**Equalizing Versus Stratificational Effects of Incidental News Exposure**

A central question in scholarship on contemporary news environments has been whether digital media are reshaping long-standing inequalities in news exposure and engagement. This question is rooted in the epistemological 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 the role of news and ‘the press’ in informing the electorate (e.g., Prior, 2007). In this context, scholars have grappled with the problem of the stratificational versus equalizing effects of news media. That is, universal access to journalism and public affairs information should ideally decrease information gaps among groups that are otherwise split along lines of socioeconomic status or other social inequalities. Theoretically, ‘equalizing’ or ‘compensatory’ effects should increase individual and collective knowledge, as access to high-quality information helps people identify problems, coordinate opportunities for solving those problems, and enables participation in civic and political activities (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). But research shows that, historically, individuals with greater political resources (e.g., the wealthy, educated, and politically interested) have been able to not only consume more news content, but reap greater benefits in terms of political knowledge and engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Schlozman et al., 2018), producing a ‘stratificational’ effect or ‘rich-get-richer’ dynamic.

The dominant perspective on digital media has been that prominent platforms tend to create ‘high-choice’ environments, in which the ability of individuals to customize and curate their media diets has deepened inequalities in news consumption (Prior, 2007). According to this view, the politically interested exist in news-rich digital spaces, while everyone else is able to self-select out of news and politics altogether (Karlsen et al., 2020; Thorson, 2015). Empirical research has documented that inequalities in news exposure and engagement persist online (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018; Merten et al., 2022). Yet the burgeoning literature on ‘incidental’ exposure complicates this picture.

*Incidental news exposure* broadly describes encounters with news or political information that occur when individuals are using media for other, non-news purposes (Weeks & Lane, 2020). Despite the high-choice nature of digital media, the pervasiveness of news online makes it likely that even those who have little interest in news will ‘stumble upon’ it once in a while (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Weeks et al., 2020). ADD LINE ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA HERE(SEE NMS). Accordingly, some scholars have argued that the sheer abundance of opportunity to encounter news online may actually serve to reduce or temper political inequality by providing opportunities for the disinterested to learn about and participate in the political process (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Weeks et al. 2022; Xenos et al., 2014). Others have argued that, while digital media may facilitate incidental exposure to news, actual *engagement* with news will remain unequal (Kümpel, 2020; Thorson, 2020).

Thus, significant scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the frequency with which incidental exposure occurs (see NMS; Boczkowski, et al., 2018; Hermida et al., 2012), the conditions under which people cognitively and behaviorally engage with the news they encounter incidentally (Oledorf-Hirsch, 2018; Karnowski et al., YEAR), and the effects of incidental exposure on political knowledge and participation (Bode, 2016; Lee & Xenos, 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Empirical findings are mixed when it comes to equalizing versus stratificational effects.

For example, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) find relatively strong evidence for equalization effects in terms of exposure. Using survey data from four 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 suggest that equalizing effects may occur while stumbling across content that other people post on the platform (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Additionally, other studies have found some support showing that incidental exposure is positively related to political learning and participation (Heiss & Matthes, 2019; Weeks et al., 2021). However, a meta-analysis of incidental exposure research noted that these effects tend to be small and contextual (Nanz & Matthes, 2022).

Despite these findings, there continues to be robust scholarly debate over the role of incidental exposure in shaping inequalities in news exposure and engagement due to evidence for stratificational effects. While some studies have found equalizing effects for exposure to news, other studies have found that people who are interested in the news are much more likely to expend the extra effort to engage with content they come across (Kümpel, 2020), and these behaviors are read by news selection algorithms as indicators of future interest (Thorson et al., 2021), which create stratificational effects in future exposure (Barnidge, 2021). Additionally, inequalities in social networks embed some individuals immersed in ‘information-rich’ networks while others are left in so-called ‘social media news deserts’ (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021), as individuals’ social contacts also inform content selection algorithms on social media platforms (DeVito, 2017). 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 reciprocal relationship between exposure and engagement, where some groups are left in information landscapes that are only sporadically populated with politically relevant information (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021; Lee & Xenos, 2020; Thorson, 2019).

**From Incidental Exposure to News Attraction**

We argue that advancing our understanding of how digital media shape news inequalities requires addressing a key issue that has arisen in incidental exposure research. This work has primarily focused on the ‘demand side’ of news exposure. Studies have operationalized incidental exposure as instances in which an individual was exposed to news when they were not motivated to do so. In foregrounding the role of individual motivation, incidental exposure becomes primarily a function of the psychology of news consumers. Yet the novelty of digital media lies in the ‘supply side’ of the equation. Here, the very opportunity to incidentally encounter news (i.e., the supply of news) is shaped by a host of social, strategic, and algorithmic forces (Thorson, 2015 Thorson, 2020). As Kümpel (2020) argued, there is a need to focus on how the very opportunity for incidental exposure may be unequally distributed. This requires considering not only individual motivation, but also social and algorithmic forces as well (Weeks and Lane, 2020; Thorson, 2020). To address this challenge, we turn to Thorson's (2020) concept of ‘news attraction.’

Responding to developments in incidental exposure research, Thorson 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 in conjunction with incidental exposure. 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 five 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; (4) social news curation; and (5) 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 1). 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), potentially contributing to a ‘rich-get-richer’ dynamic and 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 positively 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 positively 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:

H3a: Incidental news exposure will close engagement gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

H3b: Incidental news exposure will widen engagement gaps between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high and news attraction.

**Methods**