

Abstract

On social network sites (SNS), people are increasingly confronted with news content—even if they have not actively been looking for it. Although it is widely recognized that SNS have become a main driver for such incidental news exposure, we know little about the factors that influence whether users engage with news encountered on SNS. Thus, this study investigates under which conditions incidental news exposure becomes actual engagement with news by asking how both the perception of the news post and general news usage patterns influence the intention to read news articles encountered on SNS as well as the intention to look for further information about the covered issues. Building on a mobile forced experience sampling study consisting of 840 Facebook news encounters reported from 124 participants, we find that news engagement is mostly determined by participants' perceived interestingness of and prior knowledge about the issue of the news post and to a much lesser degree by social factors unique to SNS (i.e., feelings towards the spreader of the news). In contrast, no influence of content-independent news usage patterns on news engagement could be observed.

Keywords: social network sites, Facebook, online news, incidental news exposure, news engagement, mobile experience sampling method (MESM)

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From Incidental News Exposure to News Engagement—How Perceptions of the News Post and News Usage Patterns Influence Engagement with News Articles Encountered on Facebook

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the ways in which people keep up with what is going on in the world around them have changed rapidly. Especially social network sites (SNS) like Facebook have affected how individuals find, consume, and engage with news content. In today's media environment, it happens more and more frequently that SNS users encounter news content during their SNS usage even though they have not been actively looking for it. Imagine a Facebook user who just wants to post some pictures of her weekend trip, but—while browsing through her news feed—sees that her best friend liked an article of *The New York Times*, notices her university shared a link to a *TIME* report or stumbles over new content of *MSNBC* in her timeline, whose fan page she had liked a few months ago. Hence, the boundaries between (political) news and mundane everyday life experiences, that is, public and private sphere, are getting more and more porous (Brundidge, 2010). Although it is widely recognized that SNS have become a main driver for such incidental news exposure (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016; Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2016), we still know little about the factors that influence whether users actually engage with news encountered on SNS—or decide to ignore it. While incidental news exposure neither is a new phenomenon nor exclusively found online, SNS have dramatically changed the frequency and magnitude of this phenomenon. According to Pew Research Center polls, 62% of Facebook news users get news on the site mostly by chance—and not because they were actively trying to catch up with recent developments (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). At the same time, SNS, being *social* media, systematically add a layer of social cues to incidental news exposure. Hence, additionally to first

impressions about the news article itself, users' feelings towards the person, group, or organization that recommended/spread the article might alter their willingness to engage with news encountered on SNS.

Given the increasing relevance of incidental news exposure on SNS, our study seeks to understand under which conditions incidental news exposure on SNS becomes actual engagement with news. We do so by building on the curated flows framework (Thorson & Wells, 2016) and asking how both the (content-dependent) *perception of the news post* and (content-independent) *general news usage patterns* influence the intention to read news articles encountered on Facebook as well as the intention to look for further information about the covered issues. By doing so, we aim to fill a gap in the literature that—albeit having already addressed the effects of incidental news exposure on SNS, particularly the relationship with political participation—did not dig deeper into the phenomenon itself, that is, the intermediate step from (mere) exposure to engagement with news that users incidentally encounter on SNS. Empirically, we build on a mobile forced experience sampling study consisting of 840 Facebook news encounters reported from 124 German participants in October 2016.

2. From Incidental Exposure to Engagement with News

During the past decade, SNS have become a constitutive part of online news distribution and consumption (Mitchell & Page, 2015). As early as 2012, all US newspapers with a weekday circulation of more than 100,000 were using SNS as a means to deliver their content (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014)—nowadays, five years later, a news provider without a Facebook or Twitter page seems even more inconceivable. Due to convenient and easy-to-use tools like the “Share” or “Like” buttons, both online news sites and SNS facilitate and simplify the recommendation and dissemination of news content among users, which has an effect both on users actively engaging

in such sharing activities as well as on users exposed to shared news content. Empirical evidence so far suggests that incidental news exposure on SNS has the potential to foster both political participation and the learning of political information (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2016; Bode, 2016; Y. Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015). However, in order to achieve such beneficial effects, users have to actually *engage* with the content they encounter on SNS. In the following sections, we discuss the phenomenon of incidental news exposure and shed light on factors that might influence the shift from mere exposure to engagement with news in the context of SNS. As Facebook is “by far the most important network for finding, reading/watching, and sharing news” (Newman et al., 2016, p. 8; see also Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 4) and, as a result, the SNS of choice for our empirical study, the subsequent chapters are generally focused on Facebook. However, most of the discussed characteristics also apply to similar services like Twitter or local SNS counterparts.

2.1 Incidental News Exposure on the Internet

Incidental exposure to (political) information and news is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon and thus has been discussed long before the advent of the Internet. Downs (1957), for example, described two mechanisms of information acquisition that can foster the learning about public affairs. Focusing on the concept of information cost, he differentiates between actively collected “sought-for data” and passively acquired “accidental data” (Downs, 1957, p. 223). Defining the latter, he already addresses three essential features that continue to be distinctive characteristics of incidental forms of information acquisition:

Accidental data are *by-products* of the non-political activities of a citizen; they accrue to him *without any special effort* on his part to find them. Thus, their *cost in time is*

ordinarily much lower than that of sought-for data. (Downs, 1957, p. 223, emphasis by the authors)

In the ‘offline world’ people could, for example, obtain such accidental data about public affairs while passing a news kiosk and glancing at a headline, while talking with a neighbor¹, or while waiting for their favorite TV show and inadvertently watching the last five minutes of a newscast. Research prior to the Internet mainly focused on the potential of television to encourage incidental or passive learning—commonly with a focus on those not interested in politics (Blumler, 1970; Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Krugman & Hartley, 1970; Zukin & Snyder, 1984). Following Blumler (1970), television was believed to be particularly influential in conveying political information in passing due to the sequential presentation of information, the general appeal of audiovisual stimuli, and the predominantly recreational use of the medium. Taken together, television made it harder to avoid (political) information—particularly when compared with newspapers that present different pieces of information simultaneously instead of chronologically and lack the ‘spell’ of moving pictures. Schönbach and Weaver (1985, p. 173) termed this the “trap” effect, specifically referring to television’s ability to capture viewers that are indifferent about politics. In addition, up until the early 1980s, people could only choose from a handful of networks, making it even harder to escape news programs altogether. In his seminal work, *Post-broadcast Democracy*, Prior (2007) argues that with the shift from low-choice broadcast television to the current high-choice media environment incidental learning of news, and especially of political information, has become less common for people with no interest in politics. While cable news and Internet provide “a feast for news junkies” (Prior, 2007, p. 49), people with a preference for entertainment have better options to avoid the news, which is assumed to lead to more inequalities in terms of political involvement.

However, while drastically increasing information choices, the Internet also offers an abundance of possibilities to stumble upon news content by accident, thus structurally reducing the costs (e.g., in time, in effort) of news acquisition (Brundidge, 2010). Tewksbury and colleagues (2001) were one of the first to study such incidental news exposure on the World Wide Web, using Pew Research Center survey data from 1996 and 1998. Their results show that approximately half of all respondents reported incidental news exposure and that this exposure was associated with a greater knowledge of current affairs—albeit effect sizes were relatively small. While the study offers first insights into the phenomenon of incidental news exposure online, it is limited by the fact that the measurement of incidental news exposure relied on a simple binary distinction (yes/no). Furthermore, due to reliance on secondary data, the study did not distinguish between different applications (e.g., search engines, portal websites), thus providing a rather general look into the phenomenon. More recent studies, however, have addressed these issues by asking about the frequency of incidental news exposure and examining specific applications instead of ‘the Internet’ as a whole (Y. Kim et al., 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015). Although focusing on political participation as the dependent variable, the results are quite similar to those of Tewksbury and colleagues (2001): Incidental news exposure is positively associated with both offline and online political participation. However, while Kim and colleagues (2013) found that the positive effect of incidental news exposure on online political participation was *weaker* for respondents with a preference for entertainment over news, Valeriani and Vaccari (2015) found that the correlation is *stronger* among the politically less interested respondents. Hence, the conclusions range between a rather pessimistic view of incidental news exposure increasing existing gaps in political participation (Y. Kim et al., 2013) and a rather optimistic view of incidental news exposure’s ability to reduce said gaps (Valeriani

& Vaccari, 2015). Considering these differences, one should also note that Kim and colleagues condensed incidental news exposure via eight different Internet applications into a single index while Valeriani and Vaccari just focused on incidental news exposure on SNS. However, given the contradictory empirical evidence so far, it seems beneficial to—*before* discussing the potential effects of incidental news exposure on SNS—first unpack and analyze the specific characteristics of the SNS information environment that might alter the processing of incidentally encountered news.

2.2 The SNS Information Environment: Rethinking Incidental News Exposure

First, being inadvertently exposed to news on SNS differs from other forms of incidental news exposure as a) users can personally influence the likelihood of encountering news content and b) news are increasingly merged with personal social context information. Theorizing on information exposure in the age of social media, the curated flows framework (Thorson & Wells, 2016) defines five sets of curating actors that shape recent information environments and helps to understand both the factors influencing the likelihood of incidentally encountering news on SNS as well as the factors influencing the shift from exposure to engagement. Thorson and Wells (2016) argue that curation processes in the age of social media are not only undertaken by journalistic actors, but also by algorithmic filters, strategic communicators, social contacts, and individual media users. Curation processes of the latter, termed *personal curation*, are especially important when considering why some people encounter more news than others. Through intentional customization of one's SNS information environment—for example through following news providers or through prioritizing their posts—users can actively shape what they would like to see in their news feed. Although the actual content flow is not under the user's control (i.e., *which* articles are linked by a news provider), the likelihood of encountering certain

types of content can be increased. Thus, while the exposure to a certain article in one's news feed is in fact incidental, the act of following a news provider is not. However, even SNS users that refrain from such an intentional customization are likely to encounter news content through *social curation*, that is, curation performed by the human social network to which a given SNS user is connected. In that case, news content does not flow directly from a news provider to the user but gets 'filtered' through personal contacts (= friends who share or like news articles on SNS) that might moderate her willingness to engage with a given piece of news. Adding *algorithmic curation* to the picture, it can be assumed that posts (or actions) by friends or pages with whom the user regularly interacts are especially likely to be displayed in her news feed.

Second—albeit not unique for SNS—, being inadvertently exposed to news on SNS does not necessarily mean being exposed to the whole piece. As the most common practice of news providers on SNS is to share hyperlinks referring to articles on their websites (Himmelboim & McCreery, 2012; Ju et al., 2014), users generally only see a short illustrated teaser linking to the original article. While for some forms of factual public affairs knowledge this small piece of information might just be enough (e.g., “Donald Trump sworn in as 45th president of the United States”), we would argue that the processing and, ultimately, acquiring of more complex information—especially of structural (political) knowledge (Eveland & Hutchens, 2008)—requires more than a short teaser. Indeed, a recent study by Lee and Kim (2017) shows that the relationship between incidental exposure to news and the recall of news events is fully mediated by *actual* exposure to the linked article.

Hence, in order to study socially desirable outcomes of incidental news exposure like political knowledge or political participation, it seems useful to focus first on the question of *further engagement*: What prompts people to click on an incidentally encountered link to a news

article and engage with its content? Interestingly enough the potential behaviors triggered by the first encounter with a given news article (like actually reading it or even looking for further information about the covered issues) are rarely discussed in the literature on incidental news exposure—although these behaviors will necessarily mediate the relationship with target values like political knowledge or participation. A gap in the literature that is not only found in the context of SNS but also in earlier studies focusing on portal websites or search engines that share the characteristic of exposure to incomplete information on the encounter level. Valuable insight regarding factors influencing such further engagement can be found in recent studies on selective exposure in social media environments (see, for example, Beam, 2014; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016). However, these studies seem only partially transferable to the study of incidental news exposure on SNS. For one thing, these studies have focused on *metric* social cues (“3,000 people like that”) instead of *personal* social cues (“[Your Friend] shared *TIME*’s post”), thus dismissing one of SNS’s distinct characteristics. Aside from that, but closely related, they relied on predefined experimental stimuli instead of users’ actual SNS experience, thus hampering external validity. Taken together, the unique characteristics of the SNS (information) environment—individual customization/experience and personal social context information—have not been adequately addressed yet.

2.3 Factors Influencing the Shift from Exposure to Engagement

Following the curated flows framework (Thorson & Wells, 2016), the shift from SNS news exposure to further engagement can both be influenced by factors tied to a specific content (e.g., in the case of *social curation*) and factors independent of a specific piece of content (e.g., in the case of *personal curation*). In the following, we will discuss the potential of such content-dependent and content-independent factors in guiding the intention to engage with news posts

encountered on SNS. We do not claim that these factors cover every relevant aspect in the process of incidental news exposure. Rather, in this initial study, we focus on more overriding factors—especially in the area of content-dependent factors—while excluding more fine-grained perceptions (e.g., of visual stimuli or content popularity). Thus, the discussion should be seen as a starting point for addressing and indexing additional influencing factors.

Content-dependent Factors. In the context of incidental news exposure on SNS, we define content-dependent factors as all perceptions that are directly related to a specific news post a user encounters in her news feed. As these perceptions are subjective in nature, a news post does not have objective, inherent qualities, but is interpreted by the user according to her momentary emotional condition, general beliefs, and predispositions. Psychological studies on human memory and learning, for example, have shown that *prior knowledge* affects selective attention in that knowledge-relevant features are being fixated more often than irrelevant ones (S. Kim & Rehder, 2011). However, applying this to incidental news exposure on SNS, it is an empirical question whether this initial attention also sparks further engagement. On the one hand, prior knowledge might *inhibit* both the intention to read the article that is being referred to in the news post as well as the intention to look for further information, because the user feels satiated and does not expect to find any new information. On the other hand, prior knowledge might *facilitate* this intention if a user seeks to verify or reconsider the adequacy of her information or wants to acquire even more knowledge on the topic. Like prior knowledge, users' *topical interest* is another content-dependent factor that should affect both initial attention to and further engagement with news posts. According to Deci and Ryan (1985, p. 34) interest “plays an important directive role in intrinsically motivated behavior in that people naturally approach activities that interest them”. Hence, if a user is highly interested in the topic that the news post

suggests the linked article to be about, she should be more inclined to engage with it. In fact, a recent study by Mummolo (2016) shows that topical interest drastically increased the probability of selecting news items—even when sources were politically dissonant. Building on recent selective exposure research, the list of content-dependent factors influencing further engagement with incidentally encountered news posts could be further extended by including concepts like perceived credibility (e.g., Winter & Krämer, 2014), informational utility (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012), or attitude-consistency (e.g., Winter et al., 2016).

While all the factors mentioned above also apply to engagement decisions in more traditional media, another content-dependent factor—the perception of the information intermediary, that is, the news spreader associated with the post—adds a social dimension to news perceptions on SNS. Focusing on incidental news exposure triggered by posts or (inter)actions of friends (i.e., social curation, see Thorson & Wells, 2016), the user's perception of the friend that visibly shares or likes a news post might alter her willingness to engage with it. Recent research supports this idea: Kwon, Stefanone, and Barnett (2014), for example, showed that social contagion induced from SNS exposure was able to increase favorability assessments for specific ideas. Similarly, Turcotte and colleagues (2015) found that SNS recommendations from friends perceived as opinion leaders led to more trust in the recommended media outlet and increased the user's likelihood of seeking news from that outlet in the future, while Anspach (2017) uncovered that online endorsements by Facebook friends not only serve as relevant factors when deciding which content to consume, but are also able to outweigh partisan selectivity. More generally, it seems reasonable to assume that a user will be more inclined to engage with a (news) post by a friend she has positive feelings towards compared to a recommendation by a SNS acquaintance she does not cherish equally. Along these lines,

Messing and Westwood (2013) found that people were 50% more likely to attend to media recommended by a strong tie compared to media recommended by a weak tie. Likewise, we assume that the general feelings people have when seeing posts from certain SNS contacts can be a relevant factor when it comes to engagement decisions. Of course, the occurrence of *social* curation is highly connected with *algorithmic* curation (Thorson & Wells, 2016): As the Facebook algorithm prioritizes (news) content that is shared by people from the user's network ("Friends and family come first", see Mosseri, 2016), news shared by (close) friends might not only be perceived as more relevant but also be encountered more often in the first place. Both mechanisms are likely to lead to lower exposure to ideological diverse content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

Content-independent Factors. As opposed to content-dependent factors, we define content-independent factors as general patterns or user characteristics that are not directly related to the encountered news post. In the context of news use, it seems particularly likely that general news usage patterns might affect how users deal with news on SNS. It can be assumed, for example, that users that frequently engage with news *outside* of SNS are also more likely to engage with news posts encountered *there* due to a general preference for current affairs content. Likewise, users engaging in personal curation, that is, intentional customization of their SNS news environment (e.g., through following news providers, see Thorson & Wells, 2016), might be more inclined to click on links to news articles. Supporting these assumptions, a recent survey from the Pew Research Center (Mitchell et al., 2016) shows that users who are *actively* seeking news out—compared with those for whom news are only an incidental part of their online experience—are more interested in news overall. This suggests that their engagement decisions might be less selective in terms of covered issues or topics, thus prompting higher levels of

overall news engagement. Again, many comparable content-independent factors that have been studied or utilized within the wider domain of selective exposure research (e.g., need for orientation [Camaj, 2014] or need for cognition [Winter & Krämer, 2012]) could eventually be considered when investigating the shift from exposure to engagement.

As a first step, derived from the characteristics of the SNS information environment and existing empirical research, this study seeks to investigate an initial set of factors that might affect whether users decide to engage with incidentally encountered news posts. We therefore ask:

*(I) How do the **content-dependent perception of the news post** (feelings towards the spreader; prior knowledge; topical interest) and users' **content-independent general news usage patterns** (frequency of news use; personal curation of news on Facebook) influence the intention to read news articles encountered on Facebook?*

*(II) How do the **content-dependent perception of the news post** (feelings towards the spreader; prior knowledge; topical interest) and users' **content-independent general news usage patterns** (frequency of news use; personal curation of news on Facebook) influence the intention to search for further information about the covered issues?*

3. Method

3.1 Design and Sample

Data for our investigation were collected in a naturalistic setting via a mobile forced experience sampling study accompanied by an online pre-questionnaire among German-speaking Facebook users in October 2016. This approach is based on the Experience Sampling Method developed in sociological research on the everyday life (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). Experience sampling gives *in situ* access to everyday usage situations of (mobile) media,

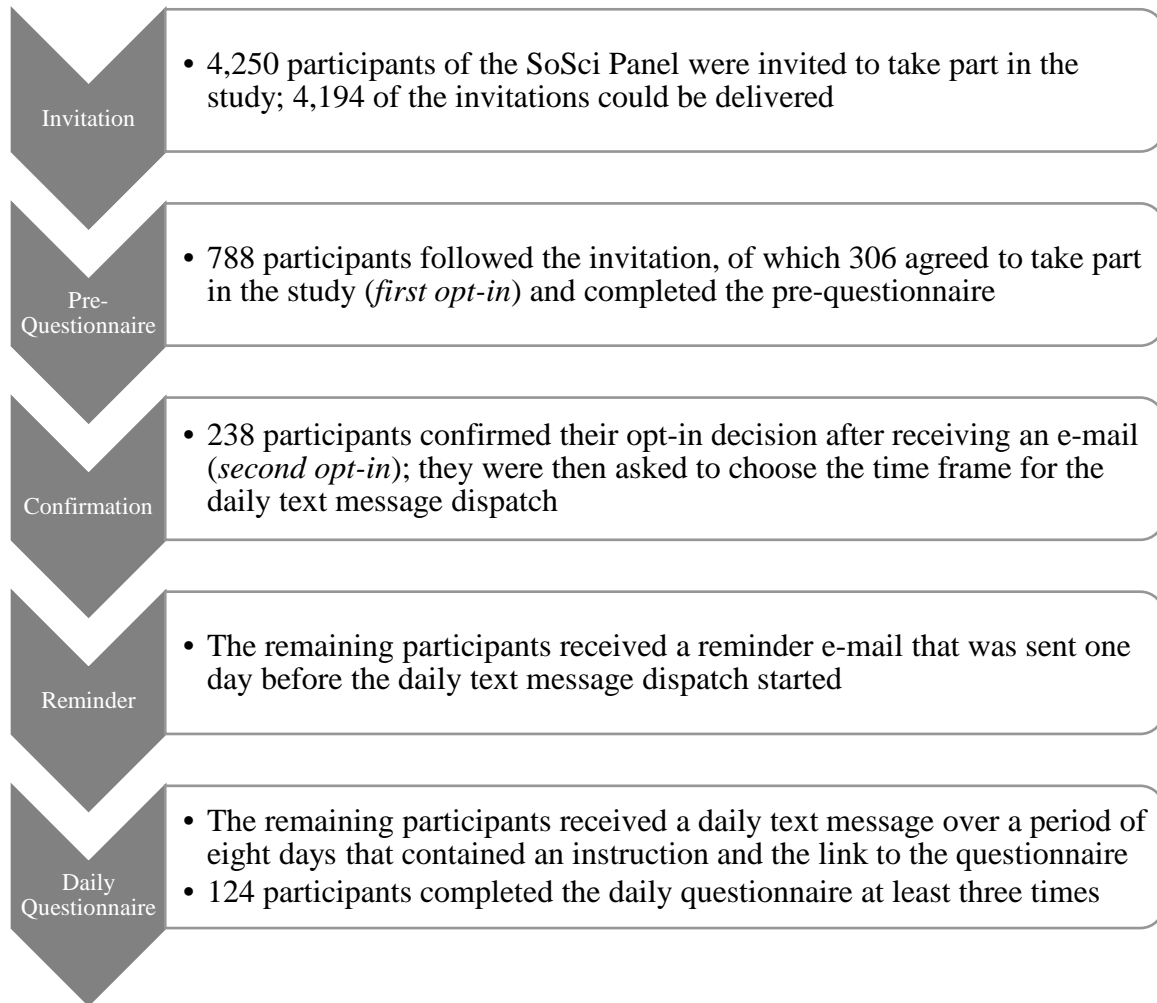
thus allowing to collect data within or close to the context that is studied (Abdesslem, Parris, & Henderson, 2010; Karnowski, 2013). We adapted this approach in two ways: (1) Alike several other recent studies (e.g., Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016; Struckmann & Karnowski, 2016)—but in contrast to the original Experience Sampling Method—data was gathered using participants’ personal smartphones instead of paper-and-pencil questionnaires and beepers, and (2) we did not collect *in situ* data on a natural everyday usage situation, but induced a usage situation in the sense of a “forced experience” (analogous to forced exposure studies). Consequently, we are terming our approach a mobile forced experience sampling study. This approach allowed us to—although forcing participants into the experience—base our study on a sample of naturalistic news encounters.

Participants were recruited using a non-commercial online access panel (SoSci Panel). Although lacking representativeness, the SoSci Panel provides more heterogeneity than regular student convenience samples, especially regarding education, age, and gender (Leiner, 2016). Participation in the study was voluntary, unpaid, and participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality regarding the obtained data. As an incentive to participate, all participants were furthermore included in a lottery of four vouchers, worth 50 euros each, for an online retail store.

The different stages of the multi-level survey process are illustrated in Figure 1. First, invitations to take part in the study were sent to 4,250 panelists, of which 4,194 could be delivered. 788 participants followed the invitation, of which 306 agreed to *want* to take part in the study (*first opt-in* through providing cell phone number and e-mail address), indicated to be *able* to take part in the study (preconditions: mobile Facebook use; smartphone with mobile Internet connection), and completed the pre-questionnaire. Data obtained by the pre-

questionnaire included information about participants' general (content-independent) news usage patterns as well as sociodemographic characteristics (see below for measures).

Figure 1. Stages of the survey process.



Besides, a short instructional video (1:30 min) was integrated into the pre-questionnaire.

The video demonstrated the procedure of responding to the daily questionnaire, thus showing participants what to expect from the study.² Second, the participants were asked in an e-mail to confirm their first opt-in decision (*second opt-in*). This confirmed opt-in was necessary to ensure a) that the participants provided a valid e-mail address, and b), even more importantly, that a third party was not able to subscribe someone else—accidentally or intentionally—to the study. 238 participants confirmed their first opt-in and were then asked to choose a two-hour time

frame between 08.00 a.m. and 10.00 p.m. for the daily text message dispatch. We decided to let the participants choose the time frame themselves to assure that they were in a situation that allowed to respond in a timely manner. Third, one day before the daily text message dispatch started, a reminder e-mail was sent to the participants that included a thank-you note as well as, once more, a link to the instructional video mentioned above. After that, participants received a daily text message over a period of eight days that contained a short instruction and the link to the questionnaire that was accessible via participants' mobile internet connection. The instruction was written as follows:

Hello, thank you for participating in our study. Please open Facebook and scroll down to the first news post in your news feed. After that, please open the following questionnaire: [*Link*].

Hence, as explained in the video (and always accessible as a detailed written instruction in the daily questionnaire, too) participants were asked to open Facebook on their smartphone and look for the first post that contained news.³ For this study, we opted not to define news posts (a problematic task per se, see Vraga, Bode, Smithson, & Troller-Renfree, 2016), but rather went with participants' perceptions. Consequently, participants decided for themselves which posts they considered to be news posts. However, we provided examples of topic areas such as politics, sports, celebrity news, and the economy, emphasizing that both hard news and soft news could be defined as news.

Participants were asked to take a close look at the post and remember its topic respectively the covered issues. Afterwards, they completed the short daily questionnaire. Data obtained by the daily questionnaire included a short description of the encountered post (as provided by the participants), variables addressing the content-dependent perception of the news

post (feelings towards the spreader; prior knowledge; topical interest), and the central dependent variables (intention to read the news article, intention to look for further information).

As stated above, our initial sample consisted of 238 participants that confirmed the second opt-in. Table 1 shows how many participants completed the daily questionnaire on how many of the eight days. After filtering out all participants that did not finish the entire daily questionnaire on at least three of the eight days, data of 124 participants and 840 completed daily questionnaires could be used for analysis.

Table 1. Response Behavior (Daily Questionnaire)

<i>Number of days (d)</i> on which the questionnaire was completed	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Number of participants</i> that completed the questionnaire on <i>d</i> day(s)	74	32	8	3	10	10	17	33	51

Demographic characteristics of the sample included age ($M = 32.47$, $SD = 10.49$), gender (72.7% female) and educational level (55.6% with a university degree, 32.3% with a higher education entrance qualification and only 12.1% with lower educational qualifications).

Participants were mainly heavy users of Facebook, with 84% accessing the site daily. A similar picture could be observed for participants' news use: 86% use news on a daily basis.

3.2 Measures⁴

Measures in the pre-questionnaire. Measures in the pre-questionnaire were focused on participants' general news usage patterns, thus covering the *content-independent* factors that might affect whether users decide to engage with incidentally encountered news posts or not. Based on Hölzig and Hasebrink (2016), *frequency of news use* was assessed by asking participants how often they usually read, hear, or watch current news using a 10-point scale ranging from "never" to "more frequently than hourly" ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 1.21$). Following theoretical

considerations by Thorson and Wells (2016), participants' amount of *personal curation of news on Facebook* was assessed by asking them about how many news providers they are following on Facebook with the five possible answers being 1=none, 2=up to five, 3=six to ten, 4=eleven to 15 and 5=more than 15 (*Mdn* = 2).

Measures in the daily questionnaire. Measures in the daily questionnaire were focused on participants' subjective perception of the news post, thus covering relevant *content-dependent* factors that might affect whether users decide to engage with incidentally encountered news posts or not. As stated above, the daily questionnaires were administered in the form of an adapted experience sampling study. Consequently, the length of the daily questionnaires is limited to very few questions (see Karnowski, 2013; Kubey, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), making it necessary to mostly rely on single-item measures instead of generally more reliable multi-item measures.

Because we assumed that the general feelings people have when seeing posts from certain Facebook friends—or from groups or (media) organizations they are following— influence their news engagement, we asked participants what kind of feelings they have when they see a post from the respective friend/group/organization on a scale from 1=negative feelings to 5=positive feelings (*feelings towards the spreader*). Because the information intermediary ('news spreader') is dependent on the specific situation, this question was worded differently according to whether the participant had indicated that the news post was shared by a friend, group, or organization. However, as the general direction of effects should be the same for all these scenarios, we combined the feelings towards the friend/group/organization to a single variable ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.02$). Participants' *topical interest* was assessed by asking "How much interest do you have in the topic of the news post?", with the scale ranging from 1=no interest at

all to 5=much interest ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.28$), while participants' *prior knowledge* was measured by asking "Is the topic of the article new to you or do you already have prior knowledge about it?" on a scale from 1=The topic is completely new to me to 5=I already have a lot of prior knowledge about it ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.38$).

The dependent variables *intention to read the news article* and *intention to look for further information* were assessed with the following questions: "If you think about how you are using Facebook: How likely is it that you give the news article that is mentioned in the post more than a glance?" ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.44$) and "How likely is it that you will look for further information on the topic?" ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.38$), both on a scale from 1=very unlikely to 5=very likely. As recent research points to the ambiguity of the behavior 'clicking on news links' (Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2017), we refrained from assessing participants' *actual* behavior and decided to ask more specifically about the likelihood of the engagement behaviors we were interested in.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

The combination of a (single) pre-questionnaire and (multiple) daily questionnaires per participant as well as the fact that our independent variables are located both on the level of the *user* and the level of the *news post*, results in a nested data structure. Hence, a multilevel approach is appropriate to answer our research questions. The first level of our model (i.e., level of the news post) is represented by the data gathered in the daily questionnaires, which were filled in at least three times by each participant (level-1 measures: *feelings towards the spreader*, *topical interest*, *prior knowledge*), while the second level (i.e., level of the user) consists of data derived from the pre-questionnaire (level-2 measures: *frequency of news use*, *personal curation of news on Facebook*). Our analysis is based on a model with randomly varying intercepts for

each participant/level-2 group (*random intercept model*, see Robson & Pevalin, 2015). Given the limited number of observations on the second level, we confine our analyses to a rather simple multilevel model that allows for accurate testing of our hypotheses but refrains from modelling possible further effects.

We used two separate regression models for each of the two dependent variables. The level 1 models explained either the *intention to read the news article* or the *intention to look for further information* by including the participants' feelings towards the spreader, her topical interest, and prior knowledge. Group affiliation (i.e., the user/participant) served as a random variable in this model. In the next step, the group intercepts were then included as outcome variables in both level 2 regression equations (similar to a means model, see Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). All models were calculated using maximum likelihood estimation, allowing for comparisons of model fit.

4. Results

In a first step, we investigated whether the participants differed in their intention to read news articles they encountered on Facebook and whether they were inclined to look for further information about the issues discussed. Single-level one-way analyses of variance showed highly significant differences between participants for both dependent measures, $F_{Reading}(1, 123) = 2.90$, $p < .001$; $F_{FurtherInformation}(1, 123) = 2.52$, $p < .001$.

As it is common in multilevel modelling, we started from a baseline model containing only our level-1 measures and controlling for interpersonal differences by including the participants' IDs as a grouping variable within which the intercept was allowed to vary randomly per person. Focusing on the intention to read news articles that were incidentally encountered on Facebook, the person itself (i.e., the grouping variable ID) accounts for 22% of variance in the

outcome ($R^2 = 0.22$). As shown in Table 2, all level-1 measures contribute significantly to the intention to read news articles with topical interest being the most important predictor ($b = 0.85$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Feelings towards the spreader (i.e., the person, group, or [media] organization that visibly shared or liked the news post) also show a positive impact on reading intention ($b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$), while prior knowledge concerning the topic of the news post is negatively associated with reading intention ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Hence, the more interested a user is in the topic discussed in an article, the less she already knows about the topic, and the more positive feelings she has towards the “spreader” of the news, the more likely she is to engage with a news article encountered on Facebook.

In a second step, we added our level-2 measures, resulting in a small, but significant increase in model fit ($\chi^2(1) = 77.17$, $p < .001$). However, none of the level-2 measures (*frequency of news use*, *personal curation of news on Facebook*) had a significant effect on the intention to read the respective news articles (see Table 2). Therefore, our results suggest that the intention to read news articles one has incidentally encountered on SNS is mainly driven by content-dependent characteristics such as the perceived interestingness of the article, prior knowledge of the topic, and—to a lesser degree—the feelings towards the “spreader”.

Regarding the predictors of intention to look for further information, a slightly different picture emerges. In this case, only perceived interestingness contributes significantly to the outcome ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), whereas feelings towards the spreader of the article as well as prior knowledge have neither meaningful nor significant effects. As in the model reported above, adding the level-2 measures leads to a small, but significant increase in model fit ($\chi^2(1) = 57.21$, $p < .001$). However, none of the level-2 measures are associated with the intention to look for further information about the issues covered in a news article one has

encountered on Facebook. Taken together, general news usage patterns like frequency of news use and personal curation of news on Facebook neither have an impact on users' intention to read news articles encountered on Facebook nor to look for further information about the covered issues.

Table 2. Explaining Intentions to Read News Articles Encountered on Facebook and to Look for Further Information

Parameter	Intention to read news articles	Intention to look for further information
Fixed effects		
Intercept	0.33* (0.14)	0.12 (0.14)
<i>Level 1 (Perception of the news post)</i>		
Feelings towards spreader	0.10** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Prior knowledge	-0.10*** (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Topical interest	0.85*** (0.03)	0.78*** (0.03)
-2*log likelihood	2985	2907
<i>Level 2 (General news usage patterns)</i>		
Frequency of news use	0.10 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)
Personal curation of news on Facebook	0.05 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
-2*log likelihood	2914	2857

Note. Unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; number of observations = 802, number of groups = 124.

5. Discussion

The present study attempted to understand under which conditions incidental news exposure on social network sites (SNS) results in actual engagement with news by asking how both the (content-dependent) *perception of the news post* and (content-independent) *general news usage patterns* influence the intention to read news articles encountered on Facebook as well as the intention to look for further information about the covered issues. It does so in a unique way by building on data from natural SNS usage situations instead of relying on forced

exposure experiments or retrospective surveys. To uncover possible antecedents of SNS news engagement, a mobile forced experience sampling study accompanied by an online pre-questionnaire was conducted among German-speaking Facebook users over the course of eight days. The collected data allowed us to analyze 840 actual Facebook news encounters reported from 124 participants.

Summing up our results, we first found that only users' content-dependent perception of the news post predicted reading intentions. These findings go along with previous investigations of engagement decisions in more traditional media, having shown that users' *topical interest* of the content as well as their *prior knowledge* about the topic had the strongest effect on reading intentions (e.g., Bolsen & Leeper, 2013; Eilders, 2006, p. 14; Mummolo, 2016). However, we found that social curation processes distinctive of SNS—in the form of users' *feelings towards the news spreader*—also had a significant effect on users' reading intentions. Hence, we could add further evidence to previous empirical research (e.g., Anspach, 2017; Turcotte et al., 2015) suggesting that the contextual social cues added by social media indeed influence the effects of media content provided via SNS.

Second, focusing on the intention to search for further information about the covered issues, the influence of *topical interest* largely remained as described above for reading intention, whereas the aforementioned influence of *prior knowledge* and *feelings towards the news spreader* disappeared. One could argue that the information added through social curation processes only seems to influence further news engagement as long as it demands little effort from the user. As soon as efforts increase, the influence seems to fade. This discrepancy roughly resembles the processes modelled by dual process theories (e.g., ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986): Social information added by SNS curation processes seems to act as a peripheral cue to engage

further with the news content. However, as soon as further effort is needed, the influence of this peripheral cue disappears and only characteristics associated with central processing—like interest in the topic—prevail. Future research should try to clarify, both conceptually and empirically, the relationship between the influence of social curation and the effort the user needs to invest in order to further engage with news.

Third, our findings did not support any influence of (content-independent) *general news usage patterns* on neither the intention to read the news article nor on the intention to look for further information. As we could see in our data, the variance of further news engagement is mainly explained on the first level of the specific (content-dependent) news encounter, whereas including the second level of overarching news usage patterns adds no explanatory power. This finding thus adds further empirical evidence to existing research (e.g., Struckmann & Karnowski, 2016) showing that media use—such as further engagement with news content—indeed seems to be mainly influenced by characteristics of the varying situational contexts of media use instead of overarching patterns. Although we expected that users that frequently engage with news content *outside* of SNS as well as users that engage in personal curation *on* SNS, that is, intentional customization of their Facebook news environment (e.g., through following news providers, see Thorson & Wells, 2016), might be generally more inclined to engage with incidentally encountered news articles, our data do not support this assumption. Instead, the shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement seems to be mainly influenced by users' momentary, situation-dependent thoughts and perceptions.

Taking these three main findings together, we see that further news engagement with incidentally encountered news articles on Facebook is mainly influenced by the specific situational interplay between the user and her perceptions of the content, particularly her existing

topical interest. As further news engagement is mediating beneficial effects of incidental news exposure like the learning of political information (cf. Beam et al., 2016; Bode, 2016; Lee & Kim, 2017) or political participation (cf. Y. Kim et al., 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015), we therefore have to state that the potential of these beneficial effects might be higher for users who were interested in the news topic they incidentally encountered anyway. Thus, our results are reminiscent of those of Kim and colleagues (2013) who found that the positive effects of incidental news exposure on political participation were stronger for people with a preference for news over entertainment content. Nevertheless, on a more optimistic note, there seems to be an (albeit small) influence of social information added by SNS curation processes, which might lead users to not only learn more about topics they had been interested in before, but also to learn about “something new”, that is, topics they had no prior interest in. To shed further light on these processes, future research should both focus on more diverse forms of news engagement (e.g., recommending or bookmarking articles, see Oh, Bellur, & Sundar, 2015) as well as on differences between specific kinds of social curation processes (e.g., news recommendations directly addressing the user vs. mere observations of friends’ news-related SNS behavior). While our data indicates that users’ content-dependent perceptions of the news post are the prime driver of news engagement decisions, it might nevertheless be useful to study the influence of users’ overarching traits or trait-like characteristics. Specifically, “news-related” (personality) characteristics like *need for cognition* (NFC) or a “*news-finds-me perception*” (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017) might alter the likelihood of news engagement. While prior studies on the relationship between NFC and news-/information-related web usage (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005; e.g., Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001) suggest the assumption that users with a high NFC are more likely to engage with incidentally encountered news articles on SNS, users who are

high in news-finds-me perceptions (= the extent to which people believe they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs), might actually be frequently *exposed* to news posts on SNS, but not motivated to *engage* with the linked article (cf. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Alongside this consideration of further content-independent factors, the list of content-dependent factors influencing further engagement with incidentally encountered news posts could be extended by including concepts like perceived credibility of the news post, perceived news values, or stylistic techniques that are supposed to “lure readers into clicking on the headline” (i.e., *clickbait*, Kuiken, Schuth, Spitters, & Marx, 2017, p. 4).

Our findings, however, should be interpreted with caution due to inherent limitations. First, the recruitment of participants and thus the composition of the sample hamper the generalizability of our results. While the SoSci Panel generally provides quite heterogeneous samples, the inevitable self-selection led to a sample of participants that are highly educated and heavy users of both Facebook and news. A replication of the study with a more diverse sample, especially including more participants with lower levels of formal education and less interest in news, would help to gain a better understanding of the processes influencing news engagement on SNS. Particularly, it can be assumed that the influence of social information added by SNS curation processes might be more pronounced among people with little interest in news as they strive for more guidance in assessing the significance of certain issues or topics. Second, due to our sample size and the associated restrictions for multilevel modelling, we only focused on a small set of content-dependent and content-independent factors that might influence the shift from incidental news exposure to engagement and did not test for possible interaction effects. Future studies therefore should aim for a bigger sample size, allowing to consider further factors on both levels (see above) which might be influential when it comes to users' intention to engage

with incidentally encountered news. Another methodological limitation concerns the reliance on single-item measures. Although single-item measures are generally inferior to multi-item measures, they also have considerable advantages, particularly when working with mobile-based experience sampling questionnaires. While multi-item measures would have burdened participants unnecessarily, single-item measures—due to their elimination of redundancy—can reduce “the fatigue, frustration, and boredom associated with answering highly similar questions repeatedly” (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001, p. 152), which is an issue especially when answering questions on one’s smartphone and/or on the go. However, future studies with a different methodological approach should aim to include more refined, multi-item measures.

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Footnotes

¹Interpersonal communication as a means of encountering news seems to be especially prevalent in times of ‘big’ news events. A meta-analysis of news diffusion studies by Basil and Brown (1994) suggests that the more important the event, the more people are likely to hear about it through interpersonal communication.

²To enable blind review, the video will be made available only after the review process is finished.

³Because we asked participants about the first post that contained *news*, this post was not necessarily the first post in their news feed. Although we—due to wanting to keep the daily questionnaire as short and straightforward as possible—did not ask participants for the post’s exact position, it can be assumed that this approach yields more variance in types of posts than simply asking about the first post and filtering for news posts *ex post*.

⁴All questionnaires were administered in German. All items discussed in the method section represent English translations of the original items.