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To cite this article: Matthew Barnidge, Trevor Diehl & Daniel S. Lane (05 Sep 2023): News “Attraction” and Digital Inequalities: Incidental News Exposure and the Equalization or Stratification of Political Information, Digital Journalism, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2023.2250825](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2250825)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2250825>

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 Published online: 05 Sep 2023.


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# News “Attraction” and Digital Inequalities: Incidental News Exposure and the Equalization or Stratification of Political Information

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the impact of digital media on news inequalities is critical for democracy. The literature on incidental exposure challenges the idea that major platforms shrink information gaps, and research has turned to the identification of variables that explain how those gaps widen or persist. We use Latent Class Analysis to operationalize the metaphor of “attracting the news” and investigate incidental exposure as both an individual trait and temporal state. We link the top stories on Facebook during an election cycle with incidental exposure measures to explore news attraction, incidental exposure, and news engagement. We find some evidence incidental exposure may close information gaps, but that it does not close engagement gaps. Results contribute to theory about how digital media shape inequalities in news consumption and engagement.


## KEYWORDS

Incidental exposure; news exposure; news engagement; digital inequalities social media; digital media; platforms

## Introduction

The notion of *incidental news exposure* complicates questions about political information inequality on digital media platforms by suggesting that even the disengaged may be exposed to political news while using platforms for other purposes (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). But research on incidental exposure overemphasizes “demand-side” factors, whereas changes in “supply-side” dynamics have been neglected. Based on Thorson’s (2020) idea of “attracting the news,” we introduce *news attraction* as an analytic concept to examine the individual, social, and technological factors that produce informational inequalities. Developing this concept clarifies debates about the equalizing or stratifying effects of social media platforms on news exposure and engagement. Using data from an online survey of US social media users during the 2020 Presidential Election cycle, we test hypotheses based on the news attraction concept, specifically considering the social media context. We discuss the contribution of the findings to existing theory about informational inequalities.

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2250825>.

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## ***Equalization versus Stratification in Political News Audiences***

The question of whether the use of digital media reduces or exacerbates inequalities in news exposure and engagement largely parallel similar questions regarding broad stratificational effects of the internet (i.e., the “digital divide”), and it grew out of normative assumptions about the role of news and “the press” in informing democratic electorates (e.g., Prior 2007). In addition, the functionalist tradition in the study of mass communication asserts that mass media serve the important social function of informing the public (Wright 1960), and while the field has moved on from functionalism as an organizing framework for understanding media effects on individuals and societies, scholars have continued to grapple with the problem of the stratifying effects of news media, particularly in digital media environments.

Theoretically, widespread access to news and public affairs information should decrease informational and political inequalities among groups that are otherwise split along lines of socioeconomic status or other social inequalities, as access to high-quality information helps people identify problems, coordinate opportunities for solving those problems, and enables participation in civic and political activities (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). But research shows that, historically, individuals with greater political resources (e.g., the wealthy, educated, and politically interested) have been able to not only consume more news content, but reap greater benefits in terms of political knowledge and engagement (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018), producing a “stratificational” effect or “rich-get-richer” dynamic.

The dominant perspective on digital media has been that prominent platforms such as Facebook and Google tend to create “high-choice” environments, in which the ability of individuals to customize their media diets has deepened inequalities in news consumption (Prior 2007). According to this view, the politically interested embed themselves in news-rich digital spaces, while everyone else self-selects out of politics and public affairs altogether (Karlsen, Beyer, and Steen-Johnsen 2020; Thorson 2020). Research has documented inequalities in news exposure and engagement online (Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen 2018; Merten et al. 2022), and although there is evidence that they are not reliably producing knowledge gaps across democratic contexts, there are strong indications of such gaps in the United States (Haugsgjerd, Hesstved, and Karlsen 2021).

The growing literature on incidental news exposure provides a plausible reason to question or temper these claims about informational stratification. Broadly describing encounters with news or political information that occur when individuals are using media for other, non-news purposes (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018), incidental exposure can occur on both “trait” and “state” levels (Weeks and Lane 2020). Trait-like exposure refers to habitual encounters with news, and it happens when individuals with low interest or motivation nevertheless stumble upon news (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Lu and Lee 2019; Weeks, Lane, and Hahn 2022). State-like exposure refers to unintentional encounters with specific content at a specific moment in time. This distinction between trait and state allows for the possibility that incidental exposure can occur among those who are generally unmotivated to engage with news, as well as those who are unmotivated in a specific context, such as a particular time of day or topic (Weeks and Lane 2020).

Research has primarily focused on incidental exposure on the trait-level, investigating how social media facilitate news exposure during “moments of leisure” (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018) and among users who are generally disconnected from news and politics (Barnidge and Xenos 2021). Studies have shown that incidental exposure accounts for a significant portion of news consumption on these platforms (Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018). Accordingly, some scholars argue that the abundance of news online may reduce political inequality by providing opportunities for the disinterested to learn about and participate in the political process (Ahmadi and Wohn 2018; Weeks, Lane, and Hahn 2022; Xenos, Vromen, and Loader 2014). Others argue that *engagement* will remain unequal despite incidental exposure (Kümpel 2020; Thorson 2020). Engagement reflects a deeper level of cognitive involvement and is more closely associated with learning from the news (Matthes et al. 2020; Nanz and Matthes 2020). Thus, many of the pro-democratic outcomes of news use depend on engagement.

Inspired by this debate, significant scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the process and frequency with which incidental exposure occurs (Ahmadi and Wohn 2018; Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke 2018; Barnidge 2020; Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage 2018; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Weeks et al. 2017), the conditions under which people engage with the news they encounter incidentally (Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018; Karnowski et al. 2017), and the effects of incidental exposure on knowledge and participation (Lee and Xenos 2022; Lee, Nanz, and Heiss 2022; Nanz and Matthes 2020, 2022; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016).

Empirical findings are mixed when it comes to the question of “equalizing” or “stratifying” effects. For example, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) find evidence for equalizing effects in terms of exposure. Using survey data from four countries (Italy, Australia, United Kingdom, and United States), they find that people who use social media for purposes other than news are exposed to significantly more online news sources, and the effect is stronger among those with lower levels of political interest. In another cross-national sample, semi-structured interviews suggest that equalizing effects may occur while stumbling across content that other people post on the platform (Mitchelstein et al. 2020). In addition, other studies have found that incidental exposure is positively related to political learning and participation (Heiss and Matthes 2019; Weeks, Lane, and Hahn 2022). Importantly, a meta-analysis of incidental exposure research found that these positive effects tend to be small and contextual (Nanz and Matthes 2022).

Other research finds evidence for stratifying effects. For example, one study found that people with high interest are more likely to engage with news content they encounter incidentally (Kümpel 2020). These engagement behaviors are read by news selection algorithms as indicators of future interest (Thorson et al. 2021), and these updated selection criteria create stratificational effects in future exposure (Barnidge 2023). Social connections also inform content selection algorithms (DeVito 2017), which explains why some individuals are immersed in information-rich networks while others are left in “social media news deserts” (Barnidge and Xenos 2021). Thus, antecedents to exposure such as interest, networks, and algorithms produce a reciprocal relationship between exposure and engagement, leaving some individuals in information landscapes that are only sporadically populated with politically relevant information (Barnidge and Xenos 2021; Lee and Xenos 2022; Thorson 2019).

### ***From Incidental Exposure to News Attraction***

Work on digital inequalities in news audiences has primarily focused on “demand side” factors. Studies have operationalized incidental exposure as instances in which an individual was exposed to news when they were not motivated to do so. In foregrounding the role of individual motivation, incidental exposure becomes primarily a function of the psychology of news consumers. Yet the novelty of digital media lies in the confluence of “demand-side” factors with changes in the supply of news, which is shaped by a host of social, strategic, and algorithmic forces (Thorson 2020; Thorson and Wells 2016). As Kümpel (2020) argues, there is a need to focus on how the very opportunity for incidental exposure may be unequally distributed. This requires considering not only individual motivation, but also social and algorithmic forces as well (Thorson 2020; Weeks and Lane 2020).

To tackle this challenge, we adopt Thorson’s (2020) notion of “news attraction,” which she introduced to better understand the “shift in power toward a broader assemblage of actors that play a role in the process of exposure to news and political information on social media platforms” (1073). Defining “attraction” as a force that evokes interest or brings two objects together, she argues that individual activity on digital platforms creates a “force” that ultimately “attracts” news and political information through the datafication of the user’s activity and the algorithmic curation of content. Thus, much of what scholars have considered to be incidental exposure is elective because it reflects individuals’ previous news-related choices (Thorson et al. 2021), as many relevant choices do not pertain to specific pieces of news content but rather to types or categories of content (Barnidge and Xenos 2021).

Before turning to the mechanics of measuring news attraction, it is important to assert that it is a digital phenomenon with no offline counterpart. However, it can be compared to traditional subscriptions, and it’s fruitful to examine the differences between the two. Subscriptions reflect a personal bond with a news organization, driven largely by branding and consumer trust. On the other hand, news attraction signifies a weaker connection to specific brands and a preference for news from various sources. The latest Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute (Newman 2023) reveals that digital subscriptions are growing but are mainly concentrated among well-known upscale brands. In addition, only 17% of people in wealthy countries are willing to pay for digital news, and those under 35 prefer social media, search engines, or news aggregator apps. Therefore, news attraction represents a noticeable shift in audience behavior, as more people rely on distributed channels for news.

### ***Dimensions of News Attraction***

News attraction is useful not only as a metaphor but also as an analytical concept. Current models examining equalization or stratification of political information tend to focus solely on “demand-side” factors like self-reported interest. By contrast, “news attraction” allows for the inclusion of the “supply-side” factors such as ego-centric social networks (Barnidge and Xenos 2021) and algorithmic curation (Thorson et al.

2021). Integrating these factors can provide further clarity on whether social media platforms tend to produce information gaps.

Prior literature has identified at least five dimensions of influence on processes of news exposure: (1) personal preferences; (2) environmental perceptions; (3) social network characteristics, particularly those that shape flows of information; (4) social news curation; and (5) the datafication of user behavior by social media platforms and/or news organizations. First, individual interest and other preferences do play large role in shaping the extent to which individuals are incidentally exposed (e.g., Barnidge 2023), helping to create what Kümpel (2020) has called “Matthew Effect” (i.e., a “rich-get-richer” dynamic) of news on social media platforms. But prior research has identified several other influences on the process of news exposure on social media. For example, Weeks and Lane (2020) theorize that “environmental perceptions”—that is, individuals’ perceptions of whether social media platforms are suitable venues for obtaining news and political information—play a primal role in processes of exposure by shaping how people approach and use platforms. In addition, research shows that characteristics of ego-centric networks such as network size and diversity (Barnidge and Xenos 2021), as well as the extent to which people follow accounts to get news content (Thorson et al. 2021), also affect news exposure. In large part, this because content is not only selected by news algorithms, but it is also curated by social contacts (Thorson and Wells 2016). Finally, while direct observations of algorithmic curation are somewhat rare, prior research has provided some evidence that is algorithms play a large role in shaping incidental exposure (e.g., Thorson et al. 2021). Therefore, we can conceptually define *news attraction* as follows: the force that results from the confluence of user attributes and interactions with social media platforms, which in turn affects the likelihood of encountering news or political information on those platforms.

Theoretically, news attraction should have a reciprocal relationship with both news exposure and news engagement, which are distinct but closely related concepts (Karnowski et al. 2017). That is, news attraction is an important antecedent of exposure as well as key predictor of engagement, while at the same time exposure to and engagement with news likely increases news attraction. But critically, we recognize the potential for both trait- and state-level incidental exposure and, therefore, the possibility that incidental encounters with the news could occur among individuals who are both “high” and “low” in news attraction. Doing so allows us to assess the extent to which incidental exposure is primarily a function of the traits that are linked to news attraction as opposed to more episodic incidental news encounters.

The news attraction concept is useful in answering still-open questions about whether incidental exposure widens or closes informational gaps. For example, we would expect people low in news attraction to report less purposeful exposure, as they have not made news-related choices that reflect an underlying intention to consume news content. However, it is not clear that these same individuals would also report less incidental exposure, because such exposure arises not only from individual choices but also social networks, and therefore is beyond the control of any one individual. The question, then, is whether news encountered in this manner is sufficient to close the gaps in total exposure with people who are high in news attraction, who presumably encounter high levels of news on purpose. On the other

hand, it is also possible that incidental exposure is *not* sufficient to close these gaps, because people who are high in news attraction encounter news both intentionally and unintentionally. Thus, if incidental exposure closes gaps, we might expect to see (a) comparatively high levels of incidental exposure among people who score low on news attraction and (b) roughly equal levels of overall exposure among those who are high and those who are low in news attraction. We might expect the opposite pattern if incidental exposure widens the exposure gap. Because of these competing expectations, we ask the following research question:

RQ1: Is incidental news exposure related to narrower or wider gaps in news exposure between people who are low in news attraction and people who are high in news attraction?

Similarly, if incidental exposure closes gaps in engagement with news, we expect to observe an interaction effect between incidental exposure and news attraction—that is, people who are low in news attraction but high in incidental exposure should have roughly equal levels of engagement to those who are high in news exposure. This prediction assumes that incidental exposure is providing users with opportunities to engage regardless of how fundamentally “attractive” they are to news content (Karnowski et al. 2017). On the other hand, if incidental exposure widens engagement gaps, we might expect to see the highest levels of engagement among those who are high in news attraction and high in incidental exposure. Therefore, we ask:

RQ2: Is the positive relationship between incidental news exposure and news engagement stronger among people who are high in news attraction or people who are low in news attraction?

## Context of Study

It is important to contextualize this research within the U.S. online environment for news and political information (Rojas and Valenzuela 2019). Two salient features of this environment are (a) the widespread availability of news on social media and (b) the fragmentation in news audiences. Over two-thirds of U.S. adults reported getting news from social media in 2022 (Pew Research Center 2022). However, less than a quarter are frequent users, and 48% get news only “sometimes” or “rarely.” Thus, news is widely available, but not everyone uses it regularly. Partisan media dominate attention on these platforms (Altay, Nielsen, and Fletcher 2022), which have also facilitated the proliferation of hyperpartisan and alternative news (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). Yet, fragmentation in the audience is not as extensive as previously thought (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). Thus, partisan media are popular, but do not necessarily produce information silos. It is within this news-rich, but fragmented environment that we test hypotheses about news attraction.

## Methods

### Survey Design

This study relies on a rolling cross-sectional (RCS) survey of adult social media users recruited *via* Qualtrics online panel from the United States. To align survey responses with the news cycle, the survey was administered in 17 sampling frames of 3–4 days



each (weekends were counted as one day). In each frame, we embedded a screenshot of the most popular news articles circulating on Facebook over the previous three days with source cues edited out of the image.

To identify popular news articles, the authors selected the top 25 news organizations on Facebook for the previous three months based on NewsWhip rankings. The top two highest performing articles based on engagement metrics were then collected using Brandwatch and validated with CrowdTangle. Because most of the stories came from a single news organization (Fox News), we also included the most popular story from any other (non-Fox) news organization and randomized which story a respondent saw. Respondents were told the story had been “recently circulating on Facebook”—a true statement. Finally, we developed several cued recall measures based on this method. We did not collect personal information or access social media accounts. Embedding articles into an RCS design affords us the ability to more closely link survey responses to content circulating during the election cycle (De Vreese et al. 2017).

## **Sample and Data**

Data were collected between 3 September and 1 November 2020. Quotas for age, race, gender, and census region were based on the 2018 American Community Survey. The survey has an incidence rate of ~100% and a cooperation rate of ~70%. It has a sample size of  $N=2,008$  with at least  $n=100$  in each sampling frame (1,731 complete cases; missingness across modeled variables: *Max.* = 126 (age), and *Min.* = 19 for strength of party identity). The sample reflects the target population on the quota criteria (see [Supplemental Appendix A](#)). The average respondent is between 45 and 54 years old (measured on a 7-point scale where 1 = 18–24 and 7 = 85 or older). The sample is composed of approximately 40% persons of color and 51% females. Census regions were defined according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s map, and in our sample ~22% of respondents live in the Midwest, ~19% live in the Northeast, ~37% live in the South, and ~23% live in the West. In terms of non-quota demographics, the average respondent has either some college or a 2-year associate’s degree or trade school diploma ( $M=4.5$  on a 7-point scale where 1 = *Some high school* and 7 = *Post-graduate degree*), and lives in a household that earns between \$45,000 and \$75,000 per year ( $M=4.7$  on an 8-point scale where 1 = *Less than \$15,000* and 8 = *More than \$150,000*). The sample underrepresents low-education and low-income individuals, and therefore the data were weighted by education and income (see [Supplemental Appendix A](#) for the weighting scheme).<sup>1</sup> To ensure balance in the sample across the 17 waves, missing values were imputed using a chained equations multiple imputation technique.<sup>2</sup>

## **Measures**

### **Exposure and Engagement**

One aim of our study was to comprehensively investigate incidental exposure at both the trait- and state-levels, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon with respect to its levels of stability and contextual dependence (Weeks and Lane 2020).



On the trait-like side, *total exposure* to political information was measured with six questions asking respondents how often in the past week they have encountered the following types of information on social media (0=Never and 4=Several times a day): information critical of a candidate they support; information critical of a candidate they oppose; information supportive of a candidate they support; information supportive of a candidate they oppose; information that disagrees with their political views; and information that agrees with their political views (c.f., Weeks et al. 2017). These items were averaged for each respondent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ). The variable has a mean of 1.8 (SD=1.3).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to clarify whether exposure was incidental (Nanz and Matthes 2022). Therefore, immediately after answering the above battery of questions, respondents were asked a follow-up question: "On social media, some people intentionally search for news or political information, but others come across such information accidentally. What about you?" (0=Always intentionally and 4=Always accidentally). To create a measure of *trait incidental exposure*, this item was multiplied by the total exposure scale, and then the square root was calculated to maintain the original 5-point metric. This variable has a mean of 1.5 (SD=1.1) and captures a general (i.e., trait-like) tendency to encounter news incidentally.

The state-like measures were centered on the embedded story stimuli. Once shown the story, respondents were asked whether they had seen it on Facebook. A follow-up question asked whether they had seen it on some other social media platform, and answers to these two items were recoded so that 1=Exposed and 0=Not exposed. Approximately 42% of the sample reported *story exposure*. Respondents who reported story exposure were asked additional follow-up questions, including those for the *state incidental exposure* ("When you saw the story, were you purposefully seeking information on this topic? 1=Purposeful and 0=Incidental; 54% of subset and 23% of full sample said "purposeful") and *engagement* ("When you saw the story, did you engage in any of the following activities?: click on the story; scan the headline of the story; read the entire story; seek out additional information about the topic; comment on the post; discuss the story; and share the story; 1=Yes and 0=No; responses were summed for each respondent; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ; Min. = 0 and Max. = 7,  $M=3.5$ ,  $SD=2.2$ ).<sup>4</sup>

### News Attraction

The study includes five indicators of news attraction. First, the study measures respondents' perceptions of *social media as news source* (Weeks and Lane 2020) by asking them which choice best describes their "reason for accessing [their] social media accounts": to follow news and public affairs information; for some other reason; do not think very much about the reason. This three-level factor was recoded into a binary variable (1=News source and 0=Not news source). A little more than one-third of the sample (35%) views social media as a news source. Second, the study measures *self-reported interest* with a three-item scale. Questions asked respondents how interested they are (1=Not at all interested and 5=Very interested) in news, politics, and local community. These three items were averaged for each respondent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ) and the variable has a mean of 3.5 (SD=1.0). Third, we measured the extent to which respondents *follow accounts for news* with a three-item scale. Items ask how often respondents follow accounts on social media because they are interested in what they post about news or current affairs, politics, and community events (1=Never and 5=Very

*Frequently*). These three items were averaged for each respondent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ), and the scale has a mean of 2.7 ( $SD=1.2$ ). Fourth, social news curation relies on 5 items that ask respondents how much (1 = *None at all* and 5 = *Almost all*) of the content their friends post is about the following topics: the 2020 election; politics or current affairs; social or community issues; racial or social justice issues; and COVID-19. The items were averaged for each respondent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ;  $M=2.9$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ). Finally, we measured *algorithmic categorization* using a technique pioneered by Thorson et al. (2021). We asked respondents at the end of the survey to open a web browser, navigate to the Settings menu of their Facebook accounts, and locate their Ad Interests section. We then asked them whether they saw the following categories included in their interests: (a) politics; (b) news or specific news organizations (e.g., the *New York Times*); or (c) neither. We coded this item into a binary variable (1 = *News or politics* and 0 = *Neither*). A little less than half (41%) of the sample was categorized as interested in news or politics, and a little more than half (59%) as uninterested.

### Control Variables

Prior research shows that it is important to include indicators of social network structures as controls in the analysis (Barnidge and Xenos 2021), and we included four such variables. First, network size was measured by asking respondents how many people or accounts they are "friends with," "follow," or "subscribe to" on six social media platforms (1 = *None* and 7 = *2,001 or more*). Respondents' answers to these items were averaged to create a scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ), which was then unobtrusively logged to correct for skew (Min. = 0 and Max. = 1.9). The final variable has a mean of 0.7 ( $SD=0.5$ ). A structural measure of *network diversity* uses a standardized list of 22 occupations and asks respondents whether they are connected to someone on social media who belongs to each (1 = *Yes* and 0 = *No*). An averaged scale was created from these items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ), which has mean of 0.3 ( $SD=0.3$ ). *Group activity* on social media was measured with an 8-item scale, where questions asked respondents whether they had discussed news or related topics during the past month in various types of groups. These items were summed for each respondent, and the index was then logged to normalize the distribution. The final variable has a mean of 0.5 ( $SD=0.6$ ).

In addition to *age*, *race*, *gender*, *education*, and *income* (see above for descriptive statistics), the analyses control for *political ideology*, *party identity*, and *frequency of social media use*. We included these variables in the models to control for potential confounding influences on our dependent variables, as they are known predictors of attention to and engagement with political information. Political ideology was measured with a single 11-point L-R scale where  $-5$  = *Very liberal* and  $5$  = *Very conservative* ( $M=0.2$ ,  $SD=3.0$ ). Respondents were also asked about their party identity (*Democrat/Republican/Other/None*). Those who selected *Democrat* or *Republican* were asked about the strength of that identity (*Strong/Not that strong*). Those who selected *Other* or *None* were asked about party lean (*Closer to Democrat/Closer to Republican*). These items were coded to create a 7-point scale where  $-3$  = *Strong Democrat* and  $3$  = *Strong Republican* ( $M=-0.3$ ,  $SD=2.0$ ). Finally, frequency of social media use was measured by asking respondents how much time per day they spend actively using social media (1 = *Less than 10 min* and 6 = *More than three hours*). The variable has a mean of 3.5 ( $SD=1.6$ ) (Ernala et al. 2020).

## Analysis Plan

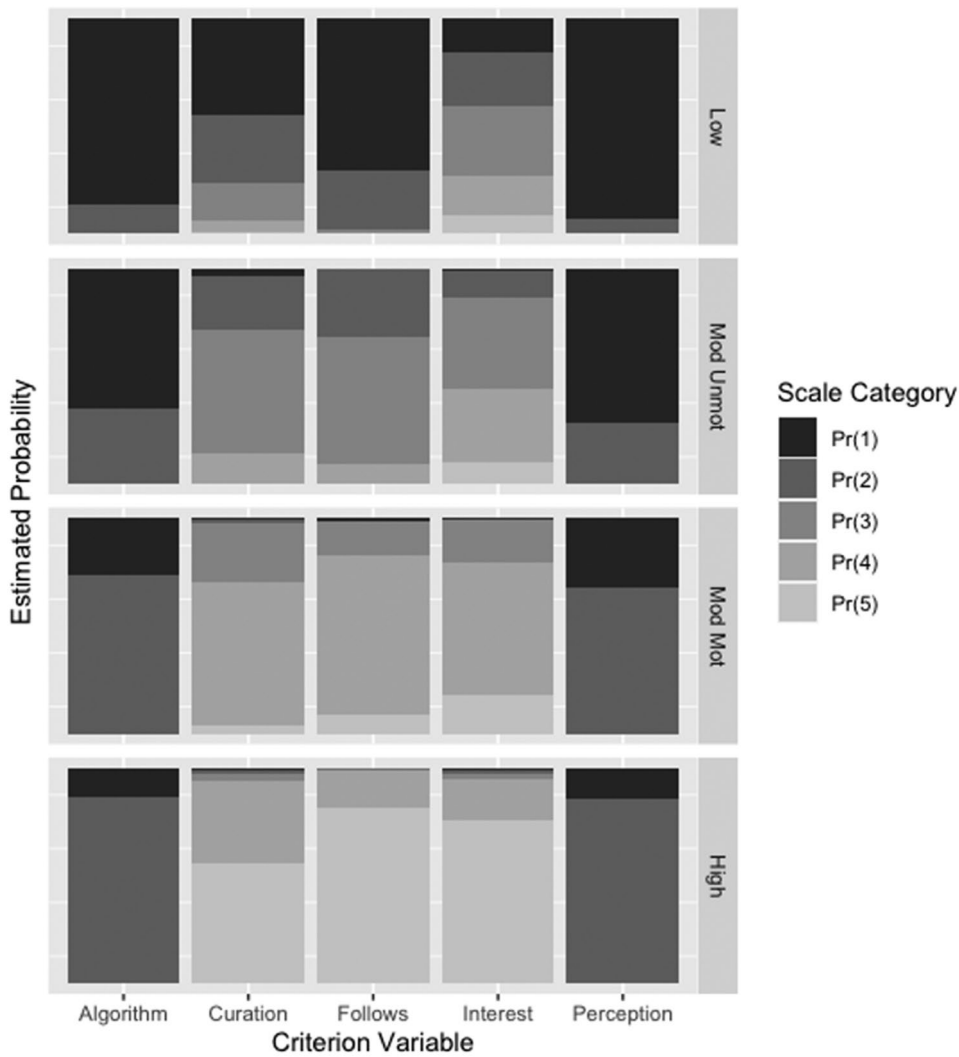
First, a Latent Class Analysis (LCA) is conducted with the five indicators of news attraction. LCA detects unobserved groups based on patterns of association among a set of observed criteria variables. We compare the fit statistics for models ranging from 2 to 5 classes, and we chose the model with the lowest Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). In the second stage of the analysis, we test the hypotheses using multi-level modeling (MLM).<sup>5</sup> This approach allows us to estimate differences between the attraction groups while controlling for measurement invariance across the 17 sampling frames by including random intercepts for each frame. Linear models are used for the trait-like variables, while quasibinomial models are used for the state-like variables to account for data weighting. Controls in these models are group-mean centered by frame to ease interpretation of the intercepts.

## Results

The correlations among the five criteria variables range between .34 and .72 ( $p < .001$  for all; see [Supplemental Table B1](#) online for a full matrix), indicating that they may be empirical manifestations of a common underlying construct—that is, they arise from latent “news attraction” groups. The model with the lowest BIC has four latent classes (see [Supplemental Appendix B](#) online).

There are important qualitative differences among the four groups, which we labeled *low-attraction*, *moderate—unmotivated group*, *moderate—motivated group*, and *high-attraction*, and which can be described according to differing response probabilities on the five criteria variables in the analysis. These probabilities are visualized in [Figure 1](#). Respondents in the first latent class, which we have labeled the *low-attraction group*, are unlikely to perceive social media as news sources or to be categorized as interested in news or politics by Facebook’s algorithm. They are less likely than the other groups to follow accounts for news or report social news curation in the past week—the most probable response category on both of these variables is “1 = Never” for both variables. There is a relatively normal probability distribution on self-reported interest, but this distribution actually skews lower than it does for the other groups. The low-attraction group is the second-largest latent class ( $n=594$ ); it makes up 38% of the sample and has a predicted probability of group membership of .40 (see [Supplemental Appendix B](#)).

The second and third latent classes are somewhat similar in that they can be characterized as having “moderate” levels of news attraction. However, they also differ in important ways. Although both groups are more likely than the low-attraction group to perceive social media as a news source and to be categorized by Facebook’s algorithm as interested, the probability of a “Yes” score on both variables is considerably lower in the second group as compared to the third. In addition, the most common response category on the other three criterion variables (self-reported interest, following news accounts, and social curation) is “3” in the second group but “4” in the third. Thus, while both groups display moderate levels of news attractiveness, respondents in the third group appear to be more motivated to attract the news than respondents in the second. Therefore, we have labeled the second group, which is larger ( $n=805$ ; 31%; predicted probability = .30), the *moderate—unmotivated*



**Figure 1.** Predicted probabilities for criterion variables in Latent Class Analysis.

group and the third group, which is smaller ( $n=416$ ; 21%; predicted probability = .21), the *moderate—motivated group*.

The *high-attraction group* is the final group, and it displays the strongest tendencies toward news attraction on all criteria variables. The most likely response category on the two binary criteria—environmental perceptions and algorithmic categorization—is “1=Yes” and the most likely response on the three interval-like scales is “5=Very Often/Very Interested.” This group is the smallest ( $n=193$ ); it makes up only 10% of the sample (.10 predicted probability).

The first model in Table 1 tests differences in the trait-like incidental exposure variable. Because the controls are group-mean centered by frame, the intercept can be interpreted as the adjusted grand mean ( $M=1.15$ ) of the low-attraction group, and the coefficients as differences from this mean. The adjusted means for the two moderate-attraction groups are significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) than the mean of the

**Table 1.** Differences in social media news exposure among the news attraction groups.

	Incidental exposure				Total exposure		Story exposure	
	Trait		State		Trait		State	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Fixed Effects								
Intercept ( <i>M</i> Low News Attraction)	1.15***	0.05	−2.07***	0.13	1.12***	0.06	−1.73***	0.11
News Attraction ( $\Delta$ versus Low)								
Medium—Unmotivated	0.62***	0.06	0.68***	0.13	0.79***	0.05	0.75***	0.12
Medium—Motivated	0.36***	0.08	0.78***	0.16	1.22***	0.07	1.18***	0.13
High	−0.16	0.11	0.40	0.24	1.59***	0.10	1.17***	0.16
Age	0.08***	0.02	0.12***	0.04	0.06***	0.02	0.01	0.03
Gender (1 = Female)	0.06	0.05	−0.15	0.10	−0.06	0.05	−0.24**	0.08
Race (1 = Person of Color)	−0.17***	0.05	−0.12	0.10	−0.22***	0.05	0.00	0.08
Education	0.06***	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.06***	0.02	0.02	0.02
Income	0.00	0.01	−0.04	0.03	0.00	0.01	−0.02	0.02
Ideology (+ Conservative)	−0.03***	0.01	−0.03	0.02	−0.03**	0.01	0.01	0.01
Party Identity (+ Republican)	0.05***	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.04**	0.01	0.00	0.02
Frequency of Social Media Use	0.07***	0.01	0.09**	0.03	0.06***	0.01	0.00	0.02
Network Size	−0.03	0.07	−0.14	0.15	0.40***	0.07	0.23*	0.10
Network Diversity	0.26*	0.11	−0.02	0.22	0.30**	0.10	0.32*	0.15
Group Activity	0.25*	0.11	0.13	0.10	0.29***	0.04	0.11	0.07
Random Effects	Var.	SD	Var.	SD	Var.	SD	Var.	SD
Intercept <sub>Frame</sub>	0.01	0.10	0.04	0.19	0.03	0.17	0.03	0.18
Fit Statistics								
ICC	.01		.02		.03		.02	
LL	−3,137.86		−1,051.30		−3,088.25		−1,339.30	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.17		.11		.44		.11	

Note: Cell entries are parameter estimates from multilevel models with random intercepts. Linear models are used for trait-like variables, and quasi-binomial models are used for state-like variables. Data are weighted by education and income. *N*=2,008. Groups = 17.  
\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

low-attraction group (*M* = 1.77 for unmotivated and *M* = 1.51 for motivated). Meanwhile, the estimate for the high-attraction group (*M* = 0.99) is not significantly different than the estimate for the low-attraction group (see Figure 2, upper-left).

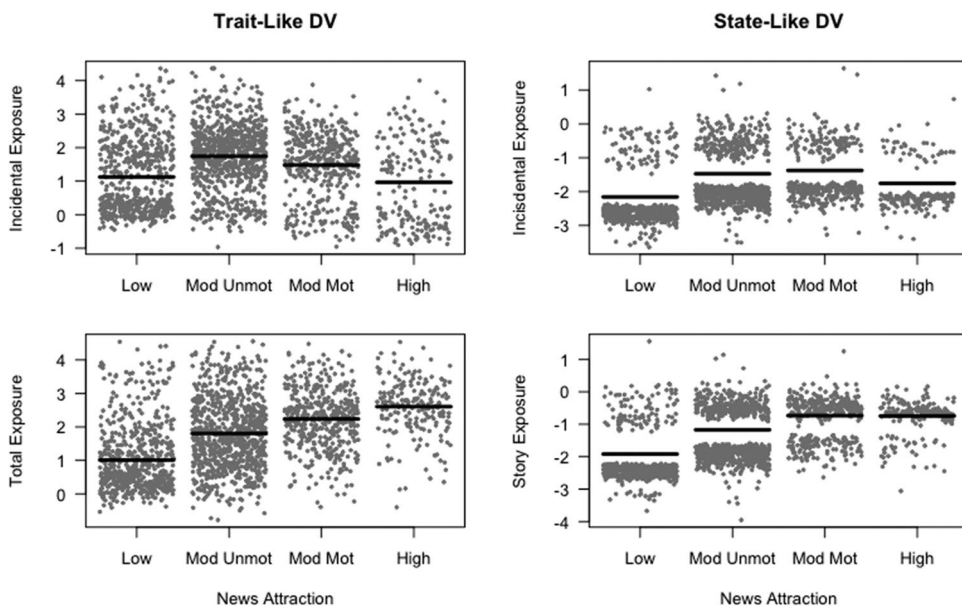
The second model in the table tests differences in the state-like incidental exposure variable. Because this model is quasibinomial (Poisson), the interpretation of the coefficients differs slightly from the linear model reported above. In this model, the exponentiated intercept can be interpreted as the weighted proportion of respondents in the reference group reporting incidental exposure, and the exponentiated coefficients as the percent increase or decrease from this reference in the other groups. Thus, the model estimates that 13% of respondents in low-attraction group report incidental exposure. The proportions for the two moderate groups are significantly (*p* < .001) higher at 25% (unmotivated) and 28% (motivated), respectively, but the proportion for the high-attraction group is not (19%). Figure 2 plots these estimates as a log-transformed linear function, and thus predicted values range from approximately −3.5 to 1.25.

The third model tests differences in the trait-like overall exposure variable. The model shows an adjusted mean of 1.12 for the low-attraction group. Meanwhile, the means for all other groups are statistically higher ( $p < .001$ ) at 1.91 for the moderate—unmotivated group, 2.34 for the moderate—motivated group, and 2.71 for the high-attraction group (see [Figure 2](#), lower-left).

The last model in the table tests differences in the state-like overall exposure variable. The model estimates the proportion of respondents in the low-attraction group reporting exposure is 18%, while the adjusted proportions for the other groups are significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) at 38% for the moderate—unmotivated group, 58% for the moderate—motivated group, and 57% for the high-attraction group (see [Figure 2](#), lower-right for the log-transformed effects).

Putting these results together, respondents in the low-attraction group do not report higher levels of incidental exposure than the other groups, and they also report significantly lower levels of overall exposure than the other groups. Therefore, the low-attraction groups meet neither of our observational criteria for closing exposure gaps (H1a). That said, the high- and low-groups report roughly the same amount of incidental exposure, and therefore we have no evidence that incidental exposure widens gaps in news exposure (H1b). On the other hand, the two moderate-attraction groups (and particularly the ‘motivated’ group) report significantly more incidental exposure than either the low- or high-attraction groups, and their reported levels of overall exposure are also close to the high-attraction group. Therefore, we have evidence that incidental exposure closes (H1a) rather than widens (H1b) exposure gaps for the “motivated” group and, to a lesser extent, the “unmotivated” group.

For news engagement ([Table 2](#)), we observe greater differences among the attraction groups among those who report incidental exposure than among those who report purposeful exposure—essentially the opposite of what we would expect if



**Figure 2.** Differences among attraction groups in news exposure.

**Table 2.** Conditional effects of news attraction on story engagement.

Fixed effects	Engagement	
	$\beta$	SE
Intercept ( <i>M</i> Low News Attraction)	4.11***	0.44
News Attraction ( $\Delta$ versus Low)		
Medium—Unmotivated	−0.40	0.48
Medium—Motivated	0.11	0.47
High	0.87	0.49
Incidental Exposure (State)	−2.67***	0.47
Incidental Exposure (Trait)	−0.12*	0.06
Age	0.00	0.05
Gender (1 = Female)	−0.29*	0.12
Race (1 = Person of Color)	0.25	0.13
Education	−0.03	0.04
Income	0.02	0.03
Ideology (+ Conservative)	0.02	0.02
Party Identity (+ Republican)	−0.05	0.03
Frequency of Social Media Use	0.02	0.04
Network Size	0.27	0.17
Network Diversity	0.74**	0.24
Group Activity	0.27*	0.11
<b>Interactions</b>		
News Attraction (Mod—Unmot) $\times$ Incidental Exposure (State)	1.17*	0.52
News Attraction (Mod—Mot) $\times$ Incidental Exposure (State)	1.23*	0.51
News Attraction (High) $\times$ Incidental Exposure (State)	0.95	0.57
<b>Random Effects</b>	Var.	SD
Intercept	0.02	0.16
<b>Fit Statistics</b>		
ICC		.01
LL		−1,634.20
Pseudo- $R^2$		.45

Note: Cell entries are parameter estimates from a multilevel model with random intercepts. Data are weighted by education and income. Analysis uses subset of respondents who report exposure to story.  $N=842$ . Groups = 17. Mod: Moderate. Unmot: Unmotivated. Mot: Motivated

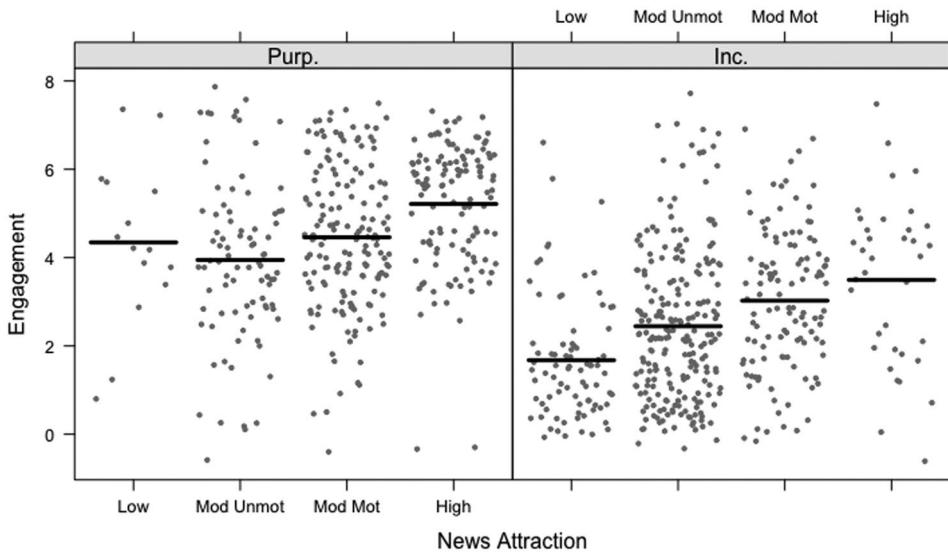
\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

incidental exposure closed engagement gaps. The estimated adjusted means can be calculated from the model coefficients in the same manner as before, only this time the calculations include not only the intercept and comparison coefficients, but also the relevant interaction term. Using this method, we can use the state-like (binary) measure of incidental exposure to compare the group differences between those who report purposeful and incidental exposure. Among those reporting purposeful exposure, the difference between the low- and high-attraction groups is 1.82, and the difference between the low-attraction group and its nearest neighbor (moderate—unmotivated) is 0.77. Substantially, greater differences are reported among those reporting incidental exposure. The difference between the low- and high-attraction groups is 3.54, and the difference between the low-attraction group and its nearest neighbor is 2.27 (see [Figure 3](#), top row). A full list of estimated means is reported online in [Supplemental Appendix C](#). These results provide evidence that incidental exposure appears to *widen* (H2b) rather than *close* (H2a) engagement gaps.

## Discussion

We started with the assumption that models of political news exposure and engagement should consider both on demand- and supply-side factors in digital news environments,





**Figure 3.** Differences in news engagement between attraction groups by exposure type (purp. = purposeful & inc. = incidental).

particularly on social media platforms, rather than rely solely on political interest. We developed the “news attraction” metaphor as an analytic concept, which is characterized by a multivariate approach that assumes interrelated dimensions of news attractiveness, and we employed the concept in empirical tests in the context of social media news consumption. Doing so has yielded some novel theoretical insights: News attraction groups have qualitatively different news-related preferences and habits; the equalizing effects on exposure may be non-linear; and there are important differences between exposure and engagement in terms of news inequality perspective.

To elaborate, the attraction groups differ from each other not only based on self-reported interest but also on other factors. While the low-attraction group and the next group differ marginally on interest, the latter reports substantially more incidental news exposure due to differences in variables such as algorithmic filtering, curation activities, news interest, and social media usage. The moderate-attraction groups appear similar in terms of algorithmic categorization and environmental perceptions, but the motivated group shows higher frequencies of following news accounts and active curation within their networks. These differences are not trivial and mirror offline social inequalities in socioeconomic status, race, and gender. People in the high-attraction group tend to have higher education and income levels, while women and people of color are less likely to be in this group (see [Supplemental Appendix D](#) online). These group differences raise concerns about digital inequalities in political news, particularly those arising from unfair social structures (Barnidge and Xenos 2021; Thorson 2019), as these issues could discourage political engagement within underserved communities.

The distribution of incidental exposure among the latent-class groups is non-linear, which differs from studies using self-reported interest as the sole predictor, as interest is less consistent and less descriptive (see [Supplemental Appendix E](#) online). Accounting

for latent classes defined by a range of behaviors allows for improved prediction of incidental exposure and reveals non-linear patterns of group differences. Our findings suggest a “sweet spot” of news attraction for exposure, with substantial evidence of equalization in the two groups in the middle. These groups have optimal levels of news attraction, resulting in a higher proportion of their exposure attributable to incidentality compared to low- or high-attraction groups. Digital media platforms may have the most significant impact on the information diets of the middle groups, which tend to be middle-of-the-road in terms of both socioeconomic status and political leanings.

In contrast to our findings related to exposure, we find evidence of stratification in engagement, with a larger gap between low- and high-attraction groups. This could be due to perception, as the high-attraction group may be more likely expression intent. But a lack of intentionality may not necessarily reduce engagement. Matthes et al.’s (2020) political incidental news exposure (PINE) model suggests that incidental exposure may not lead to deeper engagement with content. Our findings support this idea and suggest that incidental exposure may even reduce engagement. Therefore, digital media platforms may get content in front of people, but disengagement from that content could render its beneficial effects on learning and political participation minimal (Nanz and Matthes 2022).

The study’s findings have limitations. It is based on cross-sectional data, which can’t be used to test causality. Our goal was to observe information exposure and engagement patterns across groups. The “popular story” approach has a design limitation. It’s impossible to show all top stories in a cycle, and showing more would increase survey fatigue. Instead, we opted to show a single story as a proxy for popular content. This compromise introduces measurement error, but it should be random rather than systematic. Another design consideration is the dominance of Fox News on social media platforms, which scholars replicating our linkage design should consider. Fox News was the most popular and ubiquitous news organization in every sampling frame, highlighting its power in the U.S. media environment. However, it’s unclear how useful third-party ranking lists (e.g., NewsWhip, CrowdTangle) are in describing what appears in people’s feeds. We assume that posts with higher engagement are more likely to be seen, but researchers should be mindful of the content lists provided by ranking services.

The survey is limited by self-reported measures of key variables, as people tend to underestimate their news exposure on surveys (González-Bailón and Xenos 2023), and this measurement error produces biased descriptive inferences. However, it will not necessarily bias causal inferences (i.e., estimates of relationships; see King et al. 2021). This highlights the value of self-reported measures to the field, as obtaining reliable and externally valid data from social media companies is difficult. Thus, despite their limitations, self-reported measures of news use are still important for estimating relationships with other variables. The interest measure is also limited, as it includes items related to politics and local community. While the scale is reliable and the items are correlated, two of them do not specifically mention news. That said, the scale reduces random measurement error and increases model efficiency.

The study’s analysis is also limited. There are different thresholds for determining the optimal number of groups in a latent class analysis, and the number of groups estimated is sensitive to model specification. While there is a strong argument for

using the BIC as the primary criterion, there is also a case to be made for using the AIC instead. Future research should fit similar models across multiple datasets to replicate the analysis presented here.

With these caveats in mind, our findings suggest that the platformization of news creates informational inequalities. Exposure may be equalized to some extent, but engagement remains unequal. This challenges the initial optimism about information equalization and suggests that digital media platforms may not effectively fill information gaps caused by the decline of local media and public media. Addressing these inequalities may require financial investment and public attention to other forms of media. Future research should explore online systems that don't depend on datafication or algorithms. The platformization of news also has implications for inclusivity in democratic processes, as those who attract the news are better positioned to reap the rewards associated with engagement in politics, such as access to mobilizing information, political learning, resistance to misinformation, and the production of social capital. Broadening public participation may be difficult without a counterbalance to these inequalities.

## Notes

1. The weights do not inflate standard errors. We compared the first and third models in Table 1 to models without weights. The unweighted estimates are similar to the weighted estimates.
2. We compared the first and third models in Table 1 to models using listwise deletion. The substantive interpretations of model estimates are similar.
3. Previous studies suggest that survey respondents typically underestimate their exposure, resulting in point estimates lower than the actual population parameters (González-Bailón and Xenos 2023). However, this error in measurement may not bias causal inferences if all variables are impacted in the same way (King et al. 2021).
4. As a robustness check, we also tested a "high-effort" dependent variable consisting only of those engagement behaviors requiring relatively high effort to perform. However, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) found no empirical difference between the high- and low-effort items, and we therefore excluded the variable from the analysis.
5. We compared the first and third models in Table 1 with ordinary least squares (OLS) models. In both cases, the MLM model fits the data better than the OLS model, displaying lower information criteria and statistically significant log-likelihood tests (for the first model,  $\chi^2 = 5.16$ ,  $p = .023$ ; for the second model,  $\chi^2 = 29.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## Geolocation Information

This study was conducted in and analyzes data collected in the United States.

## Disclosure Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability

The dataset supporting this analysis is available at doi: 10.17632/8v9594h3jm.1.

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