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## Incidental exposure to news: Predictors in the social media setting and effects on information gain online

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## ABSTRACT

Employing two studies, this paper investigates incidental exposure to news online in terms of its influence on individual learning about public affairs as well as its predictors in the social media environment. Study 1, using an experimental design, shows that incidental exposure to news has significant effects on an individual's recognition and recall of information in news stories. The effects of incidental exposure on recall are mediated by actual exposure to information in the news (spending some time on reading), suggesting gateway effects of initial exposure by accident. Employing a national survey, Study 2 finds that social media network heterogeneity and proportion of weak ties are positively associated with likelihood of incidental exposure to news online, while most variables of individual characteristics are not. The significant effects of structural factors found suggest that incidental exposure can limit consequences of selective exposure. Further implications of the findings are discussed.

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The changing media environment has been thought to provide opportunities for informed citizenry and participatory democracy (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Xenos & Moy, 2007). The heightened accessibility and ubiquity of information online may enhance likelihood of the exposure to information about public affairs. Such exposure has been associated with more active involvement in political affairs (e.g., Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001), but it is also possible that the abundance of channels and content in this new environment may have negative consequences for an ideal informed public. Further, recent phenomenon of news socialization through various platforms of social media provides more complex challenges and opportunities in the issue of informed citizenship and proper functioning of democracy (e.g., Bond et al., 2012; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014).

The unprecedented number of choices in the media enables individuals to filter out unwanted content. As the quantity of media outlets and content increases, it is likely that more people abandon news in favor of entertainment shows, leading to the shrinking of the informed public (Prior, 2007). Even when people choose news, they are likely to select media outlets or information more compatible with their partisan ideology (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009;

Stroud, 2011) or specific interest (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Y. M.; Kim, 2009), suggesting biased exposure to certain sets of information. Then, it becomes important to address both if and how well individuals filter out the unwanted information and selectively use media outlets or content in the new environment.

Closely related to this point is the phenomenon of *incidental exposure*. There are, broadly speaking, two possible ways to obtain political information: an individual either seeks out the information or accidentally encounters it with no intention of doing so (Downs, 1957). The latter is called incidental exposure. Some argue that new technology enables individuals to effectively filter out unwanted information, leading to a significant decrease in the likelihood of incidental exposure and therefore a decline in informed citizenship (e.g., Prior, 2007). Others point out that “weakened social boundaries” online make it more probable for individuals to inadvertently come across information (Brundidge, 2010a, p. 681). Both of the predictions share an assumption that incidental exposure causally affects information gain in the new media environment. Research in political communication has sporadically found evidence for associations between incidental exposure and learning about public affairs (Shehata, Hopmann, Nord, & Höjjer, 2015; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001; Zukin & Snyder, 1984), yet little research has directly tested and shown

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effects of incidental exposure on information gain, particularly in the online environment. Based on the existing research, this study attempts to test, and add experimental evidence about, the causal relationship between incidental exposure and individual learning about public affairs.

The incidental exposure can be conceived to limit consequences of selective exposure to information, because individual characteristics such as political predilections may have less influence on incidental exposure than on the intentional path of learning. If this is the case, for those who choose not to follow news, incidental exposure may work as their unwanted yet unavoidable route to news. For those who choose to read news only from media outlets compatible with their own political predisposition, the incidental exposure will be their main sources of information that are incompatible with their specific ideologies. It is then plausible that incidental exposure may contribute to an even distribution of political information, relatively free from influence of partisan ideology. In this sense, another question is which factors affect incidental exposure to news in the online media environment. The factors in question may then influence the distribution of knowledge among the public and eventually impact equality of political learning in a democracy (Prior, 2007). Therefore, the second goal of this study is to identify the predictors of incidental exposure to news online.

To achieve each of the two goals, we used both a laboratory experiment and a public opinion survey. This project first tested a causal relationship between incidental exposure and information gain online, using experimental data from 2008. This study also employed a national probability survey to explore predictors of incidental exposure online in the real-world social media context of 2012. Findings will contribute to the literature on the processes of learning about public affairs through incidental exposure to news in the changing media environment.

## 1. Study 1: effects of incidental exposure on information gain

### 1.1. Literature review

In the online media environment, information filtering plays important roles in individual information gain, which in turn leads to significant societal consequences (Bimber, 2004; Prior, 2007). However, that filtering of information is neither perfect nor always activated, and thus enables individuals to learn about public affairs incidentally (Brundidge, 2010a; Tewksbury et al., 2001). In an online environment, information about public affairs is ubiquitous, and features like hyperlinks make it easy to navigate from non-news websites to news websites, facilitating the incidental exposure to news (Brundidge, 2010a). Hence, an individual still can learn about public affairs incidentally even if she is under influence of the selective process.

In fact, incidental exposure has long been considered an important means of gaining political information. Downs (1957) identified two routes of information gain: accidental and sought-for. Incidental information is defined as by-products of individuals' non-political activities, and this type of information does not require any special effort to locate it. Research has occasionally documented that incidental exposure to news can contribute to an individual's learning about public affairs. Television viewers who had not actively selected news programs were found to correctly identify more policies than indifferent non-viewers (Blumler & McQuail, 1968). Residents of northern New Jersey who lived in the New York City TV market were more likely to be aware of candidates in a neighboring New York City election than were people in South New Jersey, though most New Jersey residents had no interest in, and therefore were not intentionally exposing

themselves to, the election (Zukin & Snyder, 1984). In a series of Pew Research survey data, an individual's incidental exposure to news on the Internet was positively associated with their current affairs knowledge (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Most recently, a multi-wave panel survey found that individuals gain political information inadvertently through their unintended exposure to public service TV channels in the 2010 Swedish election (Shehata et al., 2015).

These findings strongly suggest associations between incidental exposure and political information gain. However, it remains to be tested whether such exposure to news *causally* influences learning about the public affairs information in the news. Previous studies mostly used a survey design to show associations between incidental exposure and political information gain, an approach which has inherent limitations in rejecting alternative explanations about the relationship between key variables. Thus, there is a need for the study of the causal relationship utilizing an experimental design in the political context.

Research based on experiments suggests that incidental news encounters indeed causally influence subsequent learning about the issues covered by the news. For example, consumers formed attitudes toward products in advertisements even in the absence of conscious processing of the information (Janiszewski, 1988). Incidental exposure influences not only preferences for stimuli but also subsequent judgments, such as consideration of purchasing certain products (Shapiro, Macinnis, & Heckler, 1997).

Incidental exposure has been found to have associations with learning in political communication contexts, and to have causal effects on consumer knowledge and attitudes in the setting of marketing. The discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Incidental exposure will have positive effects on learning about the political information in the online media environment.

Furthermore, an individual has a number of different opportunities to come across news on the Internet accidentally, but such encounters with news do not always result in the same pattern of news use. For instance, when an individual is initially exposed to a link to news in her Facebook news feed, she could ignore it and move to the next posts, or could click on the link to read about and engage with the news. When she actually reads news after the initial encounter with the news link, she is far more likely to think about the information she has read. It is unlikely that these two different paths will evoke similar consequences in learning about news events. The latter is a serial process coined as "gateway effects", where initial exposure to information leads to consumption and integration of more substantial news (Baum & Jamison, 2011, p. 125, p. 125).

Related research has documented that thinking about program content is positively associated with information holding (Perse, 1990b), as well as a key predictor of learning about public affairs from news exposure (Eveland, 2001). It may be because, through the process of the gateway effect, audiences can integrate newly-obtained information into their existing knowledge structure and thus achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the news events (Perse, 1990a). Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

**H2.** The effects of initial incidental exposure on information gain will be mediated by actual exposure to the news through the gateway effect in the online media environment.

### 1.2. Method

#### 1.2.1. Data

Study 1 employed an experimental design, because it is crucial

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