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Following the news: Patterns of online and offline news consumption

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine a frequently voiced fear: The fear that the shift of media consumption patterns towards online media is leading to a stronger fragmentation of the audience and to a decrease in mainstream media news consumption. Therefore, this study investigated in how far such selective patterns of news exposure really exist and how fundamental the alleged changes actually are. It explored if and how different sources are combined, and investigated how selective people are in their media choices. The findings revealed how important the role of offline media still is, and how small the differences in the usage patterns of online news compared to the use of offline news actually are. The results further showed that the topics and political viewpoints covered by specific news outlets are only weakly related to the interests and opinions of those who use these outlets.

All of these findings reflect the current situation in two European countries, Austria and the Netherlands – countries with political systems and media landscapes that differ on many dimensions from the US, where a lot of related research has been conducted. After summarizing the main findings of this dissertation, we will discuss how to evaluate fragmentation in democratic societies and address limitations and broader implications – also regarding the role the specific media landscapes might play: Can the findings for example be attributed to the fact that the countries under study are less ideologically polarized? Or to the comparably high political interest?

The main findings in a nutshell

1. News avoidance is not a widespread phenomenon

Being not exposed to any general-interest news at all is very uncommon. Although some people do not read daily newspapers (any more), they are still widely exposed to television news and to the online news of mainstream media.

2. Offline media still are the core of news consumption patterns

In our study, news users can be distinguished by their preference for public-service vs. commercial television channels and by whether they read a newspaper at all, and if so, by the type of newspaper they read. Their preferences for

online news media are much less important for distinguishing different user types. Although for some, newspaper reading might be less important than frequent visits of news websites, it seems that people using a lot of online media also use a lot of offline media.

3. Audience selectivity is not a substantial problem

People interested in specific topics of public affairs seem to choose outlets that match those interests. However, this relationship is very weak. In addition, most people use several offers. For example, those who are interested in human-interest news, indeed regularly read a news outlet focused on human-interest. But there is no evidence that this keeps them from using outlets that include a broad set of political issues as well.

4. Online news can trap uninterested audiences

At least for Austria and the Netherlands, there is no evidence that motivational factors, like political interest, a preference for a specific media content, or a feeling of a civic duty to keep informed determine exposure to online news in a stronger way than one's choice for offline media – although the variety online is much greater. Personal characteristics were powerful in explaining whether Austrians use few or many news sources, but much less relevant for explaining which sources they use exactly. The trap effect that offline news media are said to have seems to work online as well: Online news content has the potential to capture audiences that are actually not much interested in politics or for some other reasons (for example, because they do not see it as a civic duty) not motivated to follow the news. Given the easy access and the variety of formats able to address people in a more target-oriented fashion, online news provide even more possibilities to reach uninterested audiences. An approach that reduces media choices to a strict rational-choices paradigm – in which people would not use media that do not fit their interests – seems to fall short here.

Consequences of fragmentation

In a nutshell, we found little evidence for fragmentation in the Netherlands and Austria. However, should this situation change in the future, we then question if this is in each and every case something to be concerned about. We argue that it would be worrisome only under the condition that one can observe negative effects of this fragmentation on the performance of democracy. Therefore, we suggest that effects of fragmentation should be thoroughly analyzed: How does

it influence opinions, attitudes, and actions? Does it really lead to a spiralling process of becoming more and more narrow-minded?

For this end, a more precise conceptualization of fragmentation is necessary. In this dissertation, fragmentation was – following the pessimist argument – mainly discussed in terms of possible negative consequences for a democratic society. However, fragmentation has not necessarily to be equated with a negative outcome. Some degree of media content fragmentation might even be necessary for a democracy. McQuail (1992, 2007), for instance, discusses the importance of diversity in a democratic media system. In line with McQuail's argument, Roessler (2008) contends that not only too much, but also too little content diversity is dysfunctional for society. The first would lead to fragmented patterns of exposure; the latter would conflict with the notion of a pluralistic society.

In practice, one could imagine two different extremes of how exposure diversity relates to content diversity: One model of content diversity in which people selectively expose themselves to content matching their views, and then – ideally – deliberating with others who might not share their views byforehand. For example, as Stroud (2011), nuancing concerns of increased selectivity, argued: Partisan media with partisan audiences deserve an important role in democracy – they can help mobilize and organize citizens.

The other model would favor a diverse exposure of everyone to diverse content and would aim to minimize every kind of selectivity. Consequently, exposure diversity would be a legitimate and reasonable policy goal. Following an argument put forward by Helberger (2011), this can be achieved by increasing the chance of people's encounters with diverse content. Extending this line of thought, it makes sense to see a fragmented media offer with many low-reach outlets as less problematic if most people are also exposed to diverse content on top of their use of ideosyncratic sources. And our results make it seem likely that this is still the case.

If we accept this reasoning, then audience fragmentation appears much less threatening: We might see of a huge variety of long-tail outlets as an enrichment of public discourse – because we have no substantial reason to believe that exposure to diverse topics and viewpoints and thus a common core of issues is under pressure. To test this empirically, knowledge and attitudes about specific topics would have to be measured under the condition of different patterns of audience selectivity. Tewksbury and Rittenberg, for example, doubt that fragmented patterns of exposure necessarily result in fragmented

knowledge and state: “Our review of the research literature suggests that some people are being selective in their consumption of categories of information, but there is insufficient evidence to conclude that knowledge and opinion become highly fragmented” (2012, p. 119). But the reason, they argue, is not necessarily the absence of such an effect, but could also be the fact that studying this question has just begun.

Bringing together all these considerations, we argue that to fully understand the workings and consequences of changing patterns of media use, it is necessary to conceptualize the interplay of at least three basic elements: media content, audience exposure, and political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

Figure 6-1
Effects of different types of fragmentation

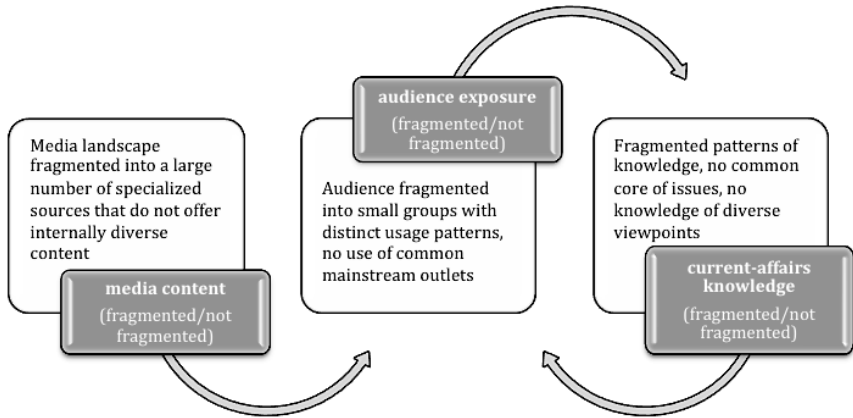


Figure 6-1 summarizes the main relationships between them. Based on survey data, this dissertation analyzed the block in the middle, the possible fragmentation of audience exposure. Combining content analysis and survey data, we also took a look at the fragmentation of the media content and whether the audience develops specialized patterns of usage based on content differences. The fragmentation often feared in the public discourse, however, implies fragmentation of current-affairs knowledge as represented in the block on the right as well. The worst-case scenario could thus be described as follows: A fragmented media landscape offers audiences the possibility to be highly selective, resulting in a fragmented audience as well. Consequently, its members learn only about things that they are interested in byforehand and reinforce

their pre-existing opinions, which fuels a spiralling process in which their selectivity might even increase.

At the same time, the figure shows that there are many points where the process can be interrupted: Even if a fragmented media landscape exists, people still can use a broad variety of sources, so that the audience does not fragment. And even if both media content and audience exposure are fragmented, it is far from certain that this results in fragmented patterns of knowledge. First, even if people use a number of specialized outlets according to their preferences and even if this pattern differs for each individual, it still might be the case that, in their combination, these specialized outlets still provide a diverse overview of current affairs that largely overlaps between users.

Second, people are not always free to choose but confronted with news in situations that are beyond their control – in personal conversations, but also on the Internet: When they log in to their mail provider, when on social network sites where people also share news-related content, or simply by surfing around and following some random links.

Limitations

The studies presented here are a snapshot of the state of news consumption in two countries at the turn of the second decade of the 21st century. Both countries are categorized into Hallin and Mancini's (2004) Northern/Central European or democratic-corporatist media system. It remains speculative if people behave similarly in other media systems – especially systems that show more political polarization and political parallelism of their media. It seems reasonable to assume, for instance, that where media outlets are more tightly linked to political parties, patterns of media choice are different from countries where this is not the case. One could also argue that the Dutch and the Austrians are more interested in news and current affairs than people from other countries. And indeed, in an Eurobarometer survey, 86 percent of the Dutch agreed with the statement "I am interested in what is going on in politics and current affairs," more than in any other European country – and also the percentage of Austrians agreeing (71%) lies at least somewhat above the EU-average (67%) (European Commission, 2005). Consequently, in both countries, the share of political apathetic citizens is comparably low (Van Deth & Elff, 2004).

Another possible limitation of our results concerns the fast-developing environment under study. After the data were collected, even newer means to keep up with the news have gained popularity. For instance, when our surveys

were fielded, mobile media as news source were a niche phenomenon, but, shortly thereafter, the diffusion of smartphones and tablet computers increased dramatically. It seems reasonable to assume that these developments are also influencing people's news diets. However, as our studies show, people do not seem to abandon acquired patterns of news diets abruptly, but rather incorporate new elements into existing routines – which suggests that these latest developments may not change diets radically. Thus, as even among online offers, traditional players still play a major role, the big change in news consumption patterns is maybe still to come – although probably more in form of a steady process than in form of a revolution.

Our analyses had to rely on self-reported measures. This bears problems, in our case especially the possible overreporting of news exposure (Prior, 2009). This seems to be rather uncritical for internal validity, i.e. the investigation of patterns of media use. But it could harm external validity by distorting projections of our results, i.e. the estimation of the share of the population using a specific news diet or not using any news media at all. In addition, with the survey measures employed, it was also not possible to tap into the exact content people are exposed to within an outlet. Their selectivity, thus, could only be studied at the channel level, not on the article or item level. For this, it would be necessary to examine logfiles and to use copy tests or mobile phone applications that track people's news behavior.

Implications

The results of our analyses have clear implications for studies on political communication. Among the variables explaining news selection processes, we found that beyond the 'usual suspects' like age or political interest, there are also other factors of influence – like region of residence, but also psychological traits.

But above all, our findings refute some of the recurring notions of selective exposure and audience selectivity. The scope of people's media diet seems to be much broader than often assumed. Even those who are exposed to partisan or specialized content seem to use a generally balanced news diet.

For the political discourse, our results first and foremost imply that fears about a dangerously fragmented discourse seem to be fairly unsubstantiated. In other words, it is unlikely that considerable groups in society are not reached by mainstream news any more. The specific outlets people use for that purpose, however, may indeed diversify – for example, people can substitute reading

one newspaper by a wide range of different online sources, both online only and offline media's spin-offs. And certainly, patterns of media use are changing: For instance, websites take over the function of providing fast updates about breaking news. But the audience does not seem to use news diets that feature mainly special-interest or partisan outlets. We can support what Gripsrud (2009) concluded after reviewing theories of the public sphere and their applicability to the online media environment: Potential risks still seem to be overestimated – just as, by the way, overly optimistic expectations about the Internet as a panacea for all kind of problems democracy faces as well.

A main issue of fragmentation research thus far is that, too often, far-reaching conclusions are drawn based on findings that only relate to parts of the model outlined above. We argue that to fully understand the processes at hand, all three aspects of the model sketched in Figure 6-1 have to be considered. A danger for democracy, in the end, can only occur if media content, audience exposure, and current-affairs knowledge all are fragmented. Communication science provides us with theories and tools that help understand the elements of these processes. However, to analyze the model, focussing on individual behavior (like rational-choice based approaches would to) or focusing only on the structure of the media landscape (like pessimist's arguments about 'the Internet' tend to do) falls short.

A way out could provide Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, which poses that neither the analysis of 'structure' nor of 'agents' alone can explain social phenomena. Rather, the interaction of both lead to the creation and reproduction of social systems. Applied to our model (Figure 6-1), one could for example say that actors (agents) are constrained in their tendency of being selective by the structure of the media content. This structure, in turn, can change over time by the agents' behavior. Also the fragmentation of current-affairs knowledge, while being structural in nature, cannot be seen isolated from the agents' selective news decisions, which – as shown – are again intertwined with the structure of media content.

These considerations could provide some first guiding ideas for the development of a theoretical framework to assess the democratic impact of fragmentation processes. Based on such a framework, all components could then be tested empirically in a systematic way and, in the end, provide a comprehensive insight into the state of the public discourse. And, of course, give an idea about whether it is in danger or not – and if so, what can be done about it.