Vol.7 Iss.2 2026 Communication & Education Review
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2026.020

Information fatigue and media choice: a study of selection and transition in the digital age

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Abstract:
In a media environment dominated by algorithmic recommendations, the proliferation of new media platforms has profoundly reshaped the media ecosystem, consequently altering user habits. Contrary to common expectations, with the prevalence of such formats as short videos and GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format), audiences are experiencing information fatigue with regard to novel content. This fatigue, in turn, triggers behaviors of media selection and transition, leading users to revert to traditional media content and forms. Grounded in the Information Fatigue Theory, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach of questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews to explore changes in users' media information environments. It analyzes the mechanisms underlying information fatigue from three dimensions: content redundancy, information overload, and ambiguous media needs. Finally, this study discusses the evolving yet constrained nature of audience agency in the new media era. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between information fatigue and media switching frequency, suggesting that negative emotions have become a key driver of media choice in the era of algorithmic recommendations.

Keywords:
Uses and Gratifications, Information Fatigue, Media Selection, Information Avoidance

1 Introduction

With the rise of new media technologies, text-based traditional mass media seem to be replaced by dynamic graphics, short videos, and AI-generated content. Therefore, the news media has to take the initiative to establish official accounts on major platforms to enhance their communication capacity, influence, guidance, and credibility.

However, a noteworthy phenomenon has emerged: a significant portion of internet users are not satisfied with obtaining news information through dynamic graphics or videos. Instead, they actively switch media, and seek out text and image-based content for news consumption, which runs counter to the common perception of internet users. Furthermore, some users' media choices change with shifts in their usage habits or external environmental changes, thus gradually altering their media usage patterns.

The traditional Uses and Gratifications Theory and Zhu Jianhua's Theory of Media Trade-off Needs cannot

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explain this phenomenon. In the current era of algorithmic recommendations, users often switch to other media forms or information sources based on information fatigue, rather than solely for personal need gratification.

This raises several new research questions: What psychological factors drive users to develop a “fatigue aversion” to familiar media or content? Does this signal that users have finally escaped media manipulation and attained true agency? These questions warrant further in-depth exploration.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Uses and Gratifications theory

The Uses and Gratifications theory, systematically proposed by Elihu Katz based on the foundational work of researchers like Herzog, Berelson, and McQuail, explains how individuals' social and psychological attributes influence their use of mass media and the resulting gratifications. It conceptualizes media exposure as a sequential process: “social factors+psychological factors→media expectations→media exposure→need gratification”, forming a basic model of the Uses and Gratifications process.

With the advent of the internet and new media technologies, research on uses and gratifications has increasingly focused on the new media environment. For instance, Zhu Jianhua (2009) proposed the “theory of media trade-off needs,” suggesting that audience choice is a rational decision made after comparing how well new and old media satisfy their comprehensive needs, including cognitive and affective ones. Han Xiaoning and Wang Jun (2014), along with Zhang Han, explored users' functional use of WeChat as a media platform and the corresponding gratifications obtained. Notably, in the algorithm-driven era, where users passively receive a deluge of information, the clear-cut logic of audience needs inherent in the traditional Uses and Gratifications Theory and its extensions has been challenged.

2.2 Information Fatigue theory

Information fatigue represents a deepening of information overload research into cognitive and affective dimensions, with interdisciplinary origins. British psychologist David Lewis (1996) coined the term “Information Fatigue Syndrome”, noting that information overload can lead to symptoms such as impaired attention and diminished analytical ability. Byung-Chul Han highlighted the characteristic of “neuronal dominance”: in the digital age, arguing that excessive informational stimulation leads to “neuronal exploitation” and “mental exhaustion” in individuals.

Information fatigue behavior often leads to information avoidance. Extensive research has examined the factors influencing users’ information avoidance behaviors in social networking environments.For example, Youn et al. (2019) investigated factors causing young US Facebook users to avoid advertising information. Zhang Ning et al. (2021) found that perceived cost, information overload, and service overload can trigger health anxiety in older adults, leading to avoidance and withdrawal behaviors. While international research on information avoidance emerged earlier and has yielded substantial findings, domestic research in China is still in its infancy, with most studies adopting qualitative interviews and few employing quantitative methods. In summary, although existing research has identified the factors influencing avoidance of different types of

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information on social media, information avoidance has assumed new dimensions in the information society characterized by informational implosion. Relatively few scholars have addressed these recent developments.

2.3 Research on media selection and transition

Academic research on media selection and transition primarily adopts three perspectives:

First, analysis of factors influencing media choice. Research by Hovland and colleagues found that media selection is affected by source credibility; higher credibility leads to greater persuasive effect, and vice versa. Additionally, Media Richness Theory offers valuable insights. Originating from Information Processing Theory, it posits that interpersonal communication efficiency depends on the fit between a medium's characteristics and the demands of a communication task.

Second, analysis of audience media selectivity. Liu Mingzheng, in a study on media literacy, found WeChat to be the most preferred medium among the general public, followed by television, microblogs, and newspapers. Du Junfei examined media selection among residents in developed coastal cities and found that internet use is prevalent for information acquisition and social interaction. International research indicates that female users are more inclined to seek entertainment on social media, participate in activities on Facebook, and use Twitter for information-seeking.

Third, media selection strategies in different contexts. For example, Fan Hua suggested that in the context of media convergence, content dissemination strategies should be based on the classification of audience behaviors to guide media selection decisions. He Zhiwu, examining media choice in NIMBY conflicts (Not in My Backyard conflict), argued that traditional media shifted from active "silence" to passive "ineffectiveness", while mobile social media became a tool for "self-redemption" among stakeholders.

In conclusion, while existing research offers multi-faceted perspectives, it lacks focus on the following phenomenon: users do not necessarily abandon a medium because their needs have been satisfied, but often do so due to fatigue and avoidance triggered by exposure to large volumes of homogeneous content. Users are not always seeking gratification; their departure is frequently driven by information fatigue and avoidance concerning familiar media forms or content. The mechanism through which such fatigue leads to media selection and transition remains unexplored.

Therefore, adopting the perspective of information fatigue, this study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: What fundamental changes have occurred in the information environment where audiences use media?

RQ2: What psychological factors drive users to develop "fatigue aversion" towards familiar media or content?

RQ3: Does this signal that users have finally escaped media manipulation and achieved true agency?

3 Methods

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This study focuses on users' levels of information fatigue and their media selection behaviors, and adopts a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire survey method is used to quantitatively measure the relationship between users' information fatigue levels and their frequency of media switching. In-depth interviews were conducted to qualitatively explore the specific contexts, psychological experiences, and micro-level psychological processes underlying media selection behaviors when users experience information fatigue.

3.1 In-Depth interviews

To explore the psychological mechanisms underlying audience media selection behaviors, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with five frequent daily media users with experience of switching between platforms (coded A–E). The interview guide covered the following dimensions: media usage habits, experiences of fatigue and their triggers, behavioral responses after fatigue, and users' perceptions of their own media usage.

3.2 Questionnaire survey

This study collected data through an online questionnaire distributed via the platform Questionnaire Star. After the initial data collection, questionnaires were screened for validity based on the following exclusion criteria: a completion time of less than 30 seconds and missing key information. This yielded 145 valid responses, a sample size that meets the basic requirements for small- to medium-scale social science research and is suitable for subsequent statistical analyses.

Regarding the distribution of the core variables, descriptive statistical analyses of the total information fatigue score for the 145 valid samples revealed a mean of 49.97 and a standard deviation of 6.94. A mean score of 49.97 indicates a moderate level of overall information fatigue among the sample. A standard deviation of 6.94 reflects a moderate degree of variability in information fatigue levels across the sample, with a relatively normal distribution and no extreme skewness.

Reliability analysis of the scales measuring information fatigue and media selection behaviors yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.823. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.8 indicates good internal consistency and excellent reliability, demonstrating that the questionnaire scales used in this study are well-designed, the items effectively measure the intended constructs, and the data reliability meets the academic standards for subsequent correlation and difference analyses of the variables.

A bivariate correlation analysis between information fatigue levels and media switching frequency revealed a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.352, with a significance level of $p=0.002$.In terms of the correlation strength, an r-value of 0.352 indicates a moderately strong positive correlation, meaning that respondents with higher levels of information fatigue tend to switch media more frequently. n terms of statistical significance, $p=0.002<0.01$ indicates that this correlation is highly statistically significant, which rules out random error and confirms the robustness of the findings. This finding preliminarily supports the research hypothesis that information fatigue may influence media selection behaviors.

4 Findings

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4.1 The media environment in the algorithm-driven era: increased audience choice and vague needs

The traditional theory of "Uses and Gratifications" implies a potential premise: the media environment is relatively stable, where audiences can rationally choose media products to satisfy specific needs. However, the findings of this study indicate that the audience's media environment has undergone fundamental changes, which potentially renders this traditional premise less applicable.

4.1.1 Expanded choice and platform diversity

First, the proliferation of media platforms has afforded audiences an unprecedented range of choices.According to the questionnaire data, respondents used an average of more than five types of media daily, including the short-video platform TikTok, the graphic information platform Xiaohongshu, the long-video platform Bilibili, and the audio podcast platform Ximalaya. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional mass media era, when audiences had access to only a few channels with relatively simple formats and limited content. Driven by digital technologies, the number and variety of media platforms are growing exponentially.

More importantly, this increased choice is not only reflected in quantity, but also in the flexibility of choice. Market competition in the saturated media market has prompted various platforms to pursue differentiated development in content formats, interface design, and other aspects, thereby further expanding the range of media available to audiences. Users can effortlessly switch between platforms with distinct functions and features based on their context, mood, or available time. When users experience fatigue with a particular media form or content, numerous alternatives are readily available, allowing them to switch to another platform with virtually no switching costs. This transformed media environment provides the material foundation for audience media selection and transition, as well as the objective conditions for media avoidance behaviors triggered by information fatigue.

4.1.2 Algorithmic recommendations and vague needs

A more profound change lies in the fact that algorithm—driven content distribution has blurred the relatively clear media needs that audiences held in the traditional mass media era. According to the interview transcripts, three of the respondents (A, C, E) reported using the algorithm-driven TikTok subconsciously, or merely to pass the time when feeling bored. Interviewee C stated: "Sometimes I subconsciously open TikTok. I intend to watch it for a while, but I end up scrolling through it for hours." This phenomenon suggests that in the algorithm—dominated era, audience media contact is often not driven by clear personal needs, but occurs in a state of vague needs or even unconsciousness. The moment users open such an app, they are confronted with a wealth of fragmented information curated by algorithms based on their personal preferences and quickly become immersed in it.Audiences have become passive recipients of information, rather than active selectors with clear media needs. Driven by commercial logic, platforms continuously optimize content recommendation algorithms to cater to audience preferences, creating the illusion of emotional satisfaction for users, who then lose the ability to clearly cognize their own media needs. Consequently, a key premise of the traditional Uses and Gratifications Model-namely, that users select media based on clear needs-is no longer met.

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However, the Uses and Gratifications Theory is not entirely invalid; rather, its scope of application has shifted. Audience media selection is no longer primarily driven by clear personal media needs but is increasingly motivated by the negative emotion of fatigue stemming from passive information consumption. This marks a theoretical shift from need gratification to fatigue avoidance.

4.2 Information fatigue: non-rational media choice based on aversion

Statistical analysis results indicate that the mean score (M) of the information fatigue scale is 49.97 (SD=6.94), which indicates that the sample exhibits a moderate level of overall information fatigue.Further correlation analysis reveals a Pearson correlation coefficient ($r=0.352$, $p<0.01$) between information fatigue levels and media switching frequency, demonstrating a significant positive correlation between these two variables. This indicates that respondents with higher levels of information fatigue tend to switch media more frequently, which preliminarily supports the core hypothesis that information fatigue is a significant factor influencing media selection behaviors.

4.2.1 Information overload and cognitive overload

Short videos attract users through a fragmented, high-intensity, fast-paced, and stimulating narrative style. While users may perceive this as a form of relaxation and entertainment, the high density of fragmented information continuously depletes their attentional resources, resulting in both emotional and physiological distress. Qualitative comments from the open-ended questionnaire items revealed this underlying emotional mechanism, and many respondents cited “irritability” to describe their media exposure experiences. A typical response was:“After scrolling through short videos, I feel overwhelmed by the deluge of fragmented information, which leads to impaired attention and irritability, and ultimately results in distinct information fatigue. I therefore uninstalled such apps and turned to reading physical books and listening to podcasts, which gradually helped me regain focus and inner calm.” (Respondent 61)

Additionally, multiple interviewees in the in-depth interviews reported physiological strain from short-video use, such as headaches and eye fatigue. This cascading effect from psychological to physiological distress aligns with the cognitive load mechanism in cognitive psychology. The high-frequency information streams, continuous audiovisual stimulation, and multimodal content on short-video platforms all deplete users’ limited cognitive resources, leaving the brain in a state of high activity without rest. The accumulation of this cognitive overload not only leads to emotional fatigue but also triggers neuronal-dominated physiological fatigue. Therefore, the psychological and physiological distress caused by the continuous depletion of users’ attentional resources due to information overload has become a fundamental factor triggering users’ media avoidance behaviors.

4.2.2 Content repetition and information cocoons

Platforms adhering to traffic-first principles tend to push content aligned with users’ stated preferences to cater to their needs. This traps users in information cocoons, where prolonged exposure to highly homogeneous content fosters fatigue. According to the questionnaire data, for the scale items measuring factors of information fatigue, the mean score for content repetition (M=4.2) is significantly higher than the overall scale mean (M=3.94), which indicates that algorithm-driven content homogenization is a core factor triggering in-

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formation fatigue. In-depth interview data further illustrate this psychological mechanism. As one interviewee (A) stated: “I searched for curtain selection tips just once, and have since been bombarded with curtain-related videos and advertisements that are repeatedly pushed to me. I was uninterested at first, and eventually simply closed the app.” This vividly illustrates media avoidance behavior stemming from information fatigue caused by content homogenization. This experience of encountering homogeneous content is not accidental but a common consequence of algorithm-driven recommendation mechanisms. Eli Pariser’s filter bubble concept incisively describes how algorithms, by continuously filtering out information that users might not be interested in, confine users within bubbles filled with their own personal preferences. In such bubbles, what users receive is invariably homogeneous information content and presentation forms.While algorithms ostensibly cater to user preferences, they are fundamentally shaping users’ perceptions.When users realize their media perspectives are narrowing and content becomes monotonous, a desire to resist such control and a craving for novelty foster intense fatigue, which manifests as media avoidance behaviors such as closing the app or switching platforms.

4.2.3 Lack of meaning and perceived time waste

The perception of time waste and a sense of meaninglessness have emerged as another key psychological driver of information fatigue. In the in-depth interviews, it was found that negative comments from audiences regarding media use repeatedly included phrases such as “I feel like I waste time after scrolling” and “It feels meaningless after watching; I just waste time.” Such negative perceptions typically arise after media use. In contrast to the pleasure derived from the high-frequency stimulation of short videos, after exiting such applications, users find it difficult to extract meaningful information from the highly fragmented and superficial content they consume, which fosters a sense of time waste. At the same time, users’ guilt over uncompleted academic or work tasks amplifies their negative evaluations of media value. Such negative emotions accumulated due to a lack of perceived meaning ultimately translate into avoidance of the current media forms. Byung-Chul Han, in The Burnout Society, introduces the concept of the achievement subject, positing that users are simultaneously excessive consumers of information and excessive creators of personal meaning. When information consumption fails to fulfill the need for personal meaning, individuals fall into profound self-doubt and information fatigue. Media platforms merely provide high-intensity stimulation and consume a great deal of users’ time, yet offer little concrete meaning applicable to real-world life, which leaves audiences with a sense of time waste. When such experiences of time-wasting media use accumulate sufficiently, they translate into fatigue with the media itself, prompting subsequent media avoidance and transition behaviors.

In summary, audiences’ media selection and transition behaviors are driven not by need gratification but by negative emotional responses to fatigue, such as dissatisfaction and aversion to existing media forms or content.This constitutes an affect-based, highly irrational avoidance mechanism. When combined with the attraction mechanism rooted in rational needs, this dual mechanism serves as a key determinant of contemporary audiences’ media selection and transition decisions.

4.3 Limited awakening: a dialectical analysis of agency in media selection and transition

While audiences’ media selection and transition behaviors driven by information fatigue demonstrate a

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certain degree of agency, these actions also reveal the limitations of such agency. Audiences are not entirely passive information recipients; they possess a certain degree of agency yet remain unable to fully escape the constraints of the contemporary media environment.

4.3.1 Manifestation of audience agency

Audiences' avoidance behaviors themselves are a manifestation of their subjectivity. The questionnaire survey data reveal a significant positive correlation between information fatigue and media switching, indicating that users are not passive couch potatoes. When media fatigue sets in, users can leverage the increasingly diverse range of media options to actively regulate their psychological states through media switching. From this perspective, information fatigue is not purely negative; it fosters a sense of media reflexivity, shifting users from passive information acceptance to active evaluation and selection of media. The phenomenon of social media fatigue embodies a call for human agency, prompting a rational and dialectical perspective on social media use. When users grow tired of algorithm-recommended content and take avoidance actions, they are essentially resisting the encroachment of technological logic and asserting their media-related rights.

More importantly, audiences' media selection and transition behaviors objectively drive the optimization of the media content ecosystem. Such avoidance behaviors compel platforms to continuously optimize content quality, innovate information presentation forms, and compete for audiences' attentional resources. Short-video platforms have begun to introduce medium and long-form videos, graphic and text platforms have attempted to expand into audio content, and multiple platforms have launched premium creator programs and introduced traffic incentive mechanisms. These developments are all examples of media form optimization driven by users' media selection behaviors.Thus, audiences can also play an active role by leveraging their information fatigue and subsequent avoidance behaviors to drive the continuous upgrading and optimization of media, and foster the evolution of the media ecosystem toward greater diversity and higher quality.

4.3.2 The enduring control of capital logic

However, the agency underpinning media transition is limited and fundamentally remains subject to multiple controlling factors. Beneath the audience-driven evolution of new media lies the enduring control of capital, which operates under the same commercial logic: competing for users' attention with stimulating content, algorithmically recommending content based on user preferences, and monetizing through advertising revenue. Users are unable to escape this commercial logic, regardless of which media platform they switch to. As Interviewee D stated: "Because there are too many advertisements, I switched from other platforms to Xiaohongshu, thinking I could find genuine user experience sharing and product evaluations. Unexpectedly, I soon found that the platform is also dominated by advertising and marketing, leaving me with the feeling that I had jumped from one trap to another."

From a critical political economy perspective, the homogeneous commercial logic underpinning different media platforms reveals a core characteristic of digital capitalism. The essence of platform capitalism lies in the extraction of surplus value from individual users. All user behaviors are predictable and manipulable within the framework of capital. Users perceive that they can break free from such control by switching media platforms, yet in reality, both the users themselves and their media usage data remain commodities under the control of capital. In the social media era, users act as digital laborers, with all their user data-including

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browsing behavior, likes, shares, and even complaints-converted into digital commodities that generate profit for media platforms.

The act of media use itself constitutes exploited labor, and such exploitation does not cease when users switch platforms; instead, it persists within the framework of platform capitalism.

4.3.3 The cyclical nature of fatigue

The questionnaire survey results indicate that information fatigue persists even after users switch media platforms. Sixty-five point fifty-four percent of respondents agreed that new media platforms also induce fatigue, while forty-seven point ninety-seven percent reported that they likely intend to continue switching between different media platforms in the future. These high response rates suggest that media switching does not fundamentally alleviate information fatigue, but instead creates a cyclical pattern: fatigue→switch→renewed fatigue. This cyclical pattern is also vividly evident in the in-depth interview data. Interviewee B described their repeated media switching experiences: "At first, I found the pace of TikTok videos too fast and the content overly repetitive, so I switched to graphic and text platforms such as Xiaohongshu. I noticed an overabundance of advertisements, and after a short time, the graphic and text content also felt monotonous and uninteresting, making me want to switch platforms again. Yet switching to another platform yields the same result; there is always some reason to grow tired of it. This feeling does not subside simply by switching apps." The findings show that even after users grow fatigued with one platform and switch to another, they may fall into this cycle, unable to completely escape information fatigue. While a new platform may offer temporary relief through its novel interfaces, content forms, and content, new feelings of fatigue eventually emerge from regular use. Issues such as content repetition and information overload resurface, prompting users to seek out another platform. This cycle indicates that information fatigue is not unique to any specific platform but rather represents a deeper dilemma inherent in media logic within the algorithm-driven era.

4.3.4 Users' inability to articulate clear needs

Ultimately, the needs driving audiences' media use are inherently vague, and users themselves often lack a clear understanding of their genuine needs. In the algorithm-driven era, audiences' media needs are significantly shaped and molded by algorithms. Media exposure behaviors under algorithmic control are continuously tracked and analyzed by media platforms. Media platforms cultivate users' usage habits by persistently pushing personalized content aligned with users' preferences, eventually solidifying these habits into what Marcuse refers to as "false needs" in One-Dimensional Man. False needs are not genuine intrinsic desires but are imposed on individuals by platform capital and are subsequently internalized as their own. In the industrial society, false needs were inculcated into individual consciousness through mass cultural forms such as advertising, fashion, and entertainment. In the digital age, such needs are more precisely inculcated in individual users through personalized algorithmic recommendations and targeted marketing strategies. Unaware of this, users mistakenly believe that they have authentic needs, and thus they choose their preferred content freely and switch between media platforms at will to avoid algorithmic control. Users have not yet achieved genuine agency, as their perceived needs are continuously shaped and manipulated by commercial platform mechanisms.

During the in-depth interviews, when asked "Why did you choose this platform?", most respondents' an-

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swers lacked a clear needs-based orientation and were instead vague and difficult to articulate, with responses such as: “to pass free time,” “to kill time,” and “I just scroll through content when I have nothing to do.” This vagueness reveals a deep-seated lack of user agency. However, when asked “Why did you switch media platforms?”, respondents could generally articulate specific reasons for their fatigue, such as: “being tired of excessive homogeneous information,” “feeling that it is a waste of time,” “finding the content meaningless,” and “experiencing information overload.” The aforementioned interview data show that users clearly know what they dislike, yet they struggle to articulate what their genuine needs are. Currently, the primary driver of audiences’ media selection and transition is negative, irrational emotion, rather than positive, clearly articulated needs based on rational reasoning.

In conclusion, while media selection and transition driven by information fatigue demonstrate a certain degree of user agency, such agency is limited and operates in an irrational state. However, this does not mean that attention to audiences’ subjectivity is devoid of meaning. A dialectical perspective is required-one that acknowledges the limitations of user agency while examining users’ actual circumstances in a clear and objective manner. Information fatigue itself may serve as the starting point for the genuine awakening of audiences’ agency, and the subsequent media selection and transition behaviors represent the initial stage of such resistance.

5 Summary and Discussion

Grounded in the theory of information fatigue, this study explores the psychological mechanisms and behavioral characteristics of audiences’ media selection and transition within the algorithm-driven era.Through an empirical analysis of 145 valid samples, this study verifies a significant positive correlation between the level of information fatigue and the frequency of media switching ($r=0.352$, $p< 0.01$), and draws the following main conclusions:

The media environment within the algorithm-driven era has undergone fundamental transformative changes. The proliferation of media platforms and extremely low media switching costs afford audiences an unprecedented range of choices. However, audiences now switch media platforms based on negative emotions stemming from fatigue, which overturns the need-driven logic of the traditional Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Intertwined factors-such as information overload, content repetition, and unclear media needs-drive users to shift from seeking need gratification to avoiding information fatigue. The quantitative data confirm that higher levels of information fatigue correlate with more frequent media switching, which highlights negative emotions as a key driver of media selection behavior.

Media switching driven by information fatigue demonstrates a certain degree of audiences’ agency to some extent, yet it essentially represents constrained choices made within the framework of commercial logic. Users may escape the constraints of one media platform yet remain trapped within the broader framework of commercial logic. New media platforms also rely on algorithmic recommendations, and their content production adheres to traffic-driven logic. After a brief sense of relief is experienced, new feelings of information fatigue inevitably emerge.

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Users thus fall into a "switch-fatigue" cycle, while the deep-seated dilemmas inherent in the contemporary media environment persist.

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