, such as anger or fear, as embodying a social and cultural product, which can sometimes be the collective instigator directing energy or engagement (Murru et al. 2018; see also Deleuze [1970] 1988). We are interested in grasping how emotions are perceived to influence an individual's sense of public engagement through news exposure (see Kligler-Vilenchik and Shresthova 2014).

In turn, affect “precedes emotions and drives the intensity with which emotions are felt” (Papacharissi 2015, 15). Affect drives intensity helping us to become aware of certain mind or body states that we connect to certain feelings and emotions (Papacharissi 2015). Through such intensity, affect is expressed *via* affective practices that involve and require activity (Wetherell 2012). In other words, an affective practice is an embodied reaction to a particular stimulus that produces an emotion (Murrut et al. 2018), thereby distinguishing affective practices from affect itself.

News Exposure, News Fatigue and News Avoidance in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Today’s multi-choice media environment enables constant news exposure. Hermida (2016) defines news exposure as the degree to which individuals encounter and engage with news content across various platforms and formats. This includes both traditional media, such as newspapers and television, and digital media, including social media. Hermida emphasizes that news exposure encompasses not only the quantity of news consumed but also the quality and nature of the engagement. This involves factors such as the depth of interaction and the diversity of sources accessed. This definition underscores the multifaceted nature of how people experience news in the digital age.

Digital devices have made news exposure increasingly unintentional and even unconscious, as individuals frequently encounter news while browsing social media or surfing the web (Strauß, Huber, and Gil de Zúñiga 2020). According to Strauß, Huber, and Gil de Zúñiga (2020), such incidental exposure can prompt deeper engagement if the topic is of interest and the news source is trusted. Globally, social media has become the primary point of initial news exposure (Newman et al. 2019). Beyond traditional channels, news also spreads through social recommendation, as family, friends, and colleagues share, discuss, and debate news content within digital networks (Hermida 2016). However, on social media, news exposure varies by platform. On Facebook, it is largely incidental, emerging as a by-product of casual browsing, whereas the platform formerly known as Twitter served as a real-time news hub for many (Hermida 2016; Shearer et al. 2015). Whether individuals engage further depends on their interest in the topic and perception of the content’s relevance (Kümpel 2019).

Thus, news exposure can be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional. This study considers both dimensions, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when news exposure was nearly constant for over two years. Research shows that people increasingly turn to the news in times of crisis (e.g., Casero-Ripollés 2020; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Westlund and Ghersetti 2015). Also, during the pandemic, the urgent need for information led to a significant surge in news consumption, particularly during the initial crisis in 2020 (Newman et al. 2020). Moreover, individuals were unintentionally exposed to COVID-19-related news, as continuous coverage dominated nearly all news and social media channels.

Research suggests that continuous exposure to news and information can lead to feelings of being “overloaded” by excessive information (Nordensen 2008, quotation marks in the original), ultimately reducing active news consumption (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017). This information overload is often associated

with news fatigue, that is “the subjective, self-evaluated feeling of being tired of news consumption” (Song, Jung, and Kim 2017, 1179). During the COVID-19 pandemic, as the constant stream of negative news led to anxiety in some individuals, news fatigue has been described as “a desire to consume less news in an effort to preserve and protect one’s mental health” (Fitzpatrick 2022, 145; Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). Combined with unsatisfactory news experiences, news fatigue has been shown to foster feelings of helplessness and disengagement (Nordensen 2008).

News fatigue has been linked to news avoidance, a behavioural pattern characterized by the intentional and intermittent disengagement from news consumption (Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020). Chan, Lee, and Chen (2024, 358) further clarify that this behaviour differs from general news consumption, as even individuals who regularly follow the news may occasionally choose to avoid it to mitigate mental fatigue. News avoidance became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some individuals deliberately reduced their news consumption to protect their mental well-being (De Bruin et al. 2021). Others adopted coping strategies, such as restricting the number of times they checked the news daily or balancing news consumption with lighter, more uplifting content to manage anxiety (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021). Some individuals found themselves unable to disengage from news consumption, leading to what has been termed “doomscrolling” (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021) – “the compulsive reading of anxiety-inducing online content during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Salisbury 2023, 887).

Drawing upon the theory and literature introduced above, the study answers the following research questions:

RQ1: What emotions and affective practices do Finnish media users associate with COVID-19 news and communication?

RQ2: How do the reflected emotions and affective news usage and sense-making practices influence the media users’ engagement with and trust in mainstream media?

Data and Methods

The data analysed for this study comprise 14 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with Finnish media users between May and August 2022. The interviews consisted of three themes: (1) media use; (2) the development of trust and emotions; and (3) belonging to the local community. We asked the interviewees about their daily news consumption routines, information-gathering practices regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, evaluation of official information and restrictions, trust in mainstream media, and the emotions the COVID-19 news coverage elicited. The questions also covered the interviewees’ social media activity related to the pandemic.

Most interviewees were chosen from the Oulu region of northern Finland, as this region comprises a rich local media ecosystem with traditional news outlets and new publications that have reshaped the local media landscape (Grönlund et al. 2022). The major traditional media outlets in the region include Kaleva (commercial news media) and YLE Oulu (the local newsroom of Finland’s national broadcaster). In recent years, several newcomers from outside the traditional media have appeared in the local media ecosystem in Oulu. Publications, such as OYS Plus (online media outlet for Oulu University Hospital), Mun Oulu (online media outlet for the city of Oulu) and

MustRead Oulu (start-up news outlet), have enriched the selection of news for the region's inhabitants. At the time of data collection, Oulu residents also had several local information-sharing and discussion Facebook groups, a few of which were dedicated to critical views of the COVID-19 topic. We thus presumed that this rich media ecosystem could reveal various approaches to engaging with the COVID-19 news coverage among local media users.

To recruit participants, we sent emails to numerous people working in academia, media organisations, news outlets and local community centres to spread awareness of the need for voluntary interviewees. Moreover, on Facebook, we sent direct messages to people following special groups of Oulu residents, including those who were sceptical of the official information about COVID-19. Subsequently, more participants were enlisted through the snowball recruitment method by asking interviewees to recommend people who might be interested in participating in the study. Despite the sensitive nature of our research topic and difficulties in gaining the trust of unknown people, we successfully managed to gather a diverse group of interviewees.¹

For the selection criteria, we did not aim to assemble a representative sample of the overall population; rather, we approached individuals with high or low trust in traditional media, especially in COVID-19 news coverage. To better understand participants' experiences of trust, we asked how they experienced the reliability of news and communication during the pandemic. We also asked whether their trust in mainstream media changed after two years of COVID-19 news. The trust criterion aimed to illustrate how certain emotions engender various affective practices among media users and shape their engagement with and trust in news and traditional media. That was also the premise of the qualitative research design. Therefore, although the sample size was small and we cannot draw profound conclusions based on participants' age, gender, or social background, we found it sufficient to qualitatively describe the emotional experiences that news usage engendered in the participants. The relatively small sample did not prevent us from unveiling how certain experiences with news can produce different emotional reactions among trusting and non-trusting participants, especially as the disparity in their attitudes regarding trust was apparent.

Ten interviews were held face-to-face, for example, in a meeting room at the local library, at the interviewee's home or office, or in the interviewer's hotel room. The interviewing conditions in each case were quiet, peaceful, and confidential. The remaining four interviews were conducted using the Teams communication platform. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish. Only the quoted excerpts for this publication were translated to English by the researchers. The interviewees included eight women, five men and one person who chose not to be identified by gender. The youngest participant was 29 and the oldest was 74. The interviews lasted 30–120 min. They were held when the strongest restrictions had been loosened, but the interviewees still remembered how it felt to live their everyday lives under these exceptional circumstances.

The interview data were transcribed and analysed via thematic categorisation (Gibbs 2018). Using the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, the data coding proceeded as follows. First, we coded the sentences in which interviewees spoke explicitly about their emotions, such as how they felt when they read news or were provided information about the COVID-19 pandemic. We also coded those parts in which interviewees described their emotions implicitly, for example, when depicting how

successfully they felt the authorities were at disseminating information. In addition to the universal emotional categories of happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust, we looked for more complex feelings, such as anxiety, boredom, confusion, frustration, and relief, to obtain a broad variation of the nuances of emotions (see e.g., Cowen and Keltner 2017). After the first round of coding, we grouped similar expressions of emotion, such as fear, anxiety and panic, or confusion, uncertainty, and contingency. Atlas.ti showed the code distribution of emotions in the interviews.

We examined the most frequently appearing emotions and categorised them into five groups: (1) fear, (2) confusion, (3) frustration, (4) anger and (5) hope. Then we examined the affective news usage practices that manifested these emotions – namely, the interviewees’ reported actions and attitudes that arose from their emotional intensities. The affective practices were identified through another round of coding focused on how participants described their news usage practices related to the emotions that arose in the first round. We focused on those affective practices which were linked to the main emotions. The emotions and affective practices identified are illustrated in Table 1. Finally, we scrutinised the emotions that engendered certain affective news usage and sense-making practices and how these observations aligned with participants’ descriptions of their trust in and engagement with mainstream media and official information about the pandemic.

Findings

We now analyse the five groups of emotions in more detail and scrutinise the affective news usage and sense-making practices the interviewees described employing after experiencing certain emotions. In each subsection, we first focus on the emotion and then on the affective practices related to the perceived emotion. As the five most common emotions were not equally distributed among the participants, we strive to examine the nuances in what follows in this section. Some affective practices appeared in parallel with several emotions, but we examine them with the emotions that had the most substance in the interviewees’ accounts.

Emotion: Fear

The most apparent emotion mentioned in the interview data was fear, which also contained accounts of concern, anxiety, and panic. Fear was universally felt across

Table 1. Main groups of emotions and affective practices.

Emotions	Affective practices
Fear (concern, anxiety, panic)	Thirst for knowledge Self-protection: news avoidance
Confusion (uncertainty, contingency)	Need to understand Criticism
Frustration (discontent, disappointment, disregard)	Self-protection: news avoidance, blocking or attacking different-minded people
Anger (annoyance, provocation, injustice)	Adaptation Resistance Social cohesion
Hope	Responsibility Care

the sample, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, for one's own, loved ones' and close relatives' health (cf. Ribeiro and Schwarzenegger 2022). The interviewees described feeling frightened owing to the rapid spread of the virus, uncertainty about the severity of a COVID-19 infection and a lack of clarity on how the situation would develop. Even before the virus reached Europe and Finland specifically, the news from China was portrayed as scary: "Those initial news stories from China and Wuhan were tremendously frightening" (Interviewee10 [I10]). Although all participants reported having been scared at some point in the pandemic, fear was especially present in the accounts of those interviewees who had senior relatives to worry about. For example, one interviewee (I3) described the local news about the spread of the virus as evoking fear because it made the impact of the pandemic on daily life more concrete as one could not visit their grandparents or parents to protect them.

Over time, the experience of fear underwent temporal changes. The more news there was about the severity of the virus, particularly for the highest risk groups, the better able participants were to evaluate the situation for their own and loved ones' sakes. For example, one interviewee assessed the personal risk of contracting the virus, and as a healthy man, he concluded that he did not personally have to be scared. Afterwards, he started to react more sceptically towards COVID-19 news. The older interviewees stated that their fear started to quell after reading news that the first doses of the vaccine had been given. Fear was also reportedly eased when one contracted the virus and survived despite the intimidating news.

According to both those who were generally trusting of mainstream media and those who were not, the news reporting exaggerated the severity of the disease. As one interviewee described, "At first, they [journalists] inflated the interviews of ordinary people who said that COVID-19 has taken all their vitality and energy and they have spent one year in bed and all" (I8). Tracing whether these emotions stemmed from the news or the pandemic itself often proved to be a challenging endeavour, as I7 pondered:

Of course, the whole situation has been frightening and caused anxiety, and if you have kids you start to worry how it impacts the family and the whole life, but I cannot say whether the fear and worries originated from the news or the situation as a whole. I have experienced the outcome of the media being relatively neutral. (I7)

However, the longer the uncertain situation continued, the more fear started to grow into anxiety because of the media's 24/7 coverage. This was the case especially among those with more scepticism towards the news. For example, one of the least trustful participants described feeling that the mainstream news coverage was "frightening the audience on purpose" (I1).

In terms of affective practices regarding news usage and sense-making, fear reportedly created a *thirst for knowledge*, especially at the beginning of the outbreak. Despite the participants' differences in age, gender, or how trustful they were of mainstream media, they described their thirst for knowledge as fear compelling them to search for all kinds of information. The topics varied from the cause of the disease, infection rates and real-time restrictions and measures to determining how to adjust to the new situation in their personal lives. The common denominator in the thirst for knowledge was seeking accurate information, facts, and statistics as a comforting

or facilitating factor to be capable of reacting to the frightening changes in everyday life.

Over time, experiences of anxiety and fear became connected to the affective practice of consuming less news to protect one's mental health – an expression of *news fatigue* (Fitzpatrick 2022, 145). News fatigue induced *self-protection via conscious and active news avoidance* (see Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020; Spyridou, Danezis, and Cyprus University of Technology 2022), which can be seen as the active choice of public non-engagement. All participants experienced news fatigue, but the ways it manifested varied. For example, some interviewees described how their experiences led them to avoid news altogether, whereas some especially avoided news from the official authorities and traditional media, while some started to search for information from alternative and contradictory sources. The reported news avoidance was stronger if the participant felt that mainstream news sources were exaggerating the severity of the virus and frightening the audience on purpose. For example, one interviewee described deciding to avoid news because it was having a negative effect on his mental health:

For three months, I tried to watch the news, but then I realised that I was going crazy... The more you read the news, the more you began to feel brainwashed. The ruckus was so, so loud, all about corona and that you will die from it. I was so exhausted that I switched off the television when I realised that it had an effect on me. And that was it. (I1)

Emotion: Confusion

Confusion, as manifested in the interviewees' responses, consisted of uncertainty about the pandemic and suspicion of the official authorities. Interviewees described feeling confused because of the perceived vagueness, incoherence and inconsistency of the official information and the complicated and conflicting news that followed. For example, I13 indicated that contradictory news led her to suspect that the situation was "a political game in which the citizens were required to read between the lines to be able to understand what is really going on in the country". However, the participants did not experience confusion equally. Conflicting and contradictory news seemed to cause greater confusion among those who were generally trustful of mainstream news media than those who were mistrustful. Participants with low trust were more confident in their self-efficacy to retrieve information from various sources, but participants with high trust felt that their general trust was at stake because they no longer knew whom to believe:

In such a situation, a common man could really flip. Let's take, for example, the mask case... Even the experts changed their minds on them every now and then: "the masks are beneficial, they are not, where can they be supplied", and so on... And then the crowd of experts extends and there are people from various fields giving their advice, and common people start to freak out because they feel that nothing is correct anymore. (I12)

For those participants who acknowledged their trust in the news media, confusion incited the affective practice of *needing to understand the work of journalists and crisis communication personnel* who were producing new information under difficult circumstances. They also showed empathy for the authorities facing criticism, as the

following quotation illustrates: “I assume that controversial information occurred partly from disagreement, the complex psychological interaction between people, the dominance and political dissonances of decision-makers and authorities, but it is understandable because it is human” (I13). Among those who expressed trust in official information, controversial and conflicting ways of reacting to the crisis also evoked *a need to understand those with opposite opinions*:

I wonder whether I should actively break my filter bubble and do some googling to find the sites that promote controversial worldviews. That would give me a chance to recognise and understand how the things are discussed on the other side. (I3)

However, for those whose trust in the official information and authorities was lower, confusion led to the affective practice of *criticising officials and mainstream media*. Participants found them to be “delivering information uncritically” and criticised them for “a lack of a neutral and dialogical conversation on the risks of the coronavirus and the necessity of measures such as lockdowns, social distancing and wearing masks” (I1). Critics also argued that the mainstream media should have covered the opposite or alternative approaches which gave a different perspective and, they claimed, were also based on science and part of science’s internal debates.

Emotion: Frustration

During the second wave of the pandemic in Finland in late 2020 and early 2021, fear and confusion started to turn into frustration, which emerged as discontent, disappointment, and disregard for what interviewees described as endless exposure to news about COVID-19. The interviewees remarked that Finland’s public service media company Yle promoted its 24/7 coverage of COVID-19, and they suggested regulating exposure to the news: “To maintain a sense of proportion, it is recommended to keep one’s head clear and stay away from the headlines. One can go crazy if there is nothing more than the corona [virus] or the Ukrainian war”, said I5. Participants also described experiencing frustration and discontent with the news on those whose views on restrictions and vaccination differed from their own. Interviewees with low trust found official information biased and misleading, whereas participants with higher trust perceived pseudo-science and some social media discussions as disinformation:

Well, I must admit that I find rather frustrating those people who seem to know better than the news coverage how things are nationally and worldwide, as we have relatively reliable media in Finland, after all... and, still, they themselves know better that they do not need vaccination or their children do not need... But I have coped with it. (I7)

Regarding affective practices adopted due to frustration, interviewees described their frustration and discontent with the never-ending COVID-19 news coverage and the long-lasting societal state of emergency leading them to *self-protection from disagreement* and to defend their own worldview by *attacking the counterparty*, for example, in social media discussions. On one hand, interviewees described these affective practices as occasional arguments on social media with people maintaining the opposite position towards vaccines or other issues; on the other hand, they

realised that for their own sake, it was better to let these people be and turn to those with similar opinions. Protecting oneself was apparent in blocking different-minded friends on social media but also in real life. However, over time, frustration began to turn into *adaptation* to “the new normal” conveyed by the news as the news media gradually diminished covering every single detail related to the pandemic. A clear turning point was Russia’s attack on Ukraine as, in a flash, the news was filled with a completely different agenda, creating the impression that there was no need to be worried about COVID-19 anymore:

Especially now, when this Ukrainian war began, I must say that I have been following the corona news only with half an eye... And if there is no news, one is prone to believe that there are no worries, all the concerns have been wiped out and there is nothing left other than a tiny, tiny common cold. (I13)

Emotion: Anger

The fourth group of emotions, labelled anger, consisted of annoyance, provocation, and injustice. Interviewees described feeling angry due to news, opinions or behaviours that differed from their own and that appeared to them as irresponsible or careless. For example, news on anti-vaccine demonstrators and so-called corona denialists provoked irritation and annoyance in most interviewees, as did “reading news on people who did not seem to care about others’ health and well-being” (I3). In addition, interviewees with low trust in mainstream media reported having felt anger when reading news, because they perceived the news coverage as “propagandist” and “misleading”.

The interviewees associated anger with either the affective practice of *resistance* or a need for *social cohesion*. As acts of resistance, some had blocked friends on social media for their differing opinions as they found it challenging to engage with their contradictory comments. The need for social cohesion with like-minded people, in turn, was expressed especially among those whose opinions differed from the mainstream, as they felt they had been left alone with their marginal views.

For harmony and perseverance, it has been important to find like-minded people abroad and in Finland, because for a human being, it is not good to stay in resistance alone. It has raised many positive emotions that there are people who agree on some questions. (I2)

Like-minded people found each other on Telegram, for example, where they established communities for social cohesion and communication. All the interviewees perceived communality as important because, during the outbreak, interactions and face-to-face encounters were suddenly fractured everywhere (see Uusiautti, Hyvärinen, and Björkman 2024). WhatsApp, Telegram, and other group chats were perceived as beneficial because they offered “a safe place to share feelings and open up with congenial people” (I8).

Emotion: Hope

Despite the prominence of negative emotions, there were also positive emotions, foremost among which were hope, content, and relief. Participants who reported content experienced satisfaction especially when they found the media acting as

responsibly and accurately as possible in their crisis coverage, such as by avoiding clickbait headlines. The hope emerging from media outlets' responsible acts was experienced primarily by those who reported high trust in mainstream media. Positive emotions were related to optimistic news that, for example, gave hope for better times and a return to normal life due to the development of the vaccine, decreasing numbers of contractions and hospitalised patients, and the diluting effects of the virus. Especially news concerning people abandoning mask wearing and the potential to travel again made the interviewees believe that "there would be light at the end of the tunnel" (I14). News on milder variants of the virus also offered a glimmer of hope:

Maybe, when you are aware that there will always be new variants, that it is what it is, then you think that, great, it is a good thing that there is again another variant and it is discovered to not have really bad effects anymore, and you realise that we will be closer to [the situation] that it will become a common cold, not a life-threatening thing anymore. (I3)

At the same time, those who had lost their trust in mainstream media and the state administration felt hopeful when they read news about acts of resistance against the authorities and restrictions, such as dock workers' strikes in Italy. Among those participants with low trust, hope was thus also related to news offering a promise of returning to normal life and news on citizens "taking power back" by participating in demonstrations and other acts of resistance against the establishment.

Regarding affective practices, hope among the more trustful participants was perceived as engendering goodwill and benevolence, such as *caring for others* and *acting responsibly* for the common good. Participants reported wanting to follow the local news and health authorities' advice to be capable of helping aged parents get vaccinated at the right time. Acting responsibly meant "avoiding visits to grandparents because of a high risk to the grandparents' health" (I3), "organising events safely" (I10) and "teaching remotely in case of being exposed to the virus" (I4). These affective practices emerged especially among those who trusted official information and took restrictions seriously.

Conclusions

In this article, we have examined qualitatively the emotions that Finnish media users experienced while being exposed to COVID-19 news coverage. This included studying the affective news usage and sense-making practices that the participants perceived these emotions engendered. The qualitative research design allowed us to identify the role of participants' emotions in terms of public engagement with and trust in the news – that is, to focus on the affective implications of emotions in news exposure (see Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018). From the interview data, we identified five main groups of emotions: fear, confusion, frustration, anger, and hope. Fear evoked by the news was associated with the affective practices of thirst for knowledge and self-protection, such as news avoidance. Confusion was associated, for example, with a need to understand the journalists and health officials who had to deliver up-to-date information in this difficult situation but also with criticism of the reporting in

mainstream media and restrictions that seemed irrelevant and unjust to many. Frustration was connected to self-protection, such as blocking different-minded people, especially on social media, and adaptation to the significantly altered daily life. Anger was connected to resistance and social cohesion especially among those whose trust had already been weakened, and hope was connected to responsibility and care among those who wanted to maintain a positive spirit despite the austerity of the news. These affective news usage and sense-making practices can be seen as emotion-driven activities aimed at and reshaping the emotional public sphere. By recognising these practices, we have tried to capture the nature and function of affective experiences to discuss how they direct individuals' engagement with the public space (Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018).

The key themes of our analysis – news exposure, news fatigue, and news avoidance (Chan, Lee, and Chen 2024; Fitzpatrick 2022; Hermida 2016; Song, Jung, and Kim 2017; Toff and Kalogeropoulos 2020) – emerged distinctly from the data. Consistent with prior research (Casero-Ripollés 2020; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Westlund and Ghersetti 2015), our findings illustrate how the demand for information surged during the crisis, prompting both conscious and unconscious, as well as intentional and unintentional, news consumption. Exposure to COVID-19 news was both pervasive and sustained over a two-year period, resulting in temporary negative responses – such as fear, concern, and anxiety – all of which were reported by participants at various stages. In all cases, prolonged news exposure was perceived to have adversely affected participants' well-being, prompting them to adopt various coping strategies. Our interview data indicate that as the media's 24/7 coverage persisted, initial news exposure gradually gave way to news fatigue – a phenomenon reported by all participants and in previous research (Fitzpatrick 2022, 145; also, Skovsgaard and Andersen 2020). While the specific manifestations of fatigue varied, most participants recognized the need to moderate their news consumption. For some, this resulted in complete news avoidance; others became more selective, choosing news sources based on their perceptions of how mainstream media portrayed the severity of the pandemic. In light of our study, within the context of COVID-19, news avoidance also encompassed the avoidance of news produced from specific perspectives and by specific media, such as mainstream news media. Notably, heightened perceptions of fear reduced participants' willingness to engage with news and eroded trust in mainstream media. When the constant exposure to fear-inducing content became overwhelming, some participants sought counter-information to ease their anxiety. This fear evoked divergent affective practices: while some broadened their news intake across multiple sources, others avoided traditional media altogether, turning instead to alternative narratives that downplayed the severity of the virus.

The significance of the study lies in the perception that media users' emotional experiences of being exposed to mainly negative news in times of crisis and uncertainty play a central role in their experience of trust in mainstream media (cf. Massumi 2015; Nussbaum 2013). Even those who reported that their trust in mainstream news was not violated during the outbreak remarked that there was some vagueness in the credibility of the news, such as the very swift changes in instructions and an allegedly heavily one-sided narrative. Critical participants expressed high confidence in their own competence to judge scientific reports on the severity of COVID-19 and

the measures against the spread of the virus (see Reunanen 2022b; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). In line with prior research (e.g., Ribeiro and Schwarzenegger 2022; Wagner and Reifegerste 2022), our study shows that fear-evoking news had the desired outcome to motivate citizens to act responsibly. Nevertheless, our study also indicates that, for part of the audience, the continuous negativity of the news hindered public engagement. It is also worth noting that news that engendered hope, at least to some extent, gave rise to more care and socially responsible practices among the participants. Accordingly, if the experienced hardship of the continuous depressing news turned one segment of the audience towards counter-information, perhaps journalism could do more to encourage positive emotions in crisis communication. For example, the concept of constructive journalism promotes the idea of “journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage” (Bro quoting McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2017, 10).

This study was not without limitations. First, the relatively small sample size restricts us from making general arguments on the perceived emotions and affective practices media users experienced when they were exposed to COVID-19 news. Therefore, it is risky to make further summative statements on emotional uniformity among these disparate participants. The sample size also simplifies the findings regarding the participants’ experienced emotions. A larger sample would likely have offered a broader variance in the rollercoaster and spectrum of emotions that many would associate with a pandemic. Accordingly, our decision to focus on five emotions limited the repertoire of emotional experiences that emerged from the participants’ accounts, such as grief, loneliness, and sadness. In this respect, our study offers a perspective for further research to investigate emotional experiences quantitatively with a larger sample. With our data, we can only propose individual perceptions of these experiences and what kinds of consequences they had for public engagement and trust. Second, as the health crisis lasted so long that people started to treat it as “a new normal”, it was challenging to define whether the affective practices were engendered by the emotions associated with the pandemic news or the pandemic itself. Third, as participants reported emotions they had felt over a year earlier, their accounts were primarily reflections of their experienced emotions about which they reminisced in the interviews. As Kolesch and Knoblauch (2019, 253) noted, audience emotions can exceed the temporal frame of the present by influencing and affecting subsequent events or by evoking a strong and long-lasting impression on one’s memory. Regarding COVID-19 news, audience emotions affected the participants’ news usage and sense-making practices, which also impacted their participation in the public sphere (see Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018).

Note

1. Given the sensitivity and emotionality of topics covered in the study, we refer to the ethical principles of research with human participants composed by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines. Following these guidelines, we assessed that the research composition in this study did not require ethical review (https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2021-01/Ethical_review_in_human_sciences_2020.pdf).

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