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Following the news: Patterns of online and offline news consumption

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Chapter I

Introduction

Introduction

*»This was what was keeping me awake at night,«
Walter said. »This fragmentation. Because it's the
same problem everywhere. It's like the internet, or
cable TV – there's never any centre, there's no
communal agreement. There's just a trillion little bits
of distracting noise. We can never sit down and
have any kind of sustained conversation, it's all just
cheap trash and shitty development. All the real
things, the authentic things, the honest things are
dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just
bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to
the latest random stimuli.«
»There's some pretty good porn on the internet,«
Katz said. »Or so I'm told.«*

—Jonathan Franzen, Freedom

The Internet has changed the way we follow the news. In the past, people used to have the choice between a limited number of local and domestic newspapers, and few channels on television. But nowadays, we can compare how Fox News and Aljazeera explain the world; and if we wish, we can read articles from local media in small towns in remote countries. If we mistrust journalists, we can even do without them: Plenty of blogs offer their view on a wide range of topics, and when there are disasters, fights or uprisings anywhere in the world, we can be sure to find some footage on YouTube (for an overview, see Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012).

These possibilities have not by all been received with great enthusiasm. In fact, many people long for the good old days with only few news media available. Like Walter in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom*, they fear that society becomes fragmented, that there is no common discourse any more, no shared experiences, and no set of issues on the importance of which people agree. Instead, everyone would rather pursue his or her own interests, not caring about any common core of current affairs.

But is the one big cinema hall, provided by the old mainstream media, really replaced by small individual booths, designed according to our very own

preferences? There is little disagreement about what makes the Internet different from other media: the abundance of different outlets, the chance to publish for everyone, the possibility of customization. But while optimists argue that the sheer amount of information and the vanishing influence of gatekeepers will make citizens better informed than ever, pessimists rather share the fears of Franzen's protagonist. Both camps, however, base their argumentation on one common assumption: They think that the Internet actually *has* changed the way we keep up with the news *fundamentally*. To which extent this is really the case lies at the root of this dissertation.

How people choose media content

In 2001, law scholar Cass Sunstein published a book on how the Internet changes the way we keep up with news and current affairs. It soon became a widely cited source for what we might call the *pessimistic view* of the Internet's influence on public discourse. In a well-functioning society, he wrote, two points are of key importance: "First, people should be exposed to topics they would not have chosen in advance" (p. 8) and "Second, many or most citizens should have a range of common experiences" (p. 9). This, he feared, would not happen any more in the Internet era.

To understand Sunstein's concerns, we have to go back to the year of 1995. Long before Google News offered easy news personalization to everyone, computer scientist Nicholas Negroponte envisioned in *Being Digital* what he called the 'daily me': A digital personal newspaper for everyone, tailored to one's very own needs – without any content that one is not interested in, and consequently – as we might continue his line of thoughts – also without viewpoints one disagrees with. What Negroponte greeted with enthusiasm, made Sunstein worry: If people do not participate in the same discourse any more but rather live in different mediated worlds, society would become polarized and fragmented. Sunstein suggested quite radical measures: so-called must-carry rules, obliging special-interest websites to publish some mainstream news content as well (a proposal that he revoked in the updated edition of the book, *Republic.com 2.0*).

Does this mean that we have to worry? Fragmented media use, the argument goes, leads to a fragmented society. A fragmented society, however, is seen as diametrical to a healthy democracy. In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam suggests that in the course of the last century, political and civil engagement in the United States has steadily decreased. According to him,

electronic media like television and the Internet in most cases further individualization, dampen interpersonal contact with other community members, and hinder engagement in clubs and organizations.

The notion of citizens being engaged in their community as the heart of democracy can be found back in different streams of democratic theory. In *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (later translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), Jürgen Habermas described the public sphere of a democratic society as citizens gathering in coffee houses and deliberating current affairs, unrestricted by power inequalities. This ideal, which also historically never existed, suffers from a problem of modern societies: It is simply impossible to bring all citizens together in one place. When Habermas published his book in 1962, however, he could not foresee that the Internet would remove spatial constraints and make deliberation on a large scale possible for the first time. Ironically, this is not exactly what happened: People did not massively start deliberating public affairs on the Internet. Those who do so form a small minority (Bakker, 2013). Blogs, for instance, the assumed breeding ponds of deliberation, are termed 'the new elite media' by Matthew Hindman in *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009), a critical assessment of how the Internet has changed the public sphere. But Habermas also could not foresee the other interpretation of the changing media landscape: that the overwhelming number of choices might make one common discourse less likely than ever.

Although definitions of democracy differ, by far most models agree that the existence of such a public discourse is crucial for democracy – because at the very least, voters have to keep up to date to make an informed voting decision (see Dahlberg, 2011; Ferre, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). And here, Sunstein's concerns come back into play: How can we make informed decisions if we do not even talk about the same set of topics, let alone participate in the same discussion? If there is not *one* common public sphere, but if *issue publics* emerge, highly specialized audiences of equally specialized outlets, and if the audiences of unifying media outlets like the main television news broadcasts and big newspapers drop.

But if these concerns are true, fragmentation does not only have serious consequences for the democratic society – it also affects some of the pillars communication science rests on. In 2001, Steven Chaffee and Miriam Metzger published an article with the straightforward title *The End of Mass Communica-*

tion?¹, which led to a lively debate (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, 2010; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). They start with the observation that a vast amount of communication research focuses on mass media effects. And although the theories that are used differ widely, ranging from cultivation to framing or agenda setting, they investigate the same phenomenon: the effects of exposure to mass media. But if there are no mass media any more, if everyone is exposed to personalized media content only - then we won't be able to detect any meaningful large-scale media effects except on the very individual level any more. And here, the debate can be linked back to the consequences for democracy: As Bennett and Iyengar argue, the *leveling effects* of the media, which align levels of political knowledge and counteract political polarization, would vanish.

Why people are selective

Even before the rise of online media and even television, it has been observed that people neglect viewpoints they disagree with. In 1944, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernhard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet concluded in *The People's Choice* that voters expose themselves mainly to political campaigns of the party they already sympathize with - which they called 'partisan exposure'.

But why do people do this?

The idea that human beings are inherently motivated to match their media choice with their preexisting beliefs can be traced back to the year of 1956, when social psychologist Leon Festinger and his colleagues Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter published *When Prophecy Fails*, in which they investigated how members of a sect deal with the incongruence when a prophecy does not come true. They introduced the concept of *cognitive dissonance*, which Festinger elaborated on one year later in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. The basic idea is simple: When new information is in conflict with preexisting beliefs, people strive to eliminate the occurring dissonance. But rather than changing their preexisting beliefs, they tend to do this by modifying or neglecting the new information.

Based on this idea, communication scholars introduced a concept known as *selective exposure*: In an attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance, people would avoid media messages that are in conflict with their opinions. Already in

¹ Similarly, but with a less negative undertone, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) dubbed the era of high-choice media the "third age of political communication".

1960, Joseph Klapper devoted one subchapter of *The Effects of Mass Communication* to selective exposure. But despite the consequences of such behavior for political communication, scientific interest in selective exposure had decreased during the last decades of the last century. The reason: People simply had not very many possibilities to be selective. Nowadays, this has changed dramatically.

But the pessimists' claims are not only about avoiding standpoints one does not share, but also about avoiding topics one is not interested in. This cannot be explained by the human inclination to avoid cognitive dissonance, but nevertheless, the argument of the effects of increased selectivity due to an increased number of choices holds true. Based on the assumption that people use media habitually to a large degree, it can be argued that rather than using only content that matches their interests perfectly, people would use that type of media content that comes closest to their interest and avoid less well matching content. Obviously, the smaller the choice, the less opportunities to find matching content and avoid non-matching one.

Accordingly, political scientist Markus Prior showed in his 2007 book, *Postbroadcast Democracy*, what consequences an increasing media choice can have on the avoidance of political news: If people live in a low-choice media environment (i.e., if they have neither cable television nor Internet access), they are generally reached by mainstream news outlets and have a pretty decent level of political knowledge. The reason is simple: Even if some would prefer to watch something else on television, they watch the news because a lack of a better alternative. They are not *watching the news*, they are *watching television* - and the news happens to be on. The effect that due to limited choices also uninformed and uninterested audiences watch political media content has been described with terms as *inadvertent exposure* or *trap effect*. But this effect, Prior suggests, is vanishing: Those who are not intrinsically motivated to follow mainstream news stop watching it as soon as they get an alternative that matches their preferences better - which results in an increasing gap between the knowledgeable and the non-knowledgeable.

Such fears are shared by a number of scholars, resulting in a renewed interest and an increase of articles published on selective exposure in the last decade. The bold claims dominating the discussion in the beginning, however, have been replaced by nuanced views: For instance, in 2011, Natalie Stroud acknowledged in *Niche News*: "Partisan media have a place in democracy. They can unite likeminded individuals, help them organize their political think-

ing, and motivate them to participate. These outcomes are not too shabby when evaluated in terms of ideals in a democracy" (p. 183). But, in line with the pessimists' fears, she also warns against widening gaps between different groups in society and calls for continuing research to critically examine patterns of selective exposure.

The state of news consumption

In spite of its relevance, little is actually known about the extent to which fragmentation and avoidance of mainstream news sources occur and form a problem in today's media environment. Without a doubt, the effects described in the previous section exist. But how large are they?

A vast part of research on fragmentation, selective avoidance, and selective exposure analyzes news exposure in the United States. However, there is a key difference between the political system and the media landscape in the United States on the one hand and many European countries on the other hand. First, the latter are multi-party systems, which are less polarized than the US two-party system. Loyalty to parties has decreased heavily in Europe, party manifesto's overlap, some positions seem indistinguishable to voters, and it is sometimes difficult to place parties on a left/right or progressive/conservative scale: A party can have economic positions that traditionally are considered "left-wing", while their position on immigration policy is clearly "right-wing". The difference between these nuanced political landscapes and a two-party system is illustrated by the popular Vote Aid Applications, websites that are set up before elections and that allow users to calculate and visualize in how far he agrees with each party on different issues. The outcome usually demonstrates that more than one party reflects the voter's ideas pretty well.

Consequently, also the media landscape in these countries differs from the two-party United States: Of course, also Northern and Central European media outlets (or democratic-corporatist systems, as they are also called by Hallin and Mancini, 2004) can have political leanings. But it is often hard to attribute them to one specific party or political ideology. Research from these countries, therefore, cannot do what is common practice in US research: Linking the political dichotomy left-wing/progressive/Democrats vs. right-wing/conservative/Republicans to a media dichotomy like CNN vs. Fox News or dailykos.com and talkingpointsmemo.com vs. Breitbart.com and littlegreenfootballs.com. And contrary to the US, the public broadcasting system still plays a major role. This is important as comparative research suggests that

countries with a strong public broadcasting system suffer less from knowledge gaps than commercial media systems do (Iyengar, Curran, Brink Lund, Salovaara-Moring, Hahn, & Coen, 2010).

Thus, extrapolating findings from research on fragmented patterns of media use to different media systems bears problems. Considering the relevance of the topic, it is therefore astonishing how slender the amount of research in European countries is. In light of this discrepancy, this dissertation aims to shed light on patterns of news use in the Netherlands and Austria. These two countries, while sharing a lot of characteristics (e.g., both being Western multi-party democracies), differ in some respects from each other. To mention a few: While the Netherlands enjoy one of the highest Internet penetration in the world, much more Austrians do not have Internet access: At the time the studies were conducted, about 75% in Austria compared to 90% in the Netherlands. Both media landscape and the political system in Austria are more polarized than in the Netherlands. And in Austria, which is twice as large while having only half of the inhabitants of the Netherlands, the regional media play a much stronger role. Nevertheless, in the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004), both countries are attributed to the North/Central European type² and, in this sense more similar to each other than to the United States, which are attributed to the North Atlantic or Liberal type.

Studying these two countries, this dissertation aims to find patterns of news exposure in today's multi-choice media environment and to investigate in how far the fear of a fragmented discourse is substantiated. To this end, it examines in how far the decision to follow the news is determined by personal preferences, which types of media people actually combine, whether these patterns can be seen as an indication for a fragmentation of public discourse, and if it actually are content preferences that guide media choices.

² Others have questioned how well Austria fits the criteria of Northern/Central European media systems. Karmasin, Kraus, Kaltenbrunner, and Bichler argue that the Austrian media system is characterized by "political parallelism in media and politics: politicians in Austria are less concerned by media self or co-regulation than perpetuating political influence", which would make Austria a "'border crosser' between the North/Central European and the Mediterranean Model" (2001, p. 23).

Outline of the dissertation

To achieve the aim of drawing an as accurate as possible picture of news consumption, this dissertation analyzes three datasets collected for this project: One survey in the Netherlands, one survey in Austria, and a content analysis of Austrian online news outlets. Chapter two and three are based on Dutch survey data, chapter four on Austrian survey data, and chapter five combines Austrian survey and content analysis data. All of these chapters can be read on their own as independent studies; nevertheless, they also form a coherent study on fragmentation as a whole. Chapter six entails a general discussion of the results and a conclusion.

In the second chapter, I investigate how many people in the Netherlands avoid mainstream news and who these people are. As it has been feared that especially people with, for example, a low political interest or a high preference for entertaining media content would be likely to *tune out* (as a book by David Mindich called the phenomenon of news avoidance), it is analyzed in how far such personal characteristics matter for both news consumption in general and amount and frequency of exposure.

The analysis continues with a more detailed view on patterns of news consumption in chapter three. While chapter two already provides some evidence that online and offline media are often combined, this chapter examines how outlets are combined exactly. I identify typical news diets and show which functions the ingredients of these diets serve. The analysis shows how online media are typically combined with a wide range of offline media and examines the degree to which they are used for different functions (i.e., getting a broad overview of the news, getting timely news updates, and getting background information).

Chapter four analyzes typical news diets in another country, in Austria. It furthermore uses the personal characteristics that can influence media use identified in chapter one to explain who uses which news diet. Attention was paid to factors that may be specific for the Austrian context.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation combines the data from the Austrian survey with content analysis data. I look at the topics and possible bias of a number of different outlets to find out in how far people really try to match their interests and views when selecting media content.

The dissertation is completed by a conclusion that relates the findings of the four previous chapters to each other and links them to the problems addressed in this introduction.