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Attitudes, Processes, and Effects

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4. Disenchantment with Political Information: Attitudes, Processes, and Effects

Alessandro Nai, Susan Vermeer, Linda Bos, and Michael Hameleers

Abstract

This chapter investigates nefarious dynamics of the “demand” side of political communication, that is, the negative side of information processing at the individual level. It focuses on sets of mechanisms at the two “ends” of individual information processing: First, looking first at “downstream” effects, the chapter discusses recent and current research by ASCoR about the potentially nefarious effects of exposure to dark and delegitimising political information, e.g., in terms of depressed voter turnout and increased polarisation. Second, looking at “upstream” mechanisms, the chapter discusses evidence that important segments of the population have pre-existing negative attitudes towards political information itself. A final section opens up on the challenges, both theoretical and methodological, that our discipline is facing.

Keywords: persuasion, negativity, cynicism, populism, news avoidance

Introduction

In an ideal world, political information—that is, any type of information from or about the political world (from news media coverage of policy implementation to campaign materials published by parties, and everything in between)—would only convey relevant and meaningful material, be universally accessible and easy to process, retrieve and sample, have only

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socially desirable effects, and is equally appreciated by all citizens (Nai, 2019). Such patterns of communication would be in line with the ideals of a deliberative democracy, where debates are based on an elaboration of substantive arguments that are rooted in factually accurate and balanced information diets.

In reality, we have moved far away from this (certainly naïve) ideal. Political information can convey nefarious meaning, be processed in a biased and skewed way, be promoted following perverse incentives, enhance misperceptions, and generally be societally harmful. With this in mind, this chapter focuses on these “dark” aspects of political information exposure and processing, and it showcases the extensive research that ASCoR scholars have been engaged in. Providing a comprehensive overview of all these dysfunctional and negative dynamics involved in (political) information processing is a daunting task, but luckily not one that this chapter tackles. Rather, we decided to focus here on two substantive lines of research, investigating the two main sides of the political information process: its effects and exposure to it. First, we discuss how recent research by ASCoR scholars have tackled the fundamental question of the “effects” of information—both news content and direct communication from political actors—focusing on the nefarious consequences of “dark” political information for individual attitudes and behaviours. Can political information really persuade us? Disenfranchise us and push us towards apathy and cynicism? Or even activate the aggressive and violent side in us? Second, we turn to the negative attitudes towards political information. Are there segments of the public that particularly dislike or distrust the news? Is this perhaps associated with the broader dynamics of populism? In a context in which interest and trust in news is declining around the world (Newman et al., 2022), understanding the individual roots of negative perceptions of political information becomes increasingly central.

Empirical findings: Dark information, its effects, and information avoidance

Conceptually, our overarching claim is that current dysfunctions within the broad process of reception and processing of political information could stem from two interrelated sets of mechanisms: (1) the fact that political information is often framed negatively (e.g., focusing on the darker and more uncivil side of politics), which likely has detrimental effects for subsequent attitudes and behaviours among those exposed to it (“downstream” effects),

and (2) the fact that often a negative stance towards political information itself exists from those who might be exposed to it (“upstream” effects). This section discusses recent and current research by ASCoR members directly tackling these two main sets of mechanisms.

When it comes, first, to the effects of political communication, early studies were relatively sceptical about the capacity of (political) information to alter people’s mind. Research paradigms developed in the wake of the Second World War suggested the presence of rather “minimal” effects of exposure to information for the society at large, stressing in particular the fundamental role of deep predisposition, values, and socialisation to explain voting patterns. Without discounting the epistemological and theoretical importance of these early models, what we consider a more fruitful approach is a detailed focus on individual consequences of exposure to political information. And, adopting such a narrower (but likely more accurate) focus, few would argue today that political information does not matter—for good and for bad. Indeed, recent research shows rather clearly that simple exposure to political messages can persuade—that is, move opinions and attitudes in line with the content of the information individuals were exposed to. Implementing a rather simple research design, where researchers exposed participants to tailored incongruent information on specific topics—that is, new information that was at odds with participants’ initial stance of such topics—Nai et al. (2017, 2023) were able to show that between a quarter and 40% of respondents have unstable opinions: regardless of whether they initially have a positive or negative opinion about a given topic (e.g., implementing economic restrictions to curb climate warming), presenting them with arguments supporting the opposite stance makes them re-evaluate their beliefs and change their initial stance. To be sure, the magnitude of such changes was at times only marginal (e.g., moving from “strongly against” to “rather against” a given policy proposition), and people have at their disposal quite a large palette of strategies to resist those persuasive attempts (Valli & Nai, 2023b; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). Yet, the fact that such changes exist in a large share of respondents and only after exposing them to a rather simple manipulation, strongly suggests that information shapes opinions quite directly—confirming well-known trends in political, social, and health communication (e.g., Neijens & de Vreese, 2009).

Information, then, can change people’s minds and alter their attitudes and behaviours. With this in mind, a normatively important question that arises is whether such effects could be detrimental. Research on the nefarious consequences of exposure to information has, notably, amply discussed

the existence of a “media malaise,” according to which political attitudes such as efficacy, trust, and positive perceptions of the political system are depressed by exposure to the news media’s portrayal of politics as a game or contest (e.g., Schuck, 2017)—and, as outlined above, this relationship between exposure and attitudinal consequences is likely self-reinforcing. Perhaps less consensual are the effects of non-mediated information, such as campaign materials sponsored by political actors for electoral purposes. Beyond its intended electoral effects, this type of information—omnipresent in competitive democracies—can have two types of nefarious consequences: depressing and polarising effects.

On the one hand, exposure to political messages from elites can depress the electorate and push them away from the voting booths. This is certainly the case of negative and uncivil campaign messages—that is, political advertising including attacks towards opponents ranging from policy criticism to mudslinging, character assassinations, and even outright ad hominem insults. Research on the dynamics of dark communication (i.e., negative campaigning and incivility) comes historically from the USA but has increasingly embraced a more international and comparative outlook (e.g., Maier et al., 2022; Nai, 2020; Walter & Vliegthart, 2010). Importantly, some indication exists that exposing voters to negative and uncivil campaigns can depress their political engagement and creates a “gloomier” public, disinterested and disappointed with the political process. Exposed by a constant barrage of attacks and incivility, voters can lose sight of the ultimate importance of their political participation, and demobilise. Otto et al. (2020) carried out an experiment in three countries—the Netherlands, the UK, and Spain—testing whether civil and uncivil forms of mediated political conflict affected cynicism, political participation intentions, and support for the discussed policies. They found that while the first was not impacted, the latter two were depressed in all three countries after exposure to uncivil political conflict.

On the other hand, political messages—in particular, dark and delegitimising ones—can rile up passions and polarise the electorate—and even mobilise them to vote (Schuck et al., 2016). Exposure to populist messages—usually particularly hostile and uncivil (Hameleers, 2019; Nai, 2021)—tends to generate stronger emotional reactions than exposure to mainstream communication, and such emotions mediate or moderate the persuasiveness of populist appeals. In their experiment Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese (2017) exposed respondents to messages framed as blame attributions towards the government or the EU (vs no blame attributed) while also manipulating anger and fear. The results of their study with 721

Dutch respondents shows that respondents in the fear conditions were more likely to accept populist blame attributions when the government was blamed. Specifically populist messages—signalling the distinction between the “good” people and the “bad” elite and other out-groups—can persuade voters to agree with a specific standpoint and mobilise them, when compared to messages that do not focus on any out-group (Bos et al., 2020). A 16-country experiment ($N = 7,286$) comparing (1) a message that was positive about the in-group of the people to (2) a message pitting the good people against the bad elite or (3) pitting them against immigrants or (4) both showed that the second anti-elitist message persuades voters to agree with the standpoint conveyed in the message. In addition, respondents scoring high on relative deprivation—believing that the resources available in society are not distributed in a fair way, and most importantly not in their interest—are more likely to be mobilised after exposure to this message. In line with this, many ASCoR researchers have studied the relationship between anti-immigrant news and anti-immigrant attitudes as well as populist radical right party support, showing a consistent relationship between the two (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007, 2009; Damstra et al., 2021).

Most often information-induced anger and rage are directed towards political elites and other systemic “culprits” (Hameleers et al., 2017), but they can also have a “horizontal” target—the political out-group. In that sense populist messages do not necessarily polarise the electorate, underlining differences between voters, but most notably polarise the in-group of the people vis-à-vis the out-group of the elite, hereby creating collateral damage as a subsection of the electorate is often also perceived as part of the elite or establishment, left-wing, highly educated or “woke.” The populist message in a sense legitimises negative attitudes towards the political out-group: it assumes that politics should be an expression of the general will of the “true” people. In line with this, a survey among a representative sample of Dutch voters ($N = 1,999$) shows that voters with stronger populist attitudes are less supportive of democratic norms, more intolerant of opposing views online, and more intolerant of political opponents (Bos et al., 2021). And this can lead to violence. A recent study showcases a disturbing positive association between negative and uncivil elite rhetoric and real-world instances of violent political incidents around election day (Nai & Young, 2023). In that sense, negative, uncivil, and/or populist rhetoric is not without consequence.

Above and beyond these nefarious “downstream” effects—that is, as a consequence of exposure to political information—current dysfunctions with the general process of information processing also come from

“upstream” dynamics—that is, preceding exposure itself. Some people do not like political information or, quite simply, prefer to have little to do with it. This disenchantment with political information takes, broadly speaking, two interrelated forms: a generalised distaste (or indifference) towards news, or an ideologically driven normative distrust towards (some segments of) the information environment. Both forms of disenchantment broadly reflect an explicit or unconscious desire to avoid political information; where they differ is in the roots and mechanisms leading to such proclivity for avoidance. We discuss these two main forms of disenchantment below, before turning to research investigating the effects of exposure to (dark) information.

Some evidence exists of a generalised indifference and distaste towards political information. Some segments of the public simply “opt out” from specific types of news consumption. Based on a latent profile analysis with national survey data from the Netherlands ($N = 2,833$), Bos, Kruikemeier, and de Vreese (2016) find that 65.94% of the sample can be considered having a minimalist news diet, using the least amount of media, watching the fewest current affairs programmes, and reading virtually no newspapers. Additionally, citizens may decide to actively and consciously avoid the news (intentional news avoidance), because news use could have a negative effect on their well-being or because of information overload. By conducting two panel surveys in 2020 among Dutch citizens, de Bruin et al. (2021) show that this effect is even stronger during times of crisis (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Conversely, some citizens may show low levels of news use without actively avoiding it (unintentional news avoidance), for example, because news consumption is not part of their daily routine. This generalised form of news avoidance exists along more “targeted” forms of avoidance, which tend to be ideologically motivated. Some voters explicitly reject (segments of) the informational environment due to ideological or normative considerations. Here, citizens’ political attitudes and ideologies play a crucial role in their need for political information. The results of a panel study among Austrian citizens in 2020 indicate that citizens who have little trust in political institutions and political elites have less reason to stay informed about their actions through political news consumption (see, e.g., Schäfer et al., 2022).

In the context of news avoidance, trust in media also plays an important role. A lack of trust can stem from the perception that news does not provide neutral information about recent events, but rather that news organisations paint a biased picture and pursue their own agenda, or even promote and push disinformation (Hameleers, 2021). As a result, low media trust

increases tendencies to turn away from news and turn towards social and non-mainstream news. Interestingly, Vermeer et al. (2022) show that, by using survey data from two waves from the Netherlands (with a baseline just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), these behavioural patterns are related to trust in these alternative news media: the more citizens trust non-mainstream news and social media, the more they expose themselves to these alternative media and vice versa. This type of alternative news use can be consequential for political knowledge. A recent survey (Damstra et al., 2023) among 2,160 Swedish citizens shows that intentional news avoiders not only are less knowledgeable about politics in general, but also have the least accurate beliefs about contested issue domains. That is, they hold the most biased and misinformed beliefs about issues like climate change, vaccination, genetically modified organisms, crime, and immigration.

In line with this, the above mentioned study by Bos, Kruikemeier, and de Vreese (2016) shows that specifically right-wing populist voters have a more popular news diet consisting of the avoidance of established quality media and hard news formats (i.e., NOS) and the approach of popular information such as talk shows and the tabloid newspaper *De Telegraaf*. In addition, voters scoring high on a scale measuring relative deprivation (feeling unfairly treated by society) are more likely to select populist messages and subsequently report stronger populist attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2018). Likewise, citizens selecting into soft news diets as opposed to hard news tend to be more cynical of politics (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015). With populist messages being more readily available within these popular news diets, a populist news spiral is not unimaginable, with populist voters tuning more and more out of mainstream news and into more popular or hyper-partisan news. Yet, in their analysis of Dutch news diets, Bos et al. (2016) also find that the public broadcasting news is present in all media diets, something also found by Stier et al. (2020) in a more recent study analysing online information exposure. How these legacy news stories are subsequently processed is, however, most likely a different story. Thus, even though fringe or filter bubbles may not exist in the sense that disenchanted people still expose themselves to established news, it remains to be studied what motives people have when approaching mainstream sources.

Importantly, the relevance of studying these news consumption patterns should also be considered in light of the work showcasing its relevance for knowledge and political participation. In one of the first ASCoR linkage analyses, de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2006) investigated the relationship between media and political knowledge by combining panel surveys and news media content analyses in Denmark and the Netherlands, linking

media content measures to individual attitudes through media exposure measures. The results show that exposure to news outlets with high levels of news content (e.g., public news broadcasts) contributes the most to knowledge gains and the intention to vote. Importantly, exposure to outlets with less political content has either no or very little positive effects. Based on these findings, they conclude that the effects of news media on knowledge and participation are more virtuous than vicious. Along the same lines, Elenbaas et al. (2014) find that a wider availability of political information in the media environment has a strong and positive impact on individual acquisition of political information—and that individuals more interested benefit more, but this difference disappears when information saturation is higher. Finally, Möller, Kühne, and de Vreese (2018) surveyed young voters ($N = 994$) around the 2014 European Parliament election, connected the survey data to a content analysis of the campaign ($N = 769$) and found that exposure to news in offline media had no significant impact on participation, whereas exposure to news in online media did positively affect turnout, suggesting that patterns of participation as a function of political news consumption strongly depend on the social and technological context in which information is accessed and shared.

Contributions to theory and practice

In the past decades the literature has expanded considerably towards a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of individual disenchantment with political information—often spearheaded by cutting-edge contributions from ASCoR researchers. Taking stock of these advances and looking ahead at what's to come in this ever-expanding field, three outstanding issues are on the table.

First, from a theoretical standpoint, information processing and individual differences necessarily intersect. Taken separately, the evidence discussed above seems to suggest that the negative attitudes towards and negative consequences of political information exist as independent sets of mechanisms. This is, of course, an oversimplification and, indeed, strong evidence exists that individual factors and the content of political information jointly explain the (nefarious) effects of the latter. More specifically, a consensus seems to emerge that a non-negligible segment of the electorate seems to “like” dark and delegitimising rhetoric—or, at the very least, does not seem to be turned off by it. Research highlighting this trend focuses on a disparate sets of factors; for instance, voters high in tolerance for

disagreement seem to be immune from the demobilising effects of incivility (Otto et al., 2020), while voters low in agreeableness are more attracted to the antiestablishment message of populist politicians (Bakker et al., 2021). Character attacks and incivility are more persuasive among respondents, respectively, high in psychopathy and low in agreeableness (Nai & Maier, 2021), and political news showcasing a conflict frame is more successful in mobilising voters low in conflict avoidance (Bjarnøe et al., 2020). While disparate, these factors seem to point towards the idea that it is more “aggressive” individuals—less likely to avoid conflict, with a “darker” personality profile, or quite simply scoring high in attitudinal predispositions towards behavioural aggressiveness—who seem to have a soft spot for aggressive political communication. Yet, such evidence remains at a preliminary stage, and a full-fledged framework about the moderating role of individual predispositions towards “dark” and delegitimising information remains an outstanding challenge.

Second, epistemologically, digital technologies, such as (new) social media platforms, have dramatically changed the way citizens are informed about political and societal issues. While social media platforms provide citizens with new opportunities to access information, express opinions, and participate in democratic processes, they can also undermine democracy by allowing polarising messages, conspiracy theories, extremist views, and unreliable information to spread easily, likely even more than less polarising, more nuanced perspectives. Here a recent study by Simon et al. (2022) using web mining, neural topic modelling, and social network analysis techniques on a dataset of 174 Dutch-language public Telegram chats/channels shows that over time, conspiracy-themed, far-right activist, and COVID-19-sceptical communities dominated the Dutch Telegramsphere of current affairs. These situations may push social media platforms to rely on automated tools to identify such content, which can result in algorithmic bias. Digital technologies also have an impact on trust perceptions, risk beliefs, and privacy concerns—the most pivotal issues in the digital age of information and communication—among citizens (Kruikemeier et al., 2020; Zarouali et al., 2022). As this may affect citizens’ online behaviour and capacity to form and express political opinions, such findings contribute to an important and timely debate regarding the democratic legitimation of digital technologies. Digital technologies and the affordances of artificial intelligence have offered the opportunity for malicious actors to deceive the public in increasingly more realistic ways, for example, through the use of visual disinformation and deepfakes (Dobber et al., 2021). Hence, when citizens are deliberately misinformed, or confronted with multiple alternative truth claims on the

same issue, their ability to make well-informed decisions based on a common truth is hampered. The role of digital technologies in exacerbating the processes described in this chapter is high on the agenda.

Third, we should consider the context of misinformation, disinformation, and polarisation in more depth (e.g., van der Meer et al., 2023). Although focusing on the effects of exposure to delegitimising false information is important, the threats of mis- and disinformation are also perceptual and discursive. Specifically, the increasing public attention to problems of disinformation has paved the way for the use of “fake news” and other delegitimising labels as political tactics, which may raise doubt in factually accurate information, confuse the electorate, or eventually contribute to the avoidance of all established information (Hameleers, 2021). The perception that society is polarised or that information is fake may have real consequences for trust in accurate information and democracy in general, and we should not overlook these side effects of emphasising threats in the information ecology. A recent study by Bos, Egelhofer, and Lecheler (2023) uses a factorial survey ($N = 715$) to study the impact of fake news and anti-elite cues in undermining news credibility. While the results lend support for a more optimistic view—showcasing that source and confirmation heuristics constitute the strongest influences on citizens’ perceptions of the credibility of an online news message—the findings also show that the fake news cue and the anti-elite cue can decrease credibility if a news message is incongruent with voters’ issue positions or the anti-elite cue is in line with their populist attitudes.

Next steps

The wealth of evidence unearthed by ASCoR research has helped unpack some of the most central mechanisms associated with dysfunctional processing of political information. Yet, as it is often the case, for each conceptual and empirical advance a new series of challenges stems. We highlight some of these challenges here, not with the aim of being comprehensive but rather to hint at some notable future directions towards which we will steer our collective endeavour.

Mounting evidence about the interrelations between individual predispositions and consequences of information processing raises a challenge of a more methodological nature: the existence of self-reinforcing spirals. While the existence of reinforcing spirals between exposure to information and political attitudes has been acknowledged in the past (for ASCoR

contributions, see Brants et al., 2010; Ohme, 2021; Otto et al., 2018), the role of such spirals within the framework of disenchantment with political information remains more elusive. Especially in light of the previous point, further research should investigate whether aggressive and polarised stances in the public are generated by exposure to “dark” political information (or moderate its effectiveness), but also provide incentives to elites to see politics through the lens of partisan conflict who, by relying on negative and uncivil rhetoric, simply “cater to their base”—and so forth. Empirical models able to investigate the unfolding of such reinforcing spirals over time will likely be central to develop more integrated frameworks.

Although research examining negative attitudes towards news has increased considerably over the last few years, it is difficult to grasp the mechanisms behind the different forms of news avoidance and understand the possible consequences for democracy. An additional challenge lies in the measurement of these concepts. Previous studies mainly rely on survey research, while ideal for studying relationships between media exposure and attitudes towards news and politics, they pose measurement issues surrounding self-reported media exposure and attitudes (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016) as well as selection bias, known to specifically affect respondent groups of interest, such as more radical and disaffected citizens. The first can be circumvented with more direct measures of media exposure, specifically online, such as using a browser plug-in, generating insights into media use behaviour (Trilling et al., 2024; Vermeer, et al., 2020). The latter is more difficult to tackle, especially in a context in which these disaffected citizens not only question politics and media, but are increasingly weary of us academics.

To conclude, the findings presented in this chapter outline the need for remedies to counter the nefarious consequences of political information—and negative attitudes towards it. All societal stakeholders likely have an important role to play here. Political actors hold the key to providing a civil, substantive, and democratic alternative to the negative and uncivil campaigns that are so attractive to voters. Recent research suggesting that the decision to go negative on their rivals might come with substantial costs—most notably, voters defecting towards parties that are ideologically close to the attacker (Mendoza et al., in press). This seems to suggest that parties also have strategic reasons to go positive, beyond normative ones.

Policymakers, on their end, have considerable powers to intervene both on the upstream and the downstream mechanisms discussed here. On the one hand, they can support educational and pedagogical initiatives to increase civic interest in political information, boost participation and

critical thinking, and provide (future) citizens with sharper tools to “pre-unk” any misinformation they might encounter. Especially in light of recent research showing that misinformation effects are harder to curb afterwards (Chan & Albarracín, 2023), taking the lead and developing cognitive skills to recognise it and “inoculate” against its possible nefarious effects seems to be the way to go. On the other hand, policymakers can hold accountable news platforms, including social media, to provide more accurate and “factual” information—a growing challenge, certainly, in light of recent advances in generative artificial intelligence and the complicated legislative task ahead.

Citizens themselves also have a role to play, of course, in being more selective towards “bad” information—not simply towards information they dislike ideologically. While the “negativity bias” at play in all human interactions suggests that “negative” information will always have a comparative advantage over “positive” or “neutral” information, citizens certainly have shown that they can reject excessive forms of political communication—communication that is very uncivil, for instance. Recent research (Valli & Nai, 2023a, 2023b) seems indeed to suggest that citizens can activate “resistance strategies” to curb attempts of political persuasion they are exposed to—for instance, by bolstering their initial attitudes or framing the persuader under a negative light—above and beyond simple mechanisms of motivated reasoning.

News organisations have to find new ways to connect with citizens who have access to an unprecedented amount of news content as well as convince them that paying attention to news is worth their while. Unfortunately, also driven by an increasingly competitive media market across the world, news organisation still face strong incentives to frame information in ways that “sells”—if it bleeds, it leads. Perhaps the most dramatic consequence of this special attention provided by news media to the dark side of politics (Maier & Nai, 2020) is that such focus likely “pours fuel onto the fire” and exacerbates the nefarious effects of exposure to the dark information discussed above.

Finally, researchers and experts increasingly face challenges to communicate their findings effectively to the public. Especially in a context where ideological stances about the topics investigated likely differ within the public—for instance, there is certainly no societal consensus about what constitutes populism, and whether it is a normatively detrimental phenomenon—scientific objectivity and rigor can make the difference between effective and ineffective communication. Rising levels of anti-intellectualism will likely make this task more challenging—and, consequently, even more important—in years to come.

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