Equalizing versus Stratification Effects

How people come across and attend to news is a long-standing question for scholars interested in the role of information in facilitating democratic processes. This work is rooted in the philosophical tradition of Harold Laswell and the functionalist framework—which argues that mass media serve important social functions of integration and assimilation (Wright, 1960)—as well as normative assumptions about news as the primer for creating an informed electorate (e.g., Prior, 2007). In this context, scholars have grappled with the problem of stratification versus equalization. That is, universal access to professional journalism and public affairs information ideally decreases information gaps among groups that are otherwise split along lines of socioeconomic status. Equalizing effects work via knowledge gain, as access to high-quality information helps people identify problems, coordinate opportunities for solving those problems, and ultimately enables participation in civic and political action more broadly (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Stratification effects, in contrast, follow a ‘rich-get-richer’ pattern, where the upper strata of society are better able to leverage information via financial, educational, or other resources like time and access to networks, in ways that exacerbate existing social inequalities (Brady et al., 1995).

The nature of media exposure on social media has forced scholars to revisit issues of equalization and stratification. Content on social media is characterized by endless streams of posts from a variety of sources, where friend updates and memes appear alongside professional news outlets and targeted messaging from political elites. This experience has given rise to perceptions of ‘news-ness’, especially among young people, who no longer differentiate discrete categories of content in mobile, hybrid environments (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). Thus, understanding the occurrences of and responses to incidental exposure has received significant scholarly interest. Scholarship has examined serendipitous news exposure and information inequality in the form of access to politically relevant information (Bode, 2016; Hermidia et al., 2012), engagement via cognitive involvement (Oledorf-Hirsch, 2018) as well as likes, shares, or comments (Karnowski et al., 2017), and finally political knowledge and participation (Lee & Xenos, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). The two narrative frameworks for organizing thinking in this area are based on ‘compensatory’ effects, or the ability of information heterogeneity to engage an otherwise disinterested public (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018), or stratification via the ‘Matthew Effect’ (Kümpel, 2020) where increased choice and algorithmic curation (Thorson et al., 2021) allow those with higher levels of interest and efficacy to ‘tune in’ while others seek entertainment and social gratifications as they ‘tune out’ of political life (Prior, 2005).

Empirical findings offer support for both hypotheses. Equalization and stratification are similarly possible, depending on the outcome considered, as well as the socio-technical conditions of platform use. First, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) show strong and convincing evidence for equalization effects in terms of news exposure. Using survey data from four Western countries (Italy, Australia, United Kingdom, United States), they find that people who use social media for purposes other than news are exposed to significantly more online news sources, and the effect is stronger among those with lower levels of political interest. In another cross-national sample, semi-structured interviews reveal that this effect is due, at least in part, to stumbling across topics of potential interest based on activities of others on the platform, thus pulling the otherwise disengaged into an information/engagement feedback loop (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). These findings qualify the nature of incidentality, as dependent upon not only information heterogeneity—as traditionally theorized (e.g., Tewksbury et al., 2001)—but also network size and diversity, as larger networks increase the chances of both incidental and purposeful news use (Barnidge, 2021).

Despite these findings, digital inequalities persist because information flows are curated based on individual interests that favor information-rich social networks (Robinson et al., 2015), creating the possibility of so-called ‘social media news deserts’ (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021). That is, individuals exercise a considerable amount of agency over their information flows; the algorithms that filter content are anchored in user behaviors and preferences (Thorson et al., 2021). These systems take on an actuary dimension (DeVito, 2017) in that individuals linked by shared interests are pooled, and then given stories and topics that enhance pre-existing preferences for news and political information. This is particularly the case for news engagement. While equalizing effects have been found for general exposure to news, people are much less likely to expend the extra effort to engage or learn from content they come across, unless they are already immersed in ‘news-friendly’ information environments (Kümpel, 2020). In addition, interest plays a special role in these processes as a moderator, in that those with higher levels of interest are more likely to share news (Barnidge, 2021), suggesting re-enforcement effects. However, in that same study, mediated lagged relationships (using panel data analysis) reveal a more nuanced picture, where incidental exposure can drive news engagement by spurring political interest over time. Thus, while there is some evidence for equalizing effects, the antecedent individual- and meso-level factors—like news interest, network characteristics and algorithms— tend to create a virtuous circle of reciprocal relationships between exposure and engagement, where some groups are left in information landscapes that are only sporadically populated with politically relevant information (Lee & Xenos, 2020; Thorson, 2019).