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 and its effects on information cleavages has received significant scholarly interest. This work looks at incidental exposure and social inequality in the form of exposure to politically relevant information (Bode, 2016; Hermidia et al., 2012), engagement via likes, shares, or comments (Karnowski et al., 2017; Oledorf-Hirsch, 2018), or political knowledge and participation (Lee & Xenos; Lee et al., 2022; Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Two frames dominate thinking in this area: compensatory effects of information heterogeneity to engage an otherwise disinterested public (), 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 the ‘tune out’ of political life (Prior, 2005).

Empirical studies do offer a clear picture, as evidence of equalization and stratification are similarly possible, depending on various socio-technical conditions.

II. Stratificational effects – see NMS