



## Stumbling upon news on the Internet: Effects of incidental news exposure and relative entertainment use on political engagement



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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary concerns that the Internet might lead to political apathy are based on suggestions that people would use the Internet for entertainment purposes rather than news consumption. However, what if someone stumbles upon news when surfing the Internet? Would this incidental news exposure online be helpful in promoting citizens' political engagement? This study tests whether and how incidental news exposure (INE) and relative entertainment use (REU) on the Internet are associated with political participation. Drawing from US national data, results revealed a significant and positive relationship between INE and offline and online political participation while REU was negatively associated with offline and online political participation. More importantly, the role of INE in facilitating citizens' online political participation was stronger for those who consume less entertainment online, indicating that incidental news exposure may increase existing gaps in political participation between people who prefer news and people who prefer entertainment online.

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### 1. Introduction

Given that an active citizenry has important implications for democratic society (Dahl, 1989; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), communication scholars have focused on how the Internet may either contribute to or be harmful in informing citizens and promoting their political engagement. Some scholars see the Internet as having the potential for a more healthy democracy since it provides citizens with easy access to ample information about politics and news and offers less costly venues for engagement in politics. Others argue that the Internet may be harmful for democratic society because increased opportunities for individual control of online content enables individuals to avoid news and information about public affairs. That is, although the Internet provides a vast amount of information, it allows people to consume media content that matches their individual interests and needs (Sunstein, 2001; Tewksbury, 2005), which in turn might increase opportunities to select mainly entertainment content and avoid news; thereby leading to a decrease in political participation (Prior, 2005, 2007; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002).

Yet an important phenomenon needs to be taken into consideration in the debate over the role of the Internet in a democratic process, which is incidental news exposure online. There are

increasing opportunities for people to stumble onto news even when they surf the Internet for non-news items (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). Moreover, recent changes in the contemporary Internet environment (e.g., search engines, social networking sites, and microblogs like Twitter) suggest that the role of unintentional news exposure may have a significant potential for providing information about politics and public affairs (Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). With increased opportunities for unintentional exposure to news on the Internet, more people may be exposed to a greater number of stories about politics and public affairs, including mobilizing information (Lemert, 1984). As a consequence, surfing the Internet might inadvertently contribute to participatory citizenship—that is, engagement in political activities—through incidental news exposure.

Unfortunately, however, very little is known about the effects of incidental news exposure on political variables (e.g., political knowledge and political engagement). One notable exception (Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001) examined the effects of incidental news exposure online on individuals' current affairs knowledge and found that accidental news exposure may have a positive role in informing citizens. Despite the fact that the possibilities of getting news accidentally online have increased in the contemporary new media environment, very little attention has been paid to this topic, which calls for further investigation of the role of incidental exposure. In particular, while Tewksbury et al. (2001) shed light on an understudied area – namely, the role of unintentional news exposure in the democratic process – they

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did not take into consideration the role of incidental exposure in promoting citizens' political engagement.

Nor has research to date inquired about the relationship between incidental news exposure and relative entertainment use – individuals' preferences for entertainment over news on the Internet. In other words, how do these two possible types of exposure – incidental exposure to news online and relative entertainment use or selective exposure to entertainment – interact with each other in affecting individuals' political participation behaviors? Existing studies have produced inconsistent findings about whether the Internet has a positive or negative effect on political participation, in part, due to different operationalization of Internet use (Boulianne, 2009). In general, however, it is agreed that entertainment use may have a negative impact on the public's political knowledge and their political engagement whereas news consumption may have a positive effect (Prior, 2005; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Yet unanswered is this question: what if someone stumbles upon news when surfing the Internet for a different purpose? Is this incidental news exposure online helpful for democratic citizenship (i.e., participatory democracy)?

The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining whether and how incidental news exposure online and relative entertainment use are associated with individuals' political participation; also, how incidental news exposure and relative entertainment use interact with each other to influence political engagement.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Incidental news exposure and political participation

Literature has demonstrated that news media use positively influences people's political participation by providing mobilizing information and facilitating political conversations among citizens (Lemert, 1984; Norris, 2000; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Specifically, studies have identified increased levels of political engagement among individuals who are exposed to news online or who discuss public affairs over the Internet (Rojas et al., 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Meanwhile, studies on effects of news media use have focused mainly on the audience's active or goal-oriented consumption of news through mainstream media (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Shah et al., 2005) or via less conventional sources such as social media (Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). In other words, researchers have assumed that the audience's *intentional* motivations (e.g., surveillance motivations) to consume news may result in media effects, such as raising political knowledge along with forming or influencing individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

In fact, people are often exposed to information while they are navigating online for other purposes—that is, people inadvertently consume news and information on the Internet when they are not actively seeking it. These encounters, considered a “byproduct” of online activities, are referred to as incidental exposure (Tewksbury et al., 2001, p. 533). In the same way that people are known to receive general news and information either intentionally and incidentally (Beaudoin, 2008; Tewksbury et al., 2001) it is likely that when people surf the Internet they will unintentionally be exposed to news and information about politics.

The concept of incidental or accidental news exposure is not entirely new; Rubin (1984) proposed that how audiences use the media can be either instrumental or ritual. Instrumental use refers to an active, selective, and purposive consumption of certain media content for specific purposes while ritualized use is the habitual consumption of a medium for diversion. Compared to instrumental use, people who practice ritualized use have greater exposure to, and attachment to, the medium but in a less active, goal-oriented

manner. As a result, media use can differ significantly depending on people's goals. Some people may find the Internet to be a resource for active information seeking, while others may consider the Internet a place to find pleasurable experiences by simply surfing and linking online. In other words, people may be oftentimes incidentally informed while habitually using media (Zukin & Snyder, 1984). The concept of information cost for the process of learning sheds light on incidental exposure (Downs, 1957). Active seeking of information requires individuals to pay information costs (e.g., time, effort, and money), while the alternative route of getting information – accidental exposure to news and information – allows people to obtain information without seeking it and without paying much cost for it. In that way, individuals can also learn about public affairs through incidental news exposure; and that process is called incidental learning (Downs, 1957).

A notable study examined how incidental news exposure online influences individuals' political knowledge and supports the positive influence of incidental news exposure on informing citizens (Tewksbury et al., 2001). To date, however, no studies have investigated the role of incidental news exposure in participatory democracy. In light of the increasing possibilities and importance of incidental exposure on the Internet, it is necessary to develop a better understanding of the role it plays in individuals' political participation, especially when very little attention has been devoted to the understanding of whether incidental news exposure online may facilitate political engagement.

Today's online environment is constantly evolving, shaping, and offering new avenues for people to acquire information about current events in ways that differ from other media; likewise, it offers new ways in which to participate politically (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009). For instance, the evolution of some sites from being solely search engines to now being portal web sites, such as Yahoo!, Baidu, AOL and MSN.com – each among the most popular web sites that people visit on the Internet – provides information from diverse sources in a holistic way. Some now serve as personalized services with a consistent look and feel allowing controlled access to multiple applications and databases (Tewksbury et al., 2001). As a consequence, when people start their Internet activities, it is possible they may encounter news stories or political information with the absence of motivation to become informed. The increasing online use of other Internet applications, such as social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, or microblogging services as Twitter, also increases opportunities to encounter news while updating information on social networks (Nielsen Reports, 2009).

Given the increasing opportunities of obtaining news and information incidentally and its significant role in providing information about current affairs (e.g., Tewksbury et al., 2001), incidental news exposure may contribute to greater levels of political participation because it provides users with mobilizing information during campaign periods. Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** There will be a positive relationship between incidental news exposure on the Internet and offline political participation.

**H1b.** There will be a positive relationship between incidental news exposure on the Internet and online political participation.

As described above, in the contemporary new media environment, incidental news exposure on the Internet may happen in a variety of forms and on websites such as portal sites, blogs, and social networking sites. Despite the originality of Tewksbury et al.'s (2001) study examining the role of incidental news exposure online, their study used a single, fairly abstract and weak question for measuring incidental news exposure—a single item asking

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