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ABSTRACT: *Social network sites (SNS) like Facebook have become an integral part of accessing news. However, as most users come across news on Facebook when using the site for other reasons (*incidental news exposure*), they will not necessarily engage with the content they encounter. Although there already is some evidence on the role of single factors that can inform news engagement decisions on Facebook, integrated findings—considering the highly personalized information environment—are still missing. Addressing this, the following study adopts a qualitative approach and relies on self-confrontation interviews with German Facebook users (*N = 16*). Results of the observations/interviews show that engagement decisions (i.e., the decision to attentively read an encountered news article) are mostly guided by users' perception of the news content and whether they are (already) interested or invested in the issue of the linked article. Yet, in some situations, this "Matthew effect" (Merton 1968) can be overshadowed by users' perceptions of the recommending friend, leaving at least some room for social influence.*

KEYWORDS: Facebook; incidental news exposure; news engagement; online news; qualitative methods; self-confrontation interview; social media; social network sites (SNS)

1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS)—and Facebook in particular—have become an integral part of accessing, discussing, and distributing news online (Nielsen and Schrøder 2014; for recent analyses also see Newman et al. 2017; van Eimeren and Koch 2016). Many SNS users, however, do not purposefully seek out news content when they are checking their feeds. According to the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (Newman et al. 2017, 44), the majority of Facebook news users encounters news when they are using the site for other reasons, like socializing with friends or planning events. Although such incidental news exposure seems to be the rule rather than the exception on most SNS (also see Fletcher and Nielsen 2017), we still know little about the factors that influence whether users actually *engage* with news content they encounter in their feeds. Due to the characteristics of the Facebook information environment, this is, however, a highly relevant question: Because Facebook users are generally only confronted with short illustrated teasers that link to articles on news providers' websites (Hille and Bakker 2013; Himelboim and McCreery 2012; Ju, Jeong, and Chyi 2014), the majority of the information remains 'hidden' and can only be accessed when a user decides to follow the link. Furthermore, and in contrast to traditional news websites, a plethora of (personal) social cues might inform users' engagement decisions. A *New York Times* post linking to an article about climate change might not instantly captivate a Facebook user, while the same post shared by her best friend can easily motivate her to read the full story.

Even though incidental news exposure on SNS has already been tied to beneficial effects like fostering political participation or the learning of political information (Beam, Hutchens, and Hmielowski 2016; Bode 2016; Y. Kim, Chen, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016), these effects might require more than scrolling over posts or reading teasers. Indeed, Lee

and Kim (2017) found that the relationship between incidental news exposure and people's ability to recall news events is fully mediated by actual exposure to the linked article. But what prompts people to engage with news content they stumble upon on Facebook? And which role is played by the rich contextual information surrounding a given Facebook news post?

To achieve an in-depth understanding of the (interplay of) factors that might influence the shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement, the following study adopts a qualitative approach and relies on self-confrontation interviews with German Facebook users ($N = 16$). Combining systematic observation methods, recordings of participants' natural usage behaviors, and qualitative interview techniques, self-confrontation interviews allow direct insight into the subjective processes that shape news engagement on Facebook. The aim of this article, thus, is to provide a profound understanding of how users' perceptions of Facebook news posts inform individual news engagement decisions. Although the social nature of Facebook implies that news might be featured in personal posts as well (e.g., friends posting about current affairs in their own words, see Vraga et al. 2016), we focus on news posts that *originate* from professional news providers, but are not necessarily *curated* by those providers— not least because this is the most common form of experiencing news on SNS (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

Before proceeding, it seems necessary to define the key outcome of this study: *news engagement*. As the term 'engagement' has been widely used in a variety of disciplines, definitions vary strongly and—in the context of current (news) media environments—have "encompassed virtually every post-exposure dimension of audience behavior" (Napoli 2011, 99; see also Brodie et al. 2011). Following conceptualizations of Ksiazek et al. (2016) and Ha et al. (2016), we focus on one of the more elementary forms of news engagement, that is, close and

attentive *reading* (of an incidentally encountered news article). While more interactive news engagement behaviors like liking, commenting, or (re)sharing—often discussed with reference to the term "social media engagement" (see, for example, Oeldorf-Hirsch 2017, 4)—are not at the core of this study, they can be seen as an active and more socially oriented continuation of the rather passive and individual reading behavior studied here. We argue, however, that actually reading an encountered news article is, for the most, an important prerequisite for those more (inter)active forms of news engagement.

2. From stumbling upon news to engaging with news

Stumbling upon political information and news is certainly not a new phenomenon and was hence discussed long before the rise of the Internet and SNS. As early as 1957, Downs described two mechanisms of information acquisition and distinguished between actively collected "sought-for data" and passively obtained "accidental data" (Downs 1957, 223). The latter are described as by-products of people's non-political activities that accrue to them without special effort, thus being significantly less time consuming to acquire. In the time before the Internet, people could, for example, obtain such accidental data about public affairs while passing a newspaper stand and catching a glimpse of the headlines, while talking with a colleague, or inadvertently tuning into the evening newscast. Research prior to the advent of the Internet primarily focused on the potential of television (TV) to encourage incidental or passive learning, commonly with a focus on those not interested in politics (Blumler 1970; Blumler and McQuail 1969; Krugman and Hartley 1970; Zukin and Snyder 1984). TV was believed to be particularly influential in casually conveying public affairs knowledge due to the sequential presentation of information, the attracting qualities of audiovisual stimuli, and the predominantly recreational use of the medium. In addition, up until the early 1980s, people could only choose

from a handful of TV networks, making it rather unlikely to escape news content altogether. Prior (2007) has argued that the shift from low-choice broadcast television to nowadays high-choice media environment has made incidental learning of news less common—especially for people with low or no political interest. While cable TV and the Internet provide "a feast for news junkies" (Prior 2007, 49), people with a preference for entertainment have better options to avoid the news altogether, which is assumed to lead to more inequalities in terms of political knowledge and involvement.

The Internet—and especially SNS—, however, also offer an abundance of possibilities to stumble upon news *by accident*, which structurally reduces the costs (in effort, in time etc.) of news acquisition (Brundidge 2010). Such incidental news exposure is a prevalent online phenomenon, particularly among SNS users (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Bergström and Belfrage 2018), and has implications both for general news-seeking behaviors (as reflected in the rise of perceptions like the *news-finds-me perception*, see Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu 2017) and democratically desirable outcomes like political knowledge or participation (see below).

Empirically, incidental news exposure in the online world was first addressed by Tewksbury et al. (2001) who re-analyzed survey data from the Pew Research Center to study the association between stumbling upon news on the Internet and current affairs knowledge. Their analysis showed that approximately half of all respondents reported incidental news exposure and that this exposure was associated with a greater knowledge of current affairs. More recently, Bode (2016) and Oeldorf-Hirsch (2017) investigated knowledge effects in the context of incidental news exposure on Facebook and Twitter. While Bode (2016), in an experimental study, found that the vast majority of participants was able to recall political information

presented in a simulated, non-personalized Facebook news feed, Oeldorf-Hirsch (2017), in a

survey study, found no direct relationship between incidental news exposure on Facebook (or

Twitter) and users' current affairs knowledge. However, she uncovered that incidental news

exposure on both SNS is positively related to social media engagement (i.e., liking, commenting,

or sharing news on SNS) and that this engagement prompts cognitive elaboration. This suggests

that, while they might not be the best place to gain factual knowledge, SNS can be an important

gateway to engaging with and thinking about encountered news content. In addition to political

knowledge, research on incidental news exposure has also focused on another outcome: *political*

participation (see Y. Kim, Chen, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016), with

available results showing a positive association between incidental news exposure and both

offline and online participation. However, while Kim et al. (2013) found that the positive effect

of incidental news exposure on online political participation was *weaker* for people with a

preference for entertainment over news, Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) found that the correlation

is *stronger* among politically less interested individuals. Hence, the conclusions range between a

rather pessimistic view of incidental news exposure increasing existing gaps in political

participation (Y. Kim, Chen, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013) and a rather optimistic view of its ability

to reduce said gaps (Valeriani and Vaccari 2016).

Given this contradictory empirical evidence, it seems valuable to consider the important

stage *between* exposure and outcomes like political knowledge or participation and look at the

factors that influence whether people actually engage with (i.e., read/view) the news content they

stumble upon. On SNS, such engagement decisions can rely on a number of factors, ranging

from users' perceptions about the news provider, about the persons acting as news intermediaries

(e.g., the Facebook friends that share news posts), or about the topic that the news post suggests

the linked article to be about. However, before discussing these factors, some consideration of

the general characteristics of the Facebook information environment is necessary.

2.1 The Facebook information environment and its implications for news use

What makes (incidentally) encountering news on Facebook special is the fact that news

content is—among 'genuine' social posts, sponsored content, or information about events—only

one part of the Facebook news feed (= non-exclusivity of news encounters), creating an

information environment in which news mixes with relationship status updates, music videos, or

friends' holiday pictures. Following the *curated flows framework* (Thorson and Wells 2016), the

choices of communicating actors surrounding a user become constitutive of the (news) content

she encounters and, possibly, engages with. Although Facebook significantly enhances users'

ability to customize the information environment to their own liking (= *personal curation*, e.g.,

through following news providers or prioritizing news posts), the actual content flow is not under

the users' control and prone to be shaped by both *algorithmic curation* and *social curation* (i.e.,

curation processes performed by the (human) social network to which a user is connected). In

this sense, Facebook actually resembles a low-control environment (Bode 2016) as users are

often exposed to information—including news—that they did not seek out, simply because a

friend or family member deemed it "shareworthy" (term coined by Trilling, Tolochko, and

Burscher 2017).

Social curation, however, not only influences the news content a user sees in her

Facebook feed (i.e., *exposure*), but also moderates her perception of the post as well as her

willingness to read/view a given piece of news (i.e., *engagement*, see Anspach 2017; Karnowski

et al. 2017; Kwon, Stefanone, and Barnett 2014; Messing and Westwood 2013; Turcotte et al.

2015). Through explicit or implicit endorsement processes, socially curated posts have the

potential to notably alter Facebook users' engagement decisions (Cappella, Kim, and Albarracín 2015): Not only are people more likely to attend to news content recommended by close friends—these recommendations are also able to outweigh partisan selectivity (Anspach 2017; Messing and Westwood 2013). Turcotte et al. (2015) found that news recommendations from Facebook friends perceived as opinion leaders even lead to more trust in the recommended media outlet and increase the user's intention to seek news from that outlet in the future.

Additional to these social cues, Facebook also enables users to consider more 'traditional' cues for selecting news articles for further engagement. Most posts from professional news providers not only consist of a short textual description of the linked article but also of so called link previews that are automatically created based on the link's metadata and feature the article's title, header, and, if present, an illustrating image (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Information foraging theory (Pirolli and Card 1999; Pirolli 2005; see also Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall 2007) offers an approach useful for describing why and how the cues available on Facebook might influence users' engagement decisions. A central concept of the theory is the so called *information scent* that concerns the user's use of proximal cues (i.e., cues that can be perceived in one's immediate environment) "in judging information sources and navigating through information spaces" (Pirolli 2003, 158). Albeit the initial focus of information foraging theory has been on understanding how individuals tackle clearly defined information-seeking problems, transferring the theoretical claims to incidental news exposure on SNS seems feasible as information foraging "is not always strategic and often tends to be quite open-ended" (Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall 2007, 367). Just as animals usually follow traces to food even though they are not currently hungry, human "informavores" (Miller

1983) pay attention to information scent cues even when they have no precise information goal

as well. Hence, although the incidental nature of news on Facebook suggests that users rarely

have specific information or news-related needs when browsing the site, a general need to be

familiar with one's surroundings (*need for orientation*, see Matthes, 2006) should make them

susceptible for information scent cues even if they have no clear informational objective. This

view is supported by Erdelez (2004) who argues that individuals not only have foreground

problems (i.e., current problems that are supposed to be solved with active information seeking

behavior), but also background problems that linger in their minds at any given time. If a user

encounters information relevant to these background problems, she will interrupt her current task

to examine the encountered information. Defining "background *problems*" rather loosely, cues

that indicate relevance for the user should shape the decision to turn to the 'scented', distal

information—in our case: the linked article. Thus, the *perceived* value of the article, inferable

from the information scent cues available in the immediate Facebook information environment,

should play a vital role for engagement decisions (cf. Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall

2007). Compared to, for example, the sparse snippets on search engine results pages (Unkel and

Haas 2017), Facebook posts offers a rather rich information scent that provides users with,

amongst other, information about the source, the topic, and—not least—the social relevance of a

linked news article. What follows is an account of the central factors that might influence the

shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement on Facebook.

2.2 What makes you click? Factors influencing the shift from exposure to engagement

    Information scent cues on Facebook that are able to inform engagement decisions, are

depicted in Figure 1. These include the perceived 1) characteristics of the news provider, 2)

characteristics of the news content, 3) characteristics of the news curator (i.e., the recommending

friend), and 4) characteristics of the news recommendation. In addition, 5) personal characteristics and traits of the exposed user ("news receiver") can moderate the influence of these cues. Similar factors have been identified in studies focusing on more active news-related behaviors: Boehmer and Tandoc Jr. (2015), for example, identified source, message, and user characteristics as the three main groups of factors predicting retweeting intentions. With a focus on news reading/viewing behavior on Facebook, however, this classification is slightly too narrow as both characteristics of the curating friend(s) and the way a user stumbles upon a news post (e.g., getting tagged by a friend vs. seeing one of his posts) need to be factored in as well. In the literature that we review below, the characteristics mentioned are treated as possible catalysts for engagement decisions. However, as will be seen both here and in the study at hand, not *every* cue has the same engaging quality for *every* user.

Characteristics of the news provider. A relevant factor that can inform (news-related) engagement decisions is the evaluation of the news provider from which the linked article originates. Although this factor is neither distinctive nor exclusive for news engagement decisions on Facebook, the perceived credibility, quality, or simple 'gut feelings'—i.e., brand images—about a news provider might influence how a user perceives an incidentally encountered news post, and, consequently, whether she decides to select it for further reading (see, for example, Arendt, Northup, and Camaj 2017; Fichter and Jonas 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Medders and Metzger 2017; Winter and Krämer 2012, 2014). Recently, Arendt et al. (2017) found that individuals choose fewer news items labeled as originating from *Fox News* the more negative both their implicit and explicit attitudes toward *Fox News* are. Interestingly, the news provider remains a strong selection criterion even when the lead paragraph of the article suggests a political stance that drastically differs from the one the news provider usually takes

(Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Medders and Metzger 2017). Apart from brand images building on the ideological orientation of a news provider, the logo and name of a news provider can also serve as a credibility cue. Indeed, news articles from sources with a high reputation were found to be selected more often in the context of news sites, blogs, and search engines (e.g., Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall 2007; Unkel and Haas 2017; Winter and Krämer 2012, 2014), suggesting that source credibility cues are able to transmit a rather strong information scent about the distal information (i.e., the linked article).

Characteristics of the news content. Perceptions about the news content (i.e., message factors) are particularly prone to drive news engagement decisions—not only but also on Facebook. If the issue or topic that the news post suggests the linked article to be about is highly relevant or interesting to the exposed user, she should be more likely to select it (Cappella, Kim, and Albarracín 2015; Karnowski et al. 2017; Mummolo 2016; Boehmer and Tandoc Jr. 2015). Such relevance can result from a number of factors, including perceptions of *informational utility* (Hastall 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2012), various news factors like *controversy*, *unexpectedness*, or *continuity* (Eilders 2006; Engelmann and Wendelin 2017), or *emotionality* (Berger and Milkman 2012). Although relevance perceptions and subsequent engagement decisions are highly subjective in nature, they can be triggered by both stylistic and rhetorical devices. In the context of SNS and online journalism, these devices are often discussed under the term *clickbait* (Kuiken et al. 2017). In addition to a focus on simplification and spectacularization, clickbait is mainly characterized by arousing expectations through forward-referencing (e.g., "You will not believe what this girl did", Blom and Hansen 2015) or question headlines (e.g., "Is this how a woman is supposed to look?", Lai and Farbrot 2014). This sensational form of headline and teaser writing is mainly used by

digitally native news sites like *BuzzFeed*, while 'traditional' news providers use clickbait strategies less frequently (Kilgo and Sinta 2016). However, while the term clickbait might be new, the underlying psychological mechanisms activated by it are essentially the same as the ones described above.

        Characteristics of the news curator. Social media "has paved the way for new, unprecedented forms of social influence" (Y. J. Kim and Hollingshead 2015, 164), resulting in an omnipresence of social cues. On Facebook, social cues are located on two levels as users are exposed both to *aggregated* recommendations like the number of shares or likes (i.e., popularity cues, see Haim, Kümpel, and Brosius in press) and *personal* recommendations from friends and acquaintances. As shown above, the latter are especially likely to trigger engagement decisions (Anspach 2017; Karnowski et al. 2017; Kwon, Stefanone, and Barnett 2014; Messing and Westwood 2013; Turcotte et al. 2015). In existing studies, the influence of personal recommendations was attributed to the perceived opinion leadership of the news curator (Turcotte et al. 2015; Bergström and Belfrage 2018), the tie strength between news curator and the exposed user (Messing and Westwood 2013), or the general feelings the exposed user has towards the news curator (Karnowski et al. 2017). Hence, if the news curator is a strong tie the exposed user likes and cherishes as an opinion leader, she will be more likely to engage with a recommended news post. The term "recommendation", however, does not imply that the news curator has to *directly* address the user (see also next section). As in the example in Figure 1, a news post shared with the curator's entire Facebook network nevertheless can serve as an implicit recommendation for the exposed user as the curator's name and profile picture are associated with the post, allowing more or less specific assumptions about the nature and (personal) relevance of the linked article. Cues about the news curator give off a particular kind

of information scent as they indicate *social* relevance and/or add a layer of trusted knowledge, particularly when the news curator is perceived as an expert or opinion leader (Bergström and Belfrage 2018).

   Characteristics of the news recommendation. In addition to the factors discussed above, the way a user stumbles upon a news post might also be influential for engagement decisions—especially because certain kinds of news recommendations are connected with differing degrees of a) *message personalization*, and b) *message access exclusivity* (Cohen, Bowman, and Borchert 2014; O'Sullivan and Carr 2017). While a news recommendation from a friend in a Facebook direct message is both personalized and private (i.e., only accessible for the receiving user), a news post on the receiving user's timeline might be highly personalized but also available to *all* persons in her Facebook network. This, in turn, might induce changes in individuals' "imagined audience" (Litt 2012; Litt and Hargittai 2016), that is, their mental conceptualization of the persons with whom—or in this case rather in front of whom—they are communicating. If, for instance, the receiving user assumes that the news curator's post in her timeline is not only seen by her, but also by mutual friends, she might feel more obliged to read the linked article and comment on it due to perceived feedback expectations of both the news curator and the potential observers (Grinberg et al. 2017). In the context of marketing, Park et al. (2016) studied whether forms of earned advertising on Facebook—getting tagged by a friend in the comments to a brand's post (personalized) and a friend sharing a brand's post on his/her own timeline (non-personalized)—are perceived as more informative, more credible, and less irritating than paid advertisings. These assumptions are confirmed, suggesting that similar effects might be observed in the context of news posts: Proximal cues about the kind of news recommendation should trigger trains of thought related to the (imagined) audience,

personalization, and/or feedback expectations, thus altering the perceived obligation to engage with a given piece of news.

Characteristics of the news receiver. Last but not least, personal characteristics and traits of the exposed user might moderate news engagement decisions on Facebook. Characteristics of the news receiver can be divided into more *information-dependent* and more *information-independent* factors. Information-dependent factors are all factors that are directly related to the encountered news post and have already been discussed above, for example, users' (naturally subjective) perceptions of the news provider or news curator. Information-independent factors, on the other hand, are general characteristics of the user that are not directly related to the encountered news post. Particularly, dispositions like the perceived *duty to keep informed* (McCombs and Poindexter 1983; Poindexter and McCombs 2001) or the *fear of missing out news information* (news information FoMO, see Alt 2015) might alter engagement decisions. As both constructs show a positive association with news use (on Facebook), it is conceivable that these trait-like characteristics also moderate individuals' engagement decisions. The characteristics of the news receiver, of course, cannot be defined as information scent cues, but rather influence how the previously discussed cues are perceived and processed.

2.3 Summary and purpose of present research

The growing role of SNS for individuals' news diets and the simultaneous observation of a primarily incidental exposure to news on these sites has lead researchers to examine the potential of incidental news exposure for political learning and participation. However, the question of whether users actually engage with (i.e., click on the link and read/view) news content they encounter in their feeds was barely considered in these studies. Although there already is some evidence on the role of single factors that can inform news engagement decisions

on Facebook, integrated findings—considering both the highly personalized information environment on SNS and the interplay of available information scent cues—are still missing. Hence, the overall purpose of this research is to achieve an in-depth understanding of the (interplay of) factors that influence the shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement on Facebook.

3. Method

3.1 Design: The self-confrontation interview

We utilized the self-confrontation interview method to study news engagement decisions on Facebook. Originally developed in psychotherapy and (action) psychology (Bailey and Sowder 1970; von Cranach and Kalbermatten 1982), the method relies on confronting participants with their behavior by means of an artifact like video or screen capture recordings and asking them to report the thoughts and feelings they had while performing the behavior (for an overview see Rix and Lièvre 2010). Thus, it allows direct insight into the (conscious) cognitions that shape the behavior of interest. Lim (2002) was the first to apply the self-confrontation interview method to the study of online behavior, examining users' interactions with online shopping sites. Following her procedure, the following steps were conducted:

1) **Giving Task:** Participants are asked to login to their Facebook accounts and to browse the site like they would do normally for a period of five minutes.

2) **Recording Task:** Participants' browsing is recorded unobtrusively with a screen capture software (*Microsoft Expression Encoder*), allowing to capture all cursor movements, text inputs, and clicking behaviors.

3) **Observing Task:** Meanwhile, the researcher silently observes the participants, using an observation protocol to note all behaviors of interest and aspects that should be addressed during the subsequent self-confrontation interview.

4) **Replaying Task/ Self-Confrontation:** Immediately after participants have completed their browsing session, the screen capture recordings are played back to them and stopped at critical junctures to gather participants' comments and evaluations.

5) **Qualitative Interviews:** As a supplement to the self-confrontation interviews, additional qualitative interviews are conducted to assess participants' Facebook and news usage patterns as well as relevant personal characteristics and traits.

In sum, the self-confrontation interview method can be conceptualized as a combination of systematic observation, retrospective think aloud protocols, and (qualitative) interview techniques. Hence, it offers the possibility to not only capture behavior the participants deem 'interesting' or 'special' but also to address self-regulated behavior and automatic actions. Due to the focus on individual experiences and the rather complex data collection and analysis, the self-confrontation interview method usually focuses on a small(er) number of participants. Considering the in-depth insight it provides into the dynamic and highly personalized navigation and engagement behaviors on Facebook, the self-confrontation interview method, nevertheless, seemed the best way to address the research interest.

3.2 Participants

In light of the interest in news engagement decisions and the focus on Facebook, theoretical sampling was used to select study participants. The participants—comprising of German Facebook users ($N = 16$)—were recruited on the basis of three criteria:

Age. Reflecting the actual distribution of age among German Facebook users (Koch and Frees 2016), a special focus was placed on the core user group of 14- to 29-year-olds: One participant was younger than 18, five participants were between 18 and 24, six participants were between 25 and 30, and four participants older than 30 (range: 16 to 47).

Gender. Again, reflecting the actual distribution of gender among German Facebook users (Koch and Frees 2016), more women than men were recruited (ten women, six men).

Education. Although participants' engagement with 'non-news posts' on Facebook is already indicative of the factors that might influence the shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement, it seemed reasonable to choose a recruitment criterion that should be related to the probability of (also) encountering news. Among the group of 14- to 49-year-olds, those with *Abitur* (school-leaving certificate in Germany that qualifies for university entrance) use the Internet more often for news than those with lower educational qualifications (van Eimeren and Koch 2016), leading to the assumption that Facebook users with *Abitur* will be more likely to be exposed to news content for two reasons: First, they should be more likely to engage in personal curation (e.g., through following news providers). Second, people are more likely to be friends with people who are similar to them in terms of sociodemographic and personal characteristics (Lönnqvist and Itkonen 2016; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), implying that these friends are (Facebook) news users as well and—at least occasionally—share news content with their network. Hence, having (or in the case of younger participants: aspiring) *Abitur* was defined as a recruitment criterion for this study.

The participants were recruited via Facebook university groups and third parties (i.e., colleagues and former participants were asked to spread the word about the study). As the study required participants to let their Facebook use be observed and recorded, particular emphasis was

placed on ethical issues. All self-confrontation interviews were based on participants' freely

volunteered informed consent; they were aware of their right to refuse participation and were

told about how the (anonymized) data was used and who had access to it. The interviews were

carried out between September 2016 and February 2017 and mostly took place at the university.

3.3 Data analysis

On average, the whole procedure (task performance, self-confrontation interview,

additional qualitative interview) lasted about 40 minutes and yielded the following data: (1)

handwritten observational protocol, (2) screen capture recording of the task [5-minute Facebook

browsing], and (3) audio recordings of both the self-confrontation interview and the additional

qualitative interview. These data were merged into an illustrated transcript for each participant

that featured screenshots of the posts/actions discussed in the self-confrontation interviews,

participants' statements and remarks, and additional annotations (e.g., about whether a post was

clicked on or acknowledged with a 'Like').

For data analysis, we used a qualitative content analysis approach that integrates

inductive category formation and deductive category assignment (Mayring 2014). Rather than

working with a strict coding scheme, the analysis was informed both by the outlined theoretical

assumptions and recurring themes that occurred in the data. Both coding and analysis were

performed with the help of *MAXQDA Plus 12*. Due to the data being German, all presented

quotes have been translated into English. The brackets behind the quotes—for example

"(Katarina, 39)"—inform about the (anonymized) names of the quoted participants and their age.

4. Results

First, it can be stated that exposure to news content is a key component of the Facebook experience for all participants—regardless of whether they accelerate it through following news providers or prioritizing news posts (i.e., *personal curation*, Thorson and Wells 2016) or whether they are only exposed to news content through the sharing/recommendation behavior of friends (i.e., *social curation*) or sponsored posts (i.e., *strategic curation*). While some participants perceive their news feeds as "my own, customized newspaper" (Katarina, 39), others encounter news post quite often although they did not provoke it at all: "All the news I see on Facebook are coming from my friends, one way or another" (Maximilian, 27). However, as we have argued above, more important than the question of exposure is the question of whether individuals actually engage with (i.e., attentively read/view) the news content they encounter on Facebook. The observations and self-confrontation interviews show that all of the theoretically identified information scent cues—the perceived 1) characteristics of the news provider, 2) characteristics of the news content, 3) characteristics of the news curator, and 4) characteristics of the news recommendation—play a role for users' navigation and engagement decisions, albeit to a different extent and highly dependent on both situational and personal characteristics.

Trying to generalize the findings, we see that the perceived relevance of the articles' issues and topics (i.e., users' perception of the **characteristics of the news content**) seems to guide news engagement decisions on Facebook the most. While clickbait elements undoubtedly lead the participants to linger on a news post longer, actual engagement seems to be prompted by genuine interest (instead of the urge to satisfy curiosity). The generic motives 'interest' or 'relevance' emerge, primarily, from a perceived *personal* relevance. Maximilian (27), for example, clicks on a post concerned with outsourcing processes of a company, "because it is the

employer of a good friend" and he was worried "that she might be affected by that as well".

Carolin (27), on the other hand, follows the link to an article about autonomous driving due to

her interest in philosophical questions: "This [article] also addresses the ethical dilemma of self-

driving cars. I studied philosophy and thus found that very interesting". Moreover, in the context

of Facebook, perceptions of *unexpectedness*, *curiosity*, and *humor* in link previews seem to drive

engagement decisions. Ulla (26) is interested in "celebrity fails" and Matteo (22) and Martin (30)

feel that a 'clickworthy' news post also needs to have "humor" or "wit". Besides, we find

evidence that *geographical/cultural proximity* and (personal) *continuity* play a role. During the

observation, Undine (26) repeatedly clicks on articles about her hometown, while Robin (25) and

Bernadette (29) turn to news stories that they were already investigated in: "I read about the

Olympic broadcasting rights just yesterday, but wanted to know a bit more" (Robin, 25).

According to Robin (25), however, he would not have actively looked for more information if

the post had not reminded him of his prior encounter, thus activating his latent information

needs. The information scent of the link preview, promising valuable information regarding one

of his current background 'problems'—the Olympic broadcasting rights—, eventually motivated

him to follow the link and turn to the full article. Thus, the post acted as a kind of 'nudge' that

motivated him to further engage with the issue.

     Overarching relevance perceptions are also the reason why the 'news junkies' in our

study were generally more likely to click on links to news articles as they tended to find typical

news topics more appealing and had more latent information needs related to these topics: A

finding that suggests an interaction between content-related perceptions and more trait-like

motivations for using news. These participants also valued Facebook for enabling them to "not

miss anything important" (Martin, 30), pointing to the fact that engagement decisions are also

based on general **characteristics of the news receiver** like the *fear of missing out news*

information (news information FoMO, see Alt, 2015) or the *duty to keep informed* (McCombs

and Poindexter 1983; Poindexter and McCombs 2001).

A chance to mitigate or even neutralize the strong influence of perceptions about the

(personal) relevance of the issues or topics is offered by the perceived **characteristics of the**

news curator. If the person that shares or recommends an article (i.e., the news curator) is

evaluated in a particular (positive *or* negative) way by the participants, engagement decisions can

be prompted regardless of interest in the news content. As expected and shown by prior research,

tie strength between news curator and participant emerged as a relevant criterion: "If my best

friend posts an article, I'll always look at it", says Liane (16). This seems to be due to the fact

that recommendations by (close) friends "are more worthy" (Ulla, 26) and "carry more weight"

(Robin, 25) in the eyes of the participants. However, the influence of tie strength somewhat

masks the fact that friends often have the same interests as the participants—ultimately making

engagement decisions content-based again—and that it is easier to evaluate the quality of

recommendations when the news curator is a close tie. Bernadette (29), for example, clicks on

links to articles that deal with issues "that are out of my depth" when she knows that the curator

is an expert or opinion leader in that area and generally shares content of high value. Contrary to

what one might expect, *negative* assumptions about the news curator can prompt engagement

decisions as well. Lara (24) clicks on all news posts from "that weird girl from my high school"

simply because she wants to know "what she's sharing again". Such a curiosity also motivates

Liane (16) to read everything her mother shares to know "whether I have to be embarrassed by

her posts". It is also interesting to note that some users anticipate their friends' recommendation

and sharing behavior and adapt their own (news-related) behavior based on these assumptions.

Both Tim (24) and Ulla (26) state that they do not have to follow certain news providers' pages as the articles published there would reach them anyway, through the actions of their friends. Asked about why he does not follow a particular page although he repeatedly clicked on posts from it during the observation, Tim says: "I really don't have to. He [*the news curator*] likes or shares literally every post from the site. That's why I never clicked the 'Like' button; I see it all the time anyway". Even if this behavior is not directly related to single engagement decisions, it shows how participants adapt to the information environment on Facebook and take advantage of its social nature. It also shows that Facebook users—albeit rarely opening the site with specific information or news-related needs—exhibit an awareness of the 'newsy' nature of SNS, which paves the way for the influence of various information scent cues.

Considering the **characteristics of the news recommendation**, we find that engagement decisions are also shaped by *how* or *why* a user stumbles upon a news post. The more directly and personalized a news recommendation on Facebook, the more likely are participants to acknowledge it. Robin (25) aptly described this as the "one-to-one factor" that triggers the feeling "that he [= the friend] selected the article for *me*". In addition to direct messages, tags (i.e., creating a link to one's Facebook profile by mentioning his/her name in the comment to a news post) play a major role for engagement decisions. Considering message access exclusivity, tagged content is not only visible for the person tagged—the news receiver—but also for both the news curator's and the news receiver's friends. As a result, tags are reviewed particularly thoroughly by the participants: First of all, because getting tagged means getting notified (i.e., receiving the proximal cue "[*News curator*] has mentioned you in a comment"); second, and more importantly, because participants are aware of the extended audience. Maren (22), for example, fears that "I have to be ashamed of the content that my friends tag me in", while Matteo

(22) deliberately considers other friends when he replies to posts he was tagged in, knowing that they will see his comment as well. Not reacting to being tagged is considered "rude", which is why the participants read the corresponding articles almost without exception.

While prior research found the perceived **characteristics of the news provider** to be particularly influential for news-related engagement decisions, participants rarely considered this factor. Although "big names" (Bernadette, 29) or news providers that are crucial for participants' news diet outside of Facebook can give off an information scent that promises the distal information to be of high quality and/or value, proximal cues about the news provider are rarely the decisive factor for selection decisions. Carolin (27), for example, almost always stopped her scrolling when she saw the *Spiegel Online* icon, but only clicked on the links when she deemed the topic interesting. Asked about one of these moments in the self-confrontation interview, she admits: "Yeah, I got caught with that Spiegel Online post. But then I quickly realized: Oh, no, I really don't care about that [*laughing*]. I wasn't interested in the topic". Hence, positive perceptions of the news provider—induced by the available information scent cues—were outweighed by content-based relevance perceptions. This trend could be observed in all participants, suggesting that a general preference for a news provider not automatically leads to engagement and that Facebook users are quite selective with their decision to delve into encountered news articles.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The present study attempted to achieve an in-depth understanding of the (interplay of) factors that influence the shift from incidental news exposure to news engagement on Facebook. Building on self-confrontation interviews with German Facebook users ($N = 16$), we found that—although *all* the available information scent cues and contextual information are used to

inform engagement decisions—the issue or topic that the news post suggests the linked article to

be about seems to be the most important factor (→ *characteristic of the news content*). If the

discovered news post is not generally perceived as 'interesting' or 'relevant', it is rather unlikely

that individuals read the linked article. These results are in line with those of previous studies

that show people's interests or relevance perceptions to be one of the most important antecedents

of news engagement decisions (Cappella, Kim, and Albarracín 2015; Karnowski et al. 2017;

Mummolo 2016; Boehmer and Tandoc Jr. 2015). In some cases, however, this content-based

relevance can be overshadowed by perceptions of *social* relevance, triggered by cues referring to

the news curator (i.e., the person that visibly shares, likes, or otherwise recommends a news post

on Facebook). This is especially the case if the news curator has a close relationship with the

news receiver, is perceived as an expert on the issue/topic the article deals with or has similar

interests (→ *characteristics of the news curator*, for similar results see Turcotte et al. 2015;

Bergström and Belfrage 2018; Karnowski et al. 2017; Anspach 2017). Interestingly, we have

also found that perceptions of the news curator do not necessarily have to be positive to inform

engagement decisions: Sometimes, news-related activities are closely monitored because the

recommending Facebook friend is perceived as particularly "weird" or because the news receiver

feels the need to check whether the content might affect his or her own image as well. Against

this background, it is not surprising that getting publicly tagged under news posts leads

participants to engage with the accompanying articles particularly thoroughly—both because

they fear to be held accountable for the content and/or because they feel that other friends might

observe their response to it (→ *characteristics of the news recommendation*). One unanticipated

finding was that individuals' evaluation of the news provider from which the linked article

originated were identified as least relevant. While (the name of) providers known to or valued by

the news receiver can contribute to the overall evaluation, they were never the sole trigger of engagement decisions (→ *characteristics of the news provider*). Although this finding is somewhat contrary to previous studies which have suggested that such source cues have a rather strong influence on online news selection (e.g., Arendt, Northup, and Camaj 2017; Medders and Metzger 2017; Winter and Krämer 2014), this disparity can probably be explained by the fact that these studies not only investigated different contexts (e.g., online news sites) but also used experimental stimuli instead of studying participants' actual information environments that possess more (and more *personal*) information scent cues. Overall, news engagement on SNS is a complex phenomenon, for it is informed by a plethora of cues that interact with one another and are highly dependent on users' individual experiences and perceptions.

What potential can be attributed to incidental news exposure on SNS based on these findings? To put it exaggeratedly: If a person has no interest in news, using Facebook will not suddenly turn him or her into a 'news junkie'. However, the increased visibility of news content—due primarily to processes of social curation (Thorson and Wells 2016)—might facilitate the learning of current affairs information or attention to societal issues at least at a low level. Simple factual knowledge (e.g., "Spain dissolves Catalan parliament and calls for reelections") seems to be particularly suitable for such accidental learning as it can be gained even if no further engagement occurs. Anything beyond that, however, requires individuals to actually turn to the linked news articles. As our results show, this usually only happens when the exposed user has at least some interest in the issue of the article, thus facilitating a kind of "Matthew effect" (Merton 1968): Those who are already interested in news (topics) also click more often on news that they happen to come across on Facebook as they have more latent, news-related information needs that hence are more likely to be triggered by information scent

cues available in one's immediate Facebook information environment . This effect is even more pronounced when considering that individuals most often interact with those who are similar to themselves and are—at least to some extent—able to customise their news feeds to their own liking. Thus, while the Matthew effect can be observed in other news use situations as well, the combination of people's tendency to surround themselves with similar others, personal curation, and responsive and highly sophisticated Facebook algorithms are likely to amplify the effect ('He that hath [an interest in news], shall be given [news]'). However, our results also show that the association of a news post with a news curator known to the user (i.e., forms of indirect and direct social recommendations) can at least partly motivate users to engage with news content that is truly new to them or that they have not found interesting from the outset.

Our user-centered approach allowed us to shed more light on the (interplay of) factors that influence news engagement decisions on Facebook by comprehensively mapping the complex SNS information environment. The self-confrontation interview method was found to be particularly effective in uncovering the emotional and cognitive considerations that surround users' engagement decisions. As participants (re)viewed every step they had made, it was not only easier for them to recall their action-related cognitions, but also to reflect on more automatic behaviors that they probably would not have commented on otherwise. However, due to the focus on individual experiences and the rather complex data collection and analysis, the self-confrontation interview method naturally limits the number of participants that can be observed and interviewed. Nevertheless, as it is simple (= researchers require only little training to deploy it) and rather cost-effective—particularly compared with eye-tracking studies—, the self-confrontation method is a useful addition to the range of methods used in research on information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Incidental news exposure on SNS is a phenomenon that influences today's handling of news and (political) information in great measure. Against this backdrop, we have argued that a sound knowledge of the factors that inform the shift from stumbling upon news content to actually engaging with it is a central prerequisite for investigating the outcomes of incidental news exposure. Future research should build on our qualitative findings and study the identified factors on a broader basis. Moreover, special attention should be paid to the implications of *algorithmic curation* (Thorson and Wells 2016), particularly considering the increasingly influential role of Facebook's (and other social network sites') algorithms *in* and *for* the larger news ecosystem (DeVito 2017; Carlson 2018). While the present study has focused on the phase in which the algorithms have already 'done their work', future studies should take a closer look at which news posts reach a given Facebook user in the first place. After all, engagement can only take place if news content is actually accessible. Last, in this study, we did not address the question of how users deal with news that they perceive as problematic or 'fake'—not least because no such situation occurred during the observations. However, an understanding of whether and how SNS users authenticate (problematic) news content they encounter in their feeds (for a conceptual framework detailing authentication acts see Tandoc Jr. et al. 2017), is crucial to draw a firm conclusion on both possible positive and detrimental effects of incidental news exposure.

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