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Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Editorial

Enlightening Confusion: How Contradictory Findings Help Mitigate Problematic Trends in Digital Democracies

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Abstract
This thematic issue includes ten articles that address previous contradictions in research on two main trends in digital democracies: news avoidance and political polarization. Looking at these contradictions from different angles, all contributions suggest one aspect in particular that could be important for future research to investigate more specifically possible countermeasures to harmful trends: the individualized, self-reflective way in which media users nowadays engage with political content. The increasingly value-based individualization of media use may be a hopeful starting point for reversing harmful trends to some degree by addressing individual media users as a community with a common base of civic values, rather than addressing them in their limited social group identities.

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Enlightening Confusion: How Contradictory Findings Help Mitigate Problematic Trends in Digital Democracies" edited by Cornelia Mothes (Macromedia University of Applied Sciences) and Jakob Ohme (University of Amsterdam).

1. Introduction

Public discourse in digital democracies faces growing challenges, with two main trends being of particular concern, while at the same time leading to ongoing debates about their actual severity: news avoidance and political polarization. Both trends may be critically related to each other in that news avoidance potentially increases political polarization by leaving the political stage to the most emotionally involved and less open-minded participants in public discourse. Although many studies have examined these trends, both developments bear a complexity that often makes it difficult for research to reconcile contradictory findings and identify potential parameters for mitigating such detrimental trends for democracy.

This thematic issue contains contributions from a wide range of perspectives focusing on two challenges

in the study of news avoidance and political polarization that may mutually reinforce each other: (a) a blurring definition of what users perceive as news and (b) an emerging divergence in the public's definition of what is perceived as news worth using and trusting.

2. News Avoidance and the Blurring Definition of the Concept of "News"

The study by Anna Sophie Kümpel, Luise Anter, and Julian Unkel provides important insights into the first challenge mentioned above—the blurring definition of the concept of "news." To provide more clarity on what it actually means to be "informed" in the social media era, the authors introduce a "self-concept of being informed". Lending some additional support to news avoidance research, they show that it is less important

for social media users to be informed about political news in general (undirected information needs) than about specific, personally relevant topics (topic-related information needs) and about what is happening in their social environment (group-related information needs). Interestingly, the study also shows that a person's political interest—although primarily related to political news demands—also relates to issue- and group-related information needs. This finding may reflect the increasing development of "politicized identities" (Bos et al., 2020) among media users or indicate a loosening conception of what qualifies information as political news. Either way, users appear to be able to satisfy their political interests at least to a certain extent by turning to non-political content and still feel informed by it, without necessarily having received actual information.

Such a view is also tentatively suggested in the study by Leonie Wunderlich and Sascha Hölig, which deals specifically with different types of information orientation and their effects on political knowledge. Their study again confirms current findings in news avoidance research by showing that young media users are least interested in political news. However, if interested in politics and public affairs, young users show a more diverse set of information sources, consisting of journalistic and non-journalistic sources, which tend to produce opposite effects on political knowledge. While young people who assign greater relevance to journalistic sources tend to show increased levels of political knowledge, young users assigning more relevance to non-journalistic sources show lower levels of political knowledge, with this negative relationship being almost equivalent to the—also negative—relationship between knowledge and a general lack of interest in political news. Users with a higher preference for non-journalistic sources thus do not seem to differ substantially in their level of knowledge from users who do not keep up with the news on a regular basis at all.

So, have we indeed entered an era of minimal media effects, as famously argued by Bennett and Iyengar (2008)? Not quite, shows the study by Stefan Geiß who revisits the question about the prevalence of agenda-setting effects by established journalistic sources in an age of digital media. Based on an extensive secondary data analysis of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), Geiß finds that issue salience during an election campaign increases with higher media use, thereby confirming the agenda-setting function of mass media. But the slope of increase of issue salience based on media exposure strongly depends on the design choice of the study: Especially user-to-content linking and the analysis on an individual (rather than an aggregate) data level increase the explanatory power of statistical models. Hence, to find agenda-setting effects in fragmented media environments, research may need to focus more on the specific content of exposure and on changes within individuals, rather than changes on the aggregate level of society as a whole.

3. Political Polarization and Diverging Views on "Valuable News"

Many previous studies in selective exposure and cognitive misperception have shown that these individualized media effects depend significantly on political attitudes of media users—addressing the second challenge of diverging views on which news merits attention. The study by Gábor Polyák, Ágnes Urbán, and Petra Szávai partly corroborates these findings for a country that has become a major representative of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. Based on a population survey in Hungary, the authors find that "more than half of Hungarians (52.9%) are balanced in their sources of information, but almost half of the voting age population is skewed in one direction or another—with a significant proportion having a completely one-sided orientation" (Polyák et al., 2022, p. 142). About one-third of the Hungarian population predominantly uses pro-government news sources, which in the Hungarian case equates to decreasing freedom to criticize the government and increasing political pressures on autonomous editorial practices in journalism.

These developments cannot remain without consequences for citizens' perceptions of political and social developments—not even in democracies with higher levels of press freedom, as a study by Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck shows. The authors find that there are substantial differences in users' perceptions of social problems depending on the particular sources used. Posing the question of how media trust relates to the use of public service media and alternative media, the authors propose a "differential susceptibility to media effects model" and present findings from a four-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden. They show that media trust emerges over time as both an "antecedent variable guiding news selection" and as a "moderator variable conditioning the effects of news use on perceptions of societal problems" (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022, p. 146). This leads us to the difficult question of how journalistic media can adequately fulfill their public service function for users who have either stopped using such media or do not trust their coverage—especially in times of increasing disinformation.

This is also a key question in the study by Michael Hameleers who found—based on two experimental studies in the United States—that people who distrust and are disenchanted with established mass media, in general, will reject information from those sources more readily, regardless of whether they are correct or how they are framed. However, a certain openness to corrective information from journalistic media is found among disenchanted audiences if this information comes from established news sources. This finding provides some grounds for optimism that fact-checking can be an effective means to debunk disinformation even among people who generally do not trust mainstream news media.

The ambiguous role of trust in media sources when building resilience to disinformation is also addressed in the study by Shelley Boulianne, Chris Tenove, and Jordan Buffie. They test whether citizens in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France differ in their resilience to misinformation. Contrary to theoretical expectations, higher trust in national news media predicted self-reported awareness and sharing of misinformation, but following public service news did not increase misinformation resilience. So again, research may need to pay more attention to the differences between individual- and macro-level factors: Strong public service broadcasters in a country may be related to misinformation resilience on the macro-level of a society, but PSB news consumption on an individual level may not.

Hence, individual effects of political news appear to depart to a certain extent from its societal-level effects. If we look at Christina Peter's study, this may be explained in part by the fact that individuals perceive the relationship between media coverage and public discourse in two very different ways, even if the same content is used. Peter's model suggests that we may need to distinguish more clearly between "reflection inference" and "persuasion inference" as two distinct individual user perceptions of how media coverage relates to public opinion—either as a mirror or a molder. The author shows that hostile media perceptions are more strongly linked to reflection inference, indicating that "people with hostile media perceptions see media coverage and public opinion as detached" (Peter, 2022, p. 192). Persuasion inference, instead, is more strongly linked to users' willingness to speak out for their own opinion, regardless of whether they perceive their opinion to represent a minority or a majority in society.

Individual differences in the perception of political content in terms of its relevance for political debates is also addressed in the study by Benjamin A. Lyons who proposes an interesting relationship between content perception and corrective intent regarding partisan (dis)information. Based on an experimental study, the author investigates this relationship specifically with respect to memes as an increasingly powerful tool in polarized political debates. Interestingly, the author finds less corrective intent among media users for memes, as compared to partisan news articles, and attributes this finding to a lower perceived influence on oneself: "People see partisan memes as trivial, and not worth corrective efforts. For this reason, however, memes may present a highly effective vehicle for the spread of misleading claims or outright misinformation" (Lyons, 2022, p. 201).

Considering that many of the studies presented in this thematic issue suggest in one way or another that dealing with politics today often takes on an individualized character at a time when media users' self-concept is generally becoming more salient during (political) media use (e. g., Dagnes, 2019), our final study may provide interesting clues about how we might address

heightened self-reflection in political discourse to overcome detrimental trends of news avoidance and polarization: Based on a panel survey of Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel, Jennifer Oser shows that "good citizenship norms" have a positive effect on non-electoral political participation, regardless of status or political orientation. Oser's findings suggest that inequalities in civic participation among different groups of media users may be reversed to some extent by reinforcing their common denominator of belonging to the same democratic society, making them aware of shared values rather than being driven apart by values of confined social identities.

4. Conclusion

The articles of this thematic issue illustrate, in different ways, an increasingly individual value-based approach to news and politics that can lead to problems of news avoidance, if users do not have a clear stance on political issues, or to polarization, if users identify with a certain political group in particular. This value-based individualization of media use might be a hopeful starting point for future research, posing the question of whether harmful trends in digital democracies may be reversible to some extent by addressing individual media users as a community with a shared base of civic values.

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Cornelia Mothes is a professor of journalism and media management at Macromedia University of Applied Sciences in Leipzig, Germany. Her main research interests lie in the field of political communication, journalism studies, and media psychology, with a special focus on the challenges that information environments in postmodern, digital democracies pose for social cohesion, civic orientation, and political agency. Cornelia is a member of the international project Journalistic Role Performance and serves as Germany's national representative in the World Association for Public Opinion Research.

Jakob Ohme is head of the research group Digital News Dynamics at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society in Berlin and an associated researcher at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests center around the impact of digital and mobile communication on news exposure and political behavior in digital democracies with a focus on generational differences in media use and political socialization. He has a special interest in the development and application of digital methods in political communication and journalism research. Currently, he is a fellow at the Digital Communication Methods Lab at the University of Amsterdam.