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Getting Tagged, Getting Involved with News? A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Effects and
Motives of News-Related Tagging Activities on Social Network Sites

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Abstract

Coming across news on social network sites (SNS) largely depends on news-related activities in one's network. Although there are many different ways to stumble upon news, limited research has been conducted on how distinct news curation practices influence users' intention to consume encountered content. In this mixed-methods investigation, using Facebook as an example, we first examine the results of an experiment (study 1, $n = 524$), showing that getting tagged in comments to news posts promotes news consumption the most. Based on this finding, we then focus on actively tagging users by investigating news tagging motives/practices with interactive qualitative interviews centered on participants' Facebook activity logs (study 2, $n = 13$). Overall, the findings show how news tagging, albeit a strong catalyst for reading and interacting with news, mostly favors users already interested in news, thus challenging the optimistic assumption that SNS might foster incidental learning among less interested audiences.

Keywords: social media, social network sites, Facebook, incidental news exposure, online news, news curation, tagging, mixed methods

Getting Tagged, Getting Involved with News? A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Effects and Motives of News-Related Tagging Activities on Social Network Sites

Although not initially designed for being gateways to news and public affairs information, social network sites (SNS), such as Twitter and Facebook, are nowadays a key part of online users' news diet (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). With the continuing decline of print and television news use and especially the younger generations' preference for social media, the importance of SNS as information gateways is likely to become even more important in the future. Importantly, however, using SNS for news does not implicate that information about current events is *actively* searched for. In fact, most users report to encounter news incidentally by being exposed to activities or (paid) posts by news providers and friends (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016, p. 6; see also Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). As the majority of news providers aim to bring traffic to their own websites, SNS users mostly stumble upon illustrated link previews and are free to decide whether they want to follow the link to the full article or just skim through its teaser. While previous research has already linked incidental news exposure on SNS to positive outcomes, including boosting political participation, prompting elaboration about current events, or learning political information (e.g., Bode, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016), it seems crucial to differentiate between coming across teasers and actually reading the linked article (see Lee & Kim, 2017). Thus, before studying the effects of incidental news exposure, it is necessary to focus on the question of what prompts people to actually read and interact with encountered news content.

A number of studies have already begun to examine what influences the step from incidental news exposure to engagement on SNS (e.g., Anspach, 2017; Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017; Kümpel, 2019; Messing & Westwood, 2013; Turcotte, York, Irving,

Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). Addressing one of the central characteristics of encountering news on SNS, the merging of news with personal social cues (e.g., “Jane Doe shared *CNN*’s post”), these studies mainly focused on the question of how such personal social influence might affect users’ selection decisions or information behavior. However, both theoretical considerations and empirical investigations of the different ways SNS users can stumble upon news posts and how these distinct encounters influence intentions to consume news have been lacking. Among other scenarios, SNS users can come across news because they observe their friends’ sharing behavior, because a friend sends the link to an article in a direct message (DM), or because they were mentioned in a friend’s comment to a news post (i.e., ‘got tagged’). As these news curation practices are linked with differing degrees of personalization (e.g., a tag being more personalized than nondirected sharing) and perceived accessibility (e.g., a tag being more public than a DM), they are likely to be perceived and acted upon differently. *How* users are exposed to news might be a crucial factor in motivating them to read and interact with encountered content.

The main aim of the present research project has therefore been to conceptualize and explore the role of different SNS news curation practices on individuals’ news consumption. To do so, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014), that is, we first conducted a quantitative study, analyzed the results, and then aimed to explain and expand the findings with a subsequent qualitative study. The starting point of the project was an online experiment (study 1, $n = 524$), in which German participants were exposed to a news post that supposedly reached them on Facebook either because 1) a news provider posted it, 2) a friend shared it with their entire network, 3) a friend send it to them in a DM, or 4) a friend tagged them in a comment to the post. As the results of the experiment showed that getting tagged motivated users to read the linked article the most, more information regarding the routines and motives of

news tagging was sought for. Thus, in a follow-up study, we specifically focused on actively tagging Facebook users. In this regard, to achieve an in-depth understanding of the motives and practices of news tagging, we conducted qualitative interviews in which we confronted participants with their Facebook activity logs, featuring both their own tagging activities as well as the posts they were tagged in (study 2, $n = 13$). The interviews highlight that news tagging is a curation practice closely tied to social grooming activities and builds mostly on relational rather than content-related considerations. Together, the results suggest that news tagging—albeit being a strong catalyst for reading and interacting with news—mostly favors users already interested in news, thus challenging overly optimistic assumptions regarding the potential of incidental news exposure to foster (political) learning or participation.

Coming Across News on SNS: News Curation Practices and Their Effects

Talking about news content and recommending it to family and friends is certainly not a new phenomenon—interpersonal communication and social influence have always played an important role for the diffusion and interpretation of news (see Basil & Brown, 1994; Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980). Long before the rise of SNS, people have cut out news articles and pinned them to bulletin boards, gave magazines to friends, or suggested political TV shows to colleagues. On SNS, however, social curation practices are more relevant than ever. In today's high-choice media environment, social curation practices do not only considerably shape which news content users *encounter* (if at all), but also how they *perceive* it. Moreover, SNS have drastically increased the visibility and accessibility of news curation practices: As observing the activities and behaviors of one's network is one of the core principles of SNS, social cues are equally ubiquitous and diverse. The following section focuses on prevalent news curation practices on SNS and theoretically assesses their implications for news reading intentions.

Social Curation of News Content

Thorson and Wells' (2016) theoretical framework of *curated flows* proposes that online users are now at the center of personal information networks, which are embedded in different content flows. Although these content flows are highly personalized—especially on SNS—, they can be analytically separated according to different actors who select and shape (i.e., curate) the (news) content users experience. On SNS, curation is not only performed by journalistic actors, but also by algorithmic filters, strategic communicators, one's social contacts, and the users themselves. Curation performed by the users themselves, termed *personal curation* by Thorson and Wells (2016), is especially important when considering why certain users are more likely than others to encounter news content on SNS. By liking the pages of news providers, following journalists, or prioritizing posts, SNS users are able to customize their information network fairly freely. These features, however, are hardly used. In Germany (22 %), the UK (26 %), and the US (32 %), only between a fifth and a third of those who claim to use SNS for news deliberately follow the page of a news provider (Newman et al., 2018). Accordingly, the vast majority of users only comes across news when news providers distribute sponsored posts (a form of *strategic curation*), an algorithm deemed it suitable (*algorithmic curation*), or when their friends/contacts share, recommend, or otherwise interact with news content (*social curation*, see Thorson & Wells, 2016).

With processes of social curation being one of the most important determinants of information flow on SNS, the contacts in a given user's online network can be conceptualized as "micro agenda setters" (Wohn & Bowe, 2016), shaping both the salience of current issues/events as well as their interpretation. To put it simply: News recommendations by our Facebook friends or Twitter contacts not only help us to determine *what* we should think about, but also tell us

how we should think about it. Following Wohn and Bowe (2016), these micro agenda-setting effects are not only determined by the user's relationship with the source (i.e., the recommending friend/contact), but also by "his or her communication patterns with those sources" (p. 3), suggesting that different social curation practices should be more or less effective in shaping the user's sense of reality. In a first step, however, social curation practices might influence a user's willingness to actually read and interact with encountered news content, thus paving the way for the formation of attitudes and beliefs.

On SNS, social curation comes in multiple forms. In line with the masspersonal communication model (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018), we propose that the different social curation practices can be organized according to their degree of *personalization/directedness* and *(perceived) accessibility* (i.e., visibility for the user's friends/contacts, see Table 1). In general, it can be assumed that reading and interacting with encountered news content becomes more likely the more personalized and accessible for others a given news curation practice is. To illustrate this assumption, the examples in Table 1 can be considered: In the first example, a SNS user is exposed to a news post because one of her friends/contacts tagged her in a comment to said post. Besides being a personalized/directed news recommendation, it is also visible to the friends of the user that she was mentioned in the comment, which is potentially changing her "imagined audience" (Litt, 2012), that is, her mental conceptualization of the persons with whom (or in the case of getting tagged: *in front of whom*) she is communicating. If she assumes that the tag is not only seen by her but also by other friends, she might feel a greater responsibility to read the linked article and react to it due to perceived feedback expectations of both the recommending friend and her imagined audience consisting of additional observers (French & Bazarova, 2017). In contrast, the news curation practice in scenario 2 (receiving a DM) is still personalized and

directed, but not visible for others. This social situation only includes the user and the news recommending friend/contact; due to the privacy of the interaction, feedback expectations of third parties are no longer relevant. Hence, reading the news post might be perceived as less urgent or (socially) imperative. This applies even more to the curation practices mentioned in scenario 3, in which social considerations are unlikely to be decisive as the user is neither directly addressed nor in front of an imagined audience. Thus, revisiting the notion of micro agenda-setting, the influence of one's SNS contacts should not only result from *who* sets the agenda, but also from *how* it is set.

Table 1 about here

Empirical evidence for the proposed relationship between different news curation practices on SNS and users' perceptions or subsequent reading intentions remains sparse. In one study, Park and colleagues (2016) investigated forms of paid and earned advertising in the context of Facebook. Their results showed that socially curated brand posts are perceived as more informative, more entertaining, more credible, and less irritating than paid banner ads. Furthermore, the investigated directed curation practice (tagging) was evaluated better than the nondirected one (sharing), particularly in terms of credibility, entertainment, and (lack of) irritation (Park et al., 2016, p. 303). The engaging quality of tags is also mirrored in a recent online observation of tagging activities on *The New York Times*'s Facebook page (Ha, Han, Lee, & Kim, 2017). Here, about 78 % of users who were tagged by a friend visibly reacted to that tag: predominantly with a like or a direct reply to the comment. Therefore, tagging seems to be a highly dialogic activity, suggesting the existence of a "norm of reciprocity" (Ha et al., 2017, p. 835). Furthermore, qualitative interview data from Kümpel (2019) shows that not reacting to tags is perceived as socially inappropriate or even rude—both because the friend has taken the trouble

to select an article personally for the user and because of the perceived publicness of the interaction. Collectively, these studies indicate that social curation practices—and tagging in particular—might have a share in intentions to read and interact with news.

Beyond Social Curation: Additional Factors Influencing News Consumption on SNS

The previous discussion of *social* news curation practices already highlighted the critical role of the recommending friend in influencing the step from news exposure to consumption. Several studies in the SNS context have shown the strong effect of such personal social influence for news-related selection decisions (Anspach, 2017; Messing & Westwood, 2013), reading intentions (Kaiser, Keller, & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Karnowski et al., 2017), and even news trust and news-seeking habits (Turcotte et al., 2015). Personal social influence was operationalized in different ways and connected with the perceived opinion leadership of the news recommending friend (Turcotte et al., 2015), the tie strength between the friend and the exposed user (Messing & Westwood, 2013), the feelings the exposed user has toward the friend (Karnowski et al., 2017), or simply the fact that the recommendation was attributed to actual friends and family of the user and not to fictional individuals (Anspach, 2017). In short, news recommendations by close friends who are positively evaluated (emotionally and/or cognitively) seem to make reading and interacting with encountered news more likely.

As indicated by research focusing on selection decisions in the context of online and SNS (news) use, source characteristics (From which news provider does the article originate?), user characteristics (Which personality traits or [news-related] dispositions does the user possess?), and (perceived) message/content characteristics are potentially able to influence news reading intentions as well (for an overview, see Kümpel, 2019). Considering the latter, perceived relevance *of* or interest *in* the news story was identified as particularly influential: The more

relevant and/or interesting the topic covered in the linked article appears to **users**, the more likely **they are** to read it (see, for example, Cappella, Kim, & Albarracín, 2015; Karnowski et al., 2017; Mummolo, 2016).¹ Hence, it can be assumed that reading an encountered article is especially likely for SNS users who already have an interest in news. While the role of user and source characteristics has barely been addressed in the context of social media, research in related areas suggests that these could also be involved in news reading intentions on SNS. Experimental research has repeatedly shown that brand images (i.e., a set of beliefs held about specific news providers) are an important cue for selecting news content (e.g., Arendt, Northup, & Camaj, 2017; Medders & Metzger, 2018). Likewise, (news-related) dispositions or personality traits could be responsible for the tendency of some users to consume encountered news content largely irrespective of content, source, or social cues. For example, users' perceived importance of politics (Holbert, Zeng, & Robinson, 2017) or the strength of their perceived duty to keep informed (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001) might trigger feelings of having to read and interact with news on a broad scale.

Summary and Purpose of the Present Research

Considering the continuing importance of (incidentally) encountering news on SNS, researchers have started to investigate the factors that influence whether users decide to consume news content they come across during their SNS use, that is, whether they follow the link to the full article and read it. Although studies already have recognized the importance of “micro agenda-setting” (Wohn & Bowe, 2016) and personal social influence for news-related selection decisions, research has yet to systematically investigate how different news curation practices (i.e., *how* a user stumbles upon news) are involved in these decisions as well. Therefore, in this research project, we examined the effects of different news curation practices on news reading

intentions and attempted to delve deeper into the practices emerging as particularly influential.

More specifically, the project was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do distinct news curation practices influence SNS users' news reading intentions?

RQ2: What are the motives and routines of SNS users that actively partake in news curation practices that are effective in influencing others' news reading intentions?

Overview of the Methodological Approach

The research project builds on an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014). The two-phase design began with the collection and analysis of experimental data on news reading intentions (study 1, quantitative approach), followed by the subsequent collection and analysis of interview data on news-related tagging activities (study 2, qualitative approach). Thus, considering the theoretical assumptions provided above, study 1 focused on possible *effects* of micro agenda-setting on SNS, while study 2 turns to the micro agenda setters themselves by investigating the *motives* and *routines* behind curating news to one's friends. In the sections that follow, we will present the design and results of both studies separately and then address the wider implications of the findings in a general discussion.

Study 1: Experimental Analysis of News Reading Intentions

Method

Study 1 was conducted in October 2017 and investigated how distinct Facebook news curation practices, differing in terms of personalization and perceived accessibility, influence users' news reading intentions. To achieve this, we conducted an online experiment in which German participants were exposed to a news post that supposedly reached them either because 1) a news provider posted it (*no social curation*), 2) a friend shared it with their entire network

(*social curation; nonpersonalized and not accessible for the user's friends*), 3) a friend sent it to them in a DM (*social curation; personalized and not accessible for the user's friends*), or 4) a friend tagged them in a comment to the post (*social curation; personalized and accessible for the user's friends*, see Figure 1). Additionally, in the social curation conditions, two name generators were utilized to enable us to use the names of participants' real-life Facebook friends as well as to create variance in tie strength (see below).

Figure 1 about here

Before the main experiment, an extensive pretest ($n = 103$) was conducted to test whether the name generators were actually able to create variance in tie strength and to find a suitable topic and news provider for the stimuli.² Based on this pretest, the basic structure of the stimuli could be created: A Facebook post supposedly published by the German news provider *Tagesschau* that deals with the topic 'rural flight and urban growth.'

Procedure. Prior to being exposed to the stimulus, participants in the social curation conditions 2 to 4 were randomly assigned to one of two name generators ("Birthday"; "Messenger") and asked to return the name of a Facebook friend in a specified way. The name generators were designed to enable us to use the name of participants' actual Facebook friends *without* obliging them to grant access to their Facebook accounts and *without* having them to rely on their memory (which usually leads to naming strong ties more frequently, see Brewer & Webster, 2000). For the first name generator "Birthday," the participants were asked to name the Facebook friend whose birthday will be next. To do so, the questionnaire provided participants with a link to the Facebook calendar, allowing them to take a quick look at the upcoming birthdays and type in the name of the respective friend. For the second name generator "Messenger," participants were asked to name the Facebook friend who interacted with them

most recently in Facebook Messenger. Again, participants were provided with a direct link, enabling them to identify the name without relying on their memory. The “Birthday” generator was designed to favor the naming of weak(er) ties, while the “Messenger” generator was designed to favor the naming of strong(er) ties, which was achieved both in the pretest (see footnote 2) and the main study³. The returned names were then stored as a variable, allowing us to integrate them dynamically into the HTML-generated stimulus. As such, the presented post looked like it was actually shared/sent/tagged by the named friend. Following exposure to the stimulus, the dependent variable (intention to read the article) as well as relevant control variables were measured.

Participants. Participants were recruited using a noncommercial online access panel (*SoSci Panel*). Participation in the study was voluntary, unpaid, and participants were guaranteed complete confidentiality regarding the obtained data. The final sample consisted of 524 German participants that were mostly self-identified as female (64.6 %), followed by male (35.0 %), and the remaining ones as other/not answered (0.4 %). Participants were on average 35.52 years old ($SD = 13.44$) and highly educated (56.4 % with a university degree, 29.4 % with a higher education entrance qualification, and only 14.2 % with lower educational qualifications). The general use of Facebook was high, with 69.1 % of the participants using the SNS at least daily.

Measures.

Dependent variable. Based on Karnowski et al. (2017), the dependent variable (*intention to read the article*, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.30$) was assessed with the following question: “When you think about how you usually use Facebook, how likely is it that you will follow the link to the article and give it more than a glance?”. Answers were measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*).

Independent and control variables. Based on Burke and Kraut (2014), *tie strength* ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.29$) was assessed by asking the participants “How close do you feel to [Friend’s name]?”, measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all close*) to 5 (*very close*). To control for possible effects of source, user, and (perceived) message/content characteristics, we also measured participants’ topical interest, their evaluation of the news provider *Tagesschau*, and the extent of their perceived duty to keep informed (DTKI). Adapting measurements used by Karnowski et al. (2017), participants’ *topical interest* ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.11$) was assessed by asking “How much are you personally interested in the topic ‘rural flight and urban growth’?”, with the scale ranging from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 5 (*very interested*). Participants’ overall *evaluation of Tagesschau* ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.71$, $\omega_h = .86$ [.84; .89]) was measured with four items covering the dimensions trustworthiness, competence, reliability, and impartiality on scales ranging from 1 (*not trustworthy, not competent etc.*) to 5 (*trustworthy, competent etc.*). *DTKI* was measured with a (translated) version of the four items developed by McCombs & Poindexter (1983). However, instead of using the original Guttman scale, we assessed participants’ agreement to the statements on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and calculated the mean index ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.76$, $\omega_h = .71$ [.66; .76]).

Results

First, to test the influence of news curation practices on users’ reading intentions, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the four curation practices as independent factors was conducted. The ANOVA showed a significant effect of curation practices on the intention to read the news article, $F(3,520) = 10.170$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .055$. Further post hoc analyses with *Hochberg’s GT2* procedure indicated that the intention to read the article was significantly higher

in the tag condition ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.33$) than in all other conditions (provider post: $M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.25$, shared post: $M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.20$, DM: $M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.28$). Hence, without controlling for further influencing factors, getting tagged seems to be the most engaging of the tested curation practices.

Based on this initial finding, we used hierarchical OLS regression analysis to uncover which additional factors predict reading intentions. Block 1 consists of the sociodemographic and control variables. Block 2 includes the tag⁴ and tie strength variables, and Block 3 contains a tag \times tie strength interaction term to assess whether the effect of tags depends on the relationship with the recommending friend. For the following analysis, participants in the ‘provider post’ condition have been excluded, as they were not asked to return the name of a Facebook friend and, consequently, did not provide an answer to the tie strength question. A post hoc statistical power assessment for the regression analysis is provided in the online supplementary data file.

Table 2 & Figure 2 about here

Results of the regression analysis indicate that the Block 1 variables account for substantial variance in reading intentions (Block 1: $R^2_{adj.} = .17$, $F(6, 416) = 15.86$, $p < .001$, see Table 2). In this first model, topical interest emerged as a significant, positive predictor of reading intentions ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$). Adding the Block 2 variables leads to a significant increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2_{adj.} = .08$, $p < .001$) and shows a positive influence of the tag ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$) and tie strength ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) variables. Finally, adding the tag \times tie strength interaction term in Block 3 leads to a further—small but significant—increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2_{adj.} = .01$, $p = .045$). A graphical inspection of the interaction suggests that a certain amount of tie strength is necessary for tags to be more effective than the other curation practices (see Figure 2): For low levels of tie strength, there does not seem to be a difference in

reading intentions between tagging and the other curation practices. However, the influence of tags on reading intentions increases steeply with increasing tie strength, while tie strength does not affect the influence of the other curation practices to a similar extent. As can be inferred from Figure 2, reading intentions are highest when SNS users were tagged by a very close friend. The final model explains 26 % of the variance in reading intentions ($R^2_{adj.} = .26$, $F(9, 413) = 17.65$, $p < .001$) and designates the variables topical interest ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), tag ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), tie strength ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), and the tag \times tie strength interaction term ($\beta = .09$, $p = .045$) as significant predictors of users' intention to read the encountered article.

Discussion

In line with theoretical assumptions about the engaging quality of different news curation practices and preliminary empirical evidence, news tagging emerged as the curation practice that motivates SNS users most to read the encountered news article. Interestingly, however, the other curation practices did not statistically differ in their influence on reading intentions, suggesting that the perceived accessibility of a news recommendation for one's friends (and *not* just its personalization/directedness) might be the main social driving force behind the willingness to read an encountered article. Consistent with the literature discussed in the theory section, the closeness of the relationship with the recommending friend (i.e., tie strength) also had a positive influence on the intention to read the encountered news article, suggesting that the motivational appeal of social news recommendations is contingent on the quality of the relationship. This is also reflected in the observed tag \times tie strength interaction, indicating the effect of tagging to be dependent on the relationship with the tagger. Last, consistent with previous studies on selection decisions in the context of SNS news use (e.g., Karnowski et al., 2017; Kümpel, 2019; Mummolo, 2016), we found a strong influence of users' interest in the article's topic on reading

intentions. Interest—and thus some kind of intrinsic motivation—seems to be crucial when users decide whether they should consume an encountered article or not. This will be discussed in more detail in the general discussion.

Considering our interest in news curation practices, the next step was to delve further into news-related tagging activities, thus changing the focus from the effects of micro agenda-setting on SNS to the micro agenda setters themselves. While the experimental analysis from study 1 provides evidence for the engaging quality of tags, particularly when created by close friends, it tells only little about the actual practice of tagging. For instance, what motivates SNS users to tag their friends, which friends (don't) get tagged, and what makes news content 'tagworthy?' With these questions in mind, we continued our research with an in-depth analysis of news tagging on Facebook.

Study 2: Qualitative Interviews with News Tagging Users

Method

Study 2 was conducted in April 2018 and investigated the experiences of actively tagging Facebook users ("taggers"), with the focus on the motives, routines, and social affordances of the practice. This second study was based on semistructured qualitative interviews as these are especially suitable when the intention is to gain a deeper understanding of everyday practices and individuals' subjective perceptions of said practices (King & Horrocks, 2010). All interviews were complemented by an interactive, dialogic examination of the Facebook activity log of each participant. According to Facebook, this log "is a list of your posts and activity, from today back to the very beginning" and includes both *active* (i.e., tagging friends) and *passive* (i.e., getting tagged by friends) tagging activities. This allowed us to tailor the questions to participants' actual behaviors, making it possible to stay close to individual experiences and insights.

Procedure. After some general questions about their Facebook use, the participants were asked to login to their Facebook accounts, open the activity log, and navigate to the first news post they tagged somebody in or in which they were tagged in themselves. As the activity log is organized by the date when the activities happened on Facebook, the interviews started with participants' most recent tagging activities. The questions in the interview focused primarily on general tagging motives, the situational and contextual circumstances of tagging, and the 'taggability' of both specific contacts and content. The interviews were conducted by two trained interviewers and lasted between 23 and 80 min (Ø 48 min).

Participants. Theoretical sampling was used to identify suitable participants for the study. Given our research interest, participants had to engage in news-related tagging activities at least occasionally. Additionally, the actual distribution of gender and age among German Facebook (news) users was kept in mind during the recruiting of participants. At the time of recruiting, Facebook news use was highest in the 18-24 and the 25-34 age group (Hölig & Hasebrink, 2017, p. 41) and general Facebook use was slightly higher among men than among women (Koch & Frees, 2017, p. 444). The search for participants was guided by these trends, resulting in a final sample of 13 participants (seven male, six female, all 20 to 30 years old) that were recruited via snowball sampling through personal and professional connections. We took an inductive thematic saturation approach (Saunders et al., 2018), continuing to interview participants until no new themes emerged in relation to news-related tagging motives/practices.

Data analysis. To analyze the interview data, a qualitative content analysis approach was used (Mayring, 2014), which builds on a system of categories that are developed both on the basis of theoretical assumptions and the actual interview material. The approach involves repeated readings of the interview data to develop and refine the categories and allows for a rich

and comprehensive analysis of news-related tagging activities. Both coding and analysis were performed with *MAXQDA Plus 12*. Due to the data being German, all presented quotes have been translated into English. The brackets behind the quotes, for example “(I3, 23, M)”, refer to the number of the interview, the participant’s age, and their self-identified gender (M/F/X).

Results

Considering the motives of news tagging users, three major themes in the data were identified, which can be subsumed under the keywords 1) *relationship maintenance & virtual community*, 2) *information sharing*, and 3) *entertainment & passing time*.

The first group of motives—maintaining relationships, keeping in touch with friends, and establishing (digital) spaces of dialog and exchange—emerged as the most important one. Participants mainly perceived tags as a kind of communicative gift, a little present that is supposed to remind the receiving friend of shared experiences, interests, or previous conversations. Tags are used to show “that you have found something that connects you or reminds you of each other” (I4, 21, F), which positively reinforces the relationship with the tagged friend. Accordingly, our interviewees state that they usually only tag those Facebook friends with whom they have a fairly close relationship and interact with on a regular basis, for example, “my boyfriend, my best friends from home, and all those I currently have a lot to do with” (I1, 27, F). As tags are inevitably directed/personalized, a person is only tagged if the tagger has enough interpersonal knowledge about what they like, find interesting, or might not have heard about. Tagging weak ties is an exception and mostly a one-time-only occasion (e.g., tagging a colleague after talking about a specific news article during lunch break).

Consistent with the aforementioned idea of gift-giving, the tagger usually expects some kind of reaction or response: “otherwise tagging someone wouldn’t make any sense” (I9, 20, F).

Not reacting is perceived as “weird” (I11, 22, M) and all of the taggers strive after “some sort of confirmation” (I7, 22, M). This need for reciprocity is particularly pronounced when it comes to topics the tagger considers meaningful. As one of our interviewees (I2, 30, F) described it:

If it’s content that I think is important to share—like when I tag my brother under a political post—it’s all about that he reads it, thinks about it, and reacts to it. I expect a reaction from the person. In fact, it [*tagging*] is almost less about the content itself. I mainly want to evoke this reaction in somebody.

The strong social component of tagging is also reflected in the formation of what we would like to refer to as ‘tagging circles.’ Tagging circles are communities comprising of a small group of Facebook friends (~ 3 to 5) that regularly tag each other in news posts (“back and forth between me and my friends,” I10, 21, M), thereby developing shared social norms and (tagging) habits. These circles are mostly monothematic and often build on established offline networks (e.g., friends from home or the sports club), which coincides with certain content preferences. Once established, tagging circles become similar to a self-sustaining system, incentivizing further tags through the anticipated reactions of others. According to the interviewees who are part of tagging circles, one quickly develops a good sense of what content is appropriate to tag and generally well received by other members in the circle. Relying on the most active members, some interviewees even claim to have developed a kind of “news-finds-me perception” (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017) as they assume that certain issues/topics will definitely be put on their agenda through others’ tags. The interviews also showed that compliance with (implicit) social norms is crucial in tagging circles. These norms are mainly built around perceptions of accessibility/visibility: Knowing about the publicness of tags for others, most of our interviewees stated that they would never tag somebody “if it could be embarrassing for them or for myself” (I4, 21, F). Hence, if deemed shareworthy, articles about sensitive issues are not publicly tagged but instead send in a DM or “privately on WhatsApp” (I8, 20, W).

Despite the central role of relational needs, tagging not only serves social functions. Reflecting the idea of micro agenda-setting, users are also motivated to use tags in order to pass on information, to encourage people to reflect on certain topics, or simply to call attention to recent developments. What information is shared through tags highly depends on both the interests of the tagger and the anticipated needs and interests of the tagged friend (“I know he’s very interested in articles like that,” I13, 24, M). Therefore, while taggers with a preference for political issues are more likely to tag friends under hard news content, those with a preference for entertainment tend to tag more soft news. Interviewees that report using tags mainly for entertainment reasons also exhibit a strong preference for humorous or emotionally charged content and, on a formal level, for visual content (i.e., pictures and videos). As the motivation to elaborate is usually lower in this group of taggers, they prefer visual content “because you don’t have to read it to get it” (I2, 30, F). Another striking difference between entertainment-oriented and ‘serious’ news tagging is the attention that is paid to the source of the content. While celebrity gossip articles or funny videos are usually tagged without even looking at who originally shared it, opinionated political commentary or articles about controversial issues “definitely require a reputable source” (I5, 18, M) in the eyes of our participants.

If the interviewees were tagged themselves, they reflected their own expectations and assumed that the tagging friend expects them both to actually view/read the tagged content and to respond to the tag. As such, it is “beyond question” (I9, 20, F) for the interviewees to read the linked articles or watch the videos they were tagged in. Likewise, liking the post or commenting on it is used as a kind of confirmation, “to show that I’ve seen it” (I8, 20, W). Being tagged repeatedly in the posts of specific Facebook (news) pages can also have lasting effects: Some interviewees remarked that regularly receiving tags related to the same source (e.g., the

Facebook page of a specific news provider) has led them to subscribe to the respective page themselves. In turn, this results in an increased likelihood of encountering news content in their Facebook feeds, regardless of being tagged by their friends.

Discussion

The qualitative interviews showed that news tagging is a curation practice that is strongly determined by social needs: The interviewed SNS users mainly use tags to maintain relationships with close friends and to show that they care about them and their (informational) needs. As such, tagging can be best described as an act of *gift-giving*. This metaphor also highlights the “norm of reciprocity” (Ha et al., 2017, p. 835) that surrounds news-related tagging activities: Taggers generally have high expectations for response, seeking attention and validation for their news recommendation choices (see also French & Bazarova, 2017). Considering these mutual expectations, the potential to motivate the tagged friend to read the recommended news content is particularly high (see also study 1). However, the *chances* to get tagged—particularly in ‘serious’ or hard news content—do not seem to be equally distributed (Thorson, 2018). While Facebook users in tagging circles centered on political issues are likely to stumble upon news regularly, users with different social backgrounds and networks might not once get mentioned in comments to (hard) news posts. Despite providing larger and more diverse networks of contacts, SNS thus reproduce inequalities known from non-mediated contexts.

General Discussion

Building on the ongoing scholarly debate about the potential of (incidental) news exposure on SNS to motivate audiences to read and interact with news content, the present mixed-methods research project addressed the question of whether different news curation practices (i.e., *how* a user stumbles upon news) influence SNS users’ willingness to read

encountered news content. Conceptualizing the contacts in a given user's online network as "micro agenda setters" (Wohn & Bowe, 2016), we were not only interested in how the relationship with these news-recommending friends affects news reading intentions, but also in the role of distinct recommendation patterns in this process. Does it make a difference whether a news recommendation is personalized and/or visible for the exposed user's friends?

The results of the first study (online experiment, $n = 524$) indicate that some news curation practices seem, in fact, to be more effective than others in motivating users to read encountered news content. Interestingly, and contrary to our assumptions about the motivational appeal of both the personalization and perceived accessibility of a news recommendation, it made no difference for reading intentions whether a news post reached users because a news provider posted it, a friend shared it with their entire online network, or a friend sent it to the user in a personal DM. Only getting tagged (i.e., mentioned in a friend's comment to a news post) had a notable influence on SNS users' willingness to read encountered news content. Thus, there is reason to believe that the anticipated *publicness* of a news recommendation (i.e., perceived accessibility for others)—and not just its personalization—might be the main social driving force at play. A news recommendation that is visible to others likely induces changes in users' "imagined audience" (Litt, 2012), thus expanding feedback expectations and creating more social pressure to react to and interact with a news post (see also French & Bazarova, 2017). This was also evident in the second study (qualitative interviews, $n = 13$) that focused on the micro agenda setters themselves and assessed the motives and routines of actively tagging SNS users. The interviewees painted tagging as an act of gift-giving—an inherently reciprocal behavior that originates both in the management of (strong) social ties and in the need to pass on information deemed relevant and important. The impact that users' ideas of the imagined audience can

generate was particularly reflected in the formation of ‘tagging circles,’ in which small groups of SNS users regularly tag each other in news posts. Although a user rarely tags all members of the circle, a possible reaction of the other members is always kept in mind or even expected. In these groups, reciprocation becomes routine and a strong organizing principle of information exchange. Study 2’s finding that tagging is a news curation practice mostly reserved for close friends is particularly interesting when considering study 1’s finding that tags are most effective in raising reading intentions when created by strong ties. Thus, tagging is not only most common among close friends, but also most influential. Overall, our results corroborate earlier findings focusing on the role of personal social influence for news-related selection decisions (e.g., Anspach, 2017; Kaiser et al., 2018; Karnowski et al., 2017), while also extending these studies by considering how exactly social curation takes place.

But can *getting tagged* be equated with *getting involved with news*? At first glance, considering the observed influence on news reading intentions, tagging seems to provide a good chance to motivate SNS users with little or no interest in news to develop a more active information behavior. However, more than tags and tie strength, users’ preexisting topical interest was predictive of news reading intentions. This finding accords with previous studies indicating that perceived relevance or interest is decisive for (news-related) selection decisions (e.g., Cappella et al., 2015; Karnowski et al., 2017; Kümpel, 2019; Mummolo, 2016). Thus, the largest motivator for reading encountered news seems already having some interest in what is covered in the news. This indicates the existence of what Kümpel (2019) described as the *Matthew effect* of SNS news engagement: Those already interested in news topics are more likely to read encountered news content, which suggests that differences between interested and uninterested users are likely to increase rather than decrease. Although this ‘rich-get-richer’

phenomenon has been intensively discussed since the proposition of the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), SNS are particularly likely to reproduce or even accentuate existing inequalities (see also Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Thorson, 2018).

Considering the example of tagging, SNS users with little or no interest in news seem to be systematically less likely to get tagged in news content: First, due to general social tendencies to surround oneself with similar others, they are less likely to have friends that are interested in news and deem news content tagworthy. Second, even if we assume that they have many close friends with high levels of news interest, they probably do not get tagged by those friends. The qualitative interviews showed that tags are carefully chosen based on the perceived interests and needs of one's friends. Hence, knowing about their preferences, news junkies are unlikely to tag their uninterested friends in news stories. As one of our interviewees (I1, 27, W) put it: "A lot of my friends are not interested in politics. If I would tag them [*in political content*], they would ask me: Did you turn into a politician?" Accordingly, it is also very unlikely that uninterested users become part of tagging circles in which news are exchanged on a regular basis. In agreement with Thorson (2018), we have to conclude that "becom[ing] attractive to news and political content" (p. 13) on SNS is much easier for those that are already interested in news, have friends that care about news, and regularly interact with news content. Reinforced by the operation of responsive and highly adaptive algorithms, news tagging—like incidental news exposure on Facebook in general—mostly favors users that do not 'need it.'

However, looking at the results of the qualitative interviews, we are able to identify factors that make news content appear more tagworthy. As a number of our interviewees with strong(er) entertainment preferences repeatedly referred to the appeal of visual content such as videos or quote images, news providers might use this knowledge to speak to less interested

audiences. The Facebook page of the German public service news organization *ZDF heute*, for example, vividly shows how political news content can be presented in an appealing format. Instead of providing links to their website, they mostly distribute videos and pictures directly on Facebook (Sehl, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2018, p. 15), which omits the necessity to click on a link. Such low-key news encounters might help less-interested users to become acquainted with certain issues and topics, thus rather subtly increasing their awareness and interest, which are both essential for news reading intentions. In addition, adapting techniques from entertainment-heavy pages/accounts (e.g., “Tag somebody who would try this!”), news providers could gently nudge their followers to tag their friends in posts to promote the visibility of socially relevant topics. Future studies should experimentally test whether such prompts are successful in motivating people to engage in more proactive news-related behaviors such as tagging or sharing.

Additionally, to develop a full picture of news tagging, further studies could examine whether certain overarching characteristics exist that make news content tagworthy. Similar to studies focusing on the “shareworthiness” of news articles (e.g., Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017), researchers could study the association between certain content characteristics and the amount of tags to identify successful topics or modes of presentation. Furthermore, researchers might consider field-like experiments (for such an approach see Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015) for which participants are explicitly asked to tag somebody in certain news posts. This would allow determining how the tagged friends react to being mentioned in comments to posts that collide with established tagging norms or content preferences.

This work has limitations that warrant discussion. First, the dependent variable used in the experimental study only captures behavioral intentions, thus likely overestimating the effects

of the tested news curation practices on actual behavior (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Using tracking data and measuring selection decisions in (more) naturalistic settings might obviate the necessity of working with hypothetical decision scenarios in the future. Second, relying on an online access panel, the sample poses a limitation as it overrepresents highly educated SNS users with an above-average interest in 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 that influence news reading intentions. Last, our findings rely on data from Germany, thus being limited to a Western European context. Although there is little reason to assume that the addressed mechanisms and practices are only applicable to German SNS users, replicating the study in other countries and cultures might help to corroborate the findings.

Despite these limitations, this research project shows that social news curation practices play a vital role for incidental news exposure and consumption on SNS. The results particularly highlight the need to consider the perceived accessibility of news recommendations for one's social contacts as a factor influencing the willingness to read and interact with encountered news content. As SNS continue to become entangled in online users' news consumption habits, it is important to better understand how and under what circumstances they are able to foster engagement with current events.

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Footnotes

¹These findings in the context of online and SNS (news) use, of course, also resonate with the frequently identified influence of measures of *political* interest on all kinds of political behaviors and, not least, news media use (e.g., Prior, 2010; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013).

²As intended, tie strength between participant and the named friend was found greater for friends whose name was returned with the “Messenger” generator ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.35$) than those returned with the “Birthday” generator ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(102) = 6.179$, $p < .001$, Hedges’ $g_{av} = 0.95$). In addition to testing the name generators, the pretest was also used to identify a news provider that is perceived as being generally *reliable* and *impartial* in order to minimize negative spill-over effects on reading intentions. To do so, participants were confronted with the seven most important (in terms of reach, views, etc.) German news providers and asked to rate their reputation and impartiality. The public service news provider *Tagesschau* achieved the best ratings in both dimensions and was therefore selected. Finally, it was necessary to find a topic for the article that was neither *too* uninteresting nor *too* interesting as previous research has identified users’ topical interest as an important predictor of news reading intentions.

Accordingly, participants were presented with 12 different topics and asked to indicate how interested they were in each of them. We then identified the topic which mean interest rating was closest to the center of the scale and had the smallest possible standard deviation. This was the case for the topic “rural flight and urban growth,” which was consequently selected for the study.

³Again, tie strength was found greater for friends whose name was returned with the “Messenger” generator ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.34$) than those returned with the “Birthday” generator ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(390.98) = 6.181$, $p < .001$, Hedges’ $g_{av} = 0.60$).

⁴As the initial ANOVA has shown that the non-tagging news curation practices (i.e., provider post, shared post, direct message) did not statistically differ in their influence on reading

intentions, the regression analysis only features a “tag” variable that differentiates between tagging and all other curation practices. However, to get a more nuanced picture of the influence of all news curation practices vis-à-vis the control variables, the online supplementary data file provides a regression analysis that includes all of the studied news curation practices as dummy variables.

Tables and Figures

Table 1

Social curation practices on social network sites (SNS)

Social curation practice (as observed/experienced by the user)	<i>Personalization / Directedness</i>	<i>(Perceived) Accessibility for user's network</i>
1 Friend/Contact tags the user in a comment to a news post. Friend/Contact shares a news post with the user on the user's profile page.	✓	✓
2 Friend/Contact sends a news post to the user in a direct message (DM).	✓	✗
3 Friend/Contact shares a news post with her/his entire network. Friend/Contact likes/comments on/reacts to a news post.	✗	✗

Table 2

Hierarchical OLS regression analysis predicting intention to read the article

Predictors	<i>Intention to read the article</i>		
	<i>r_{zero-order}</i>	<i>β_{upon-entry}</i>	<i>β_{final}</i>
<i>Block 1 ($\Delta R^2_{adj.} = .17^{***}$)</i>			
Gender ¹	.09	.06	.08
Age	-.10*	-.06	-.07
Education ²	.05	.03	.04
Topical interest	.41***	.40***	.36***
Evaluation <i>Tagesschau</i>	.05	-.04	-.04
Duty to keep informed	.12*	.09	.08
<i>Block 2 ($\Delta R^2_{adj.} = .08^{***}$)</i>			
Tag ³	.24***	.22***	.22***
Tie strength	.22***	.20***	.23***
<i>Block 3 ($\Delta R^2_{adj.} = .01^*$)</i>			
Tag × tie strength	.02	.09*	.09*

Note. Column *r_{zero-order}* shows zero-order Pearson correlations, *β_{upon-entry}* shows standardized regression coefficients upon entry, and *β_{final}* shows standardized regression coefficients of the final model.

Block 1: $R^2_{adj.} = .17$, $F(6, 416) = 15.86$, $p < .001$

Block 2: $R^2_{adj.} = .26$, $F(8, 414) = 19.21$, $p < .001$

Block 3: $R^2_{adj.} = .26$, $F(9, 413) = 17.65$, $p < .001$

All metric predictors are mean centered.

¹ Dummy coding (0 = not female; 1 = female).

² Dummy coding (0 = no university degree; 1 = university degree).

³ Effect coding (-.5 = other curation practices; .5 = tagging).

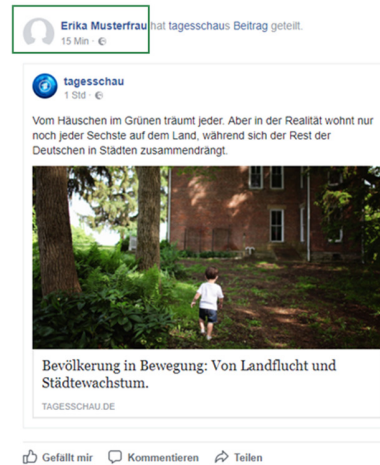
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Translation of the basic post:*People on the move: Of rural flight and urban growth*

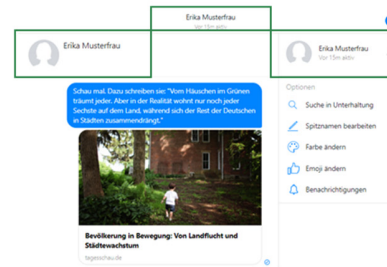
Everyone dreams of a little house in the countryside. But in reality only one in six still lives in the countryside, while the rest of the Germans crowd together in cities.

1) Provider Post

Social curation ✗
 Personalization/directedness ✗
 Perceived accessibility for friends ✗

2) Shared Post

Social curation ✓
 Personalization/directedness ✗
 Perceived accessibility for friends ✗

3) Direct Message (DM)

Social curation ✓
 Personalization/directedness ✓
 Perceived accessibility for friends ✗

4) Tag

Social curation ✓
 Personalization/directedness ✓
 Perceived accessibility for friends ✓

Figure 1. News curation practices and corresponding experimental stimuli. In the actual experiment, the name “Erika Musterfrau” (encircled in green) was replaced by the name the participant returned with the name generator assigned to them. In the personalized/directed conditions 3 and 4, the news recommending friend writes “Have a look.”

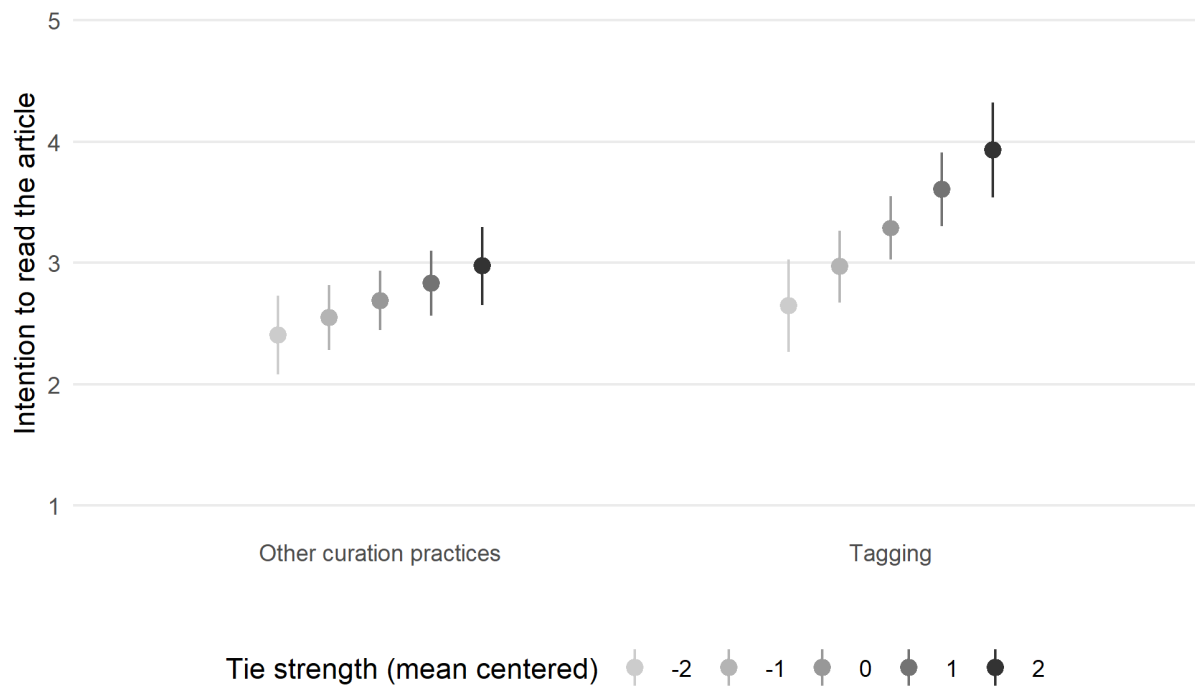


Figure 2. Reading intentions by tie strength and curation practice. Vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals.