I. Equalizing effects – see NMS

II. Stratificational effects – see NMS

**‘News Attraction’**

Seeking to reframe the scholarly conversation about incidental news exposure, Thorson (2020) introduced the concept of ‘news attraction’ in order to better characterize the “shift in power toward a broader assemblage of actors” that play a role in the process of exposure to news and political information on social media platforms” (p. xx). Drawing from dictionary definitions of ‘attraction’ that define the term as “a force that attracts two objects” or “an evocation of interest,” she argues concept more accurately reflects the dynamics of news exposure in which platforms and curation algorithms play a critical role in the shaping news exposure through the datafication of user activity. In other words, individual activity creates a ‘force’ or ‘evocation’ that ultimately ‘attracts’ news and political information to the user. Thus, much of what scholars have considered to be incidental exposure—that is, news or political information people stumble upon in the course of using social media for other reasons—is not necessarily encountered accidentally. Rather, these encounters often reflect individual’s previous news-related choices and behaviors, as platforms and news organizations use digital traces of these actions to classify users as interested, and subsequently draw on this classification to select content for them to view (Thorson et al., 2019). Therefore, while news may be encountered “in moments of leisure” (Boczkowski et al., 2018)—that is, in the course of doing something else on a platform, these encounters may not entirely non-elective in that people previously have made choices that lead to these encounters. Thus, on social media platforms, the object of choice, as well as the temporality of choice, is often displaced, and choices themselves may not pertain to specific pieces of news content but rather to ‘types’ or categories of content (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021).

While Thorson (2020) offered ‘news attraction’ as a metaphor, we argue that it may also prove fruitful to develop the idea as an analytic concept. There is a need for such a conceptualization in the literature, because, as we previously discussed, most models testing the equalizing or stratification effects of incidental exposure focus primarily on individual’s self-reported interest in politics or the news as an antecedent factor, and generally consider incidental exposure (or its subsequent outcomes) among individuals with low interest to be evidence of equalizing effects (e.g., Barnidge, 2021; CITE). Yet, in line with the ‘news attraction’ metaphor, we know from prior literature that the factors shaping incidental exposure go beyond personal interests, and include environmental perceptions (Weeks & Lane, 2020), characteristics of ego-centric social networks (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021), and processes of algorithmic classification based on prior user activity such as engaging with news and political information or following news organizations and/or information actors like journalists and politicians (Thorson et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a need to systematically develop a concept that incorporates these various influences on the process of news exposure and also separates those factors from ‘incidentality’ associated with exposure to any given story or piece of content (Michelstein et al., 2020). We believe that doing so will bring clarity to the debate over equalizing versus stratificational and provide leverage over the question of whether incidental exposure closes or widens gaps in exposure to and engagement with news and political information.

The ‘news attraction’ metaphor is quite clear about two factors that shape news exposure: individual preferences and the curation algorithms that social media platforms use to select content for users. Prior research shows the individual interest and other preferences do play large role in shaping the extent to which individuals are incidentally exposed (xxx), helping to create what Kümpel (2020) has called ‘Matthew Effect’ (i.e., a ‘rich-get-richer’ dynamic) of news on social media platforms. And while the capacity of research to directly observe curation algorithms is limited, prior research has provided some indirect evidence that is algorithms play a large role in shaping incidental exposure, specifically by showing how previous engagements with news content predict a future exposure (Barnidge, 2021; xxx). In addition to these two factors, prior research has identified several other influences on the process of news exposure on social media. For example, Weeks and Lane (2020) theorize that ‘environmental perceptions’—that is, individuals’ perceptions of whether social media platforms are suitable venues for obtaining news and political information—play a primal role in processes of exposure by shaping how people approach and use particular platforms. Additionally, recent research shows that characteristics of individuals’ ego-centric networks such as network size and diversity (Barnidge & Xenos, 2020), as well as the extent to which people follow accounts to get news content (Thorson et al., 2019), also affect processes of news exposure, in large part because content is not only selected by news algorithms, it is also curated by social contacts (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Thus, prior literature has identified at least four dimensions of influence on processes of news exposure that are related to the ‘news attraction’ concept, which is to say they reflect individual’s interest in news and politics, and they contribute to the ‘force’ that draws news content toward them: (1) personal preferences; (2) environmental perceptions; (3) social network characteristics, particularly those that shape flows of information; and (4) the datafication of user behavior by social media platforms and/or news organizations. Therefore, we can conceptually define *news attraction* as follows: the force that results from user interactions with social media platforms, and which affects the likelihood of encountering news or political information on those platforms. Operationally, this definition implies that we need indicators not just of individual preferences such as interest, but also of the other ways in which individuals interact with social media platforms in a way that increases the chances of news exposure.

Theoretically, news attraction should have a reciprocal relationship with both news exposure and news engagement (see Figure xx). That is, news attraction is an important antecedent of exposure as well as key predictor of engagement, while at the same time exposure to and, in particular, engagement with news likely increases news attraction. Thus, these three concepts form a ‘virtuous circle’ (or ‘unvirtuous,’ depending on your perspective), contributing to a ‘rich-get-richer’ dynamic and potentially exacerbating digital inequalities related to news exposure (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021). But critically, this conceptualization of news attraction separates its empirical indicators from the incidentality of exposure to any given piece of news content. Thus, we recognize the possibility that incidental encounters with the news could occur among individuals who are both ‘high’ and ‘low’ in news attraction, and doing so allows us to isolate incidentality and assess the extent to which incidental exposure occurs among each group. The logic of this assessment can be used to derive three predictions about equalizing or stratificational effects. First, and in an effort to provide predictive validity for the news attraction concept, news attraction should be negatively correlated with news use *via any medium or platform*, as the preferences, perceptions, connections, and behaviors that makeup news attraction likely reflect a generalized habit of non-news consumption or preference for entertainment content (Prior, 2007). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: News attraction will be negatively related to non-social media news use.

Second, if incidental exposure on social media platforms truly closes exposure gaps by drawing in potential news audience members who would not otherwise encounter news, we would expect to see (a) higher levels of incidental exposure among people who score low news attraction and (b) roughly equal levels of overall exposure among those who are high and those who are low in news attraction. We expect the opposite pattern if incidental exposure widens the exposure gap. These predictions can be summarized with the following competing hypotheses:

H2a: Incidental news exposure will close exposure gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

H2b: Incidental news exposure will widen exposure gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

Similarly, if incidental exposure closes engagement gaps, then we would expect to observe an interaction effect between incidental exposure and news attraction—that is, people who are low in news attraction but high in incidental exposure should have roughly equal levels of engagement to those who are high in news exposure. On the other hand, if incidental exposure widens engagement gaps, we might expect to see the highest levels of engagement among those who are high in news attraction and high in incidental exposure. Thus, we can formulate the following competing hypotheses:

H2a: Incidental news exposure will close engagement gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

H2b: Incidental news exposure will widen engagement gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

References

Barnidge, 2020

Barnidge & Xenos, 2021

Boczkowski et al., 2018

Kümpel (2020)

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