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**DOI**

[10.1177/1940161217723152](https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217723152)

**Publication date**

2017

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

The International Journal of Press/Politics

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Andersen, K., Skovsgaard, M., Albæk, E., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). The Engaging Effect of Exemplars: How an Emotional Reaction to (Dis)Similar People in the News Media Affects Political Participation. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(4), 490-509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217723152>

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# The Engaging Effect of Exemplars: How an Emotional Reaction to (Dis)Similar People in the News Media Affects Political Participation

The International Journal of Press/Politics  
2017, Vol. 22(4) 490–509  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1940161217723152  
journals.sagepub.com/home/hij



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## Abstract

Journalists use ordinary people as exemplars in their news stories to make their reports more interesting and understandable for the audience. This journalistic practice has often been discussed as a potential democratic problem because of its effects on perceptions of and attitudes toward political issues. Taking exemplification theory as our starting point and drawing on research from decision-making and social psychology literature, we add to this discussion by examining how exemplars in news reports affect intentions to participate in political activities. Using an experimental design, we randomly exposed respondents to a news report with or without exemplars or no news report at all. We found that for respondents who were similar to the exemplars, exposure to a news report with exemplars triggered an empathic concern and increased political participation intentions. For dissimilar respondents, exposure to a news report with exemplars decreased empathic concern, which in turn decreased political participation intentions. By highlighting these differential effects of exemplars in the news media on political participation, the study shows how a common journalistic practice potentially engages some citizens in democracy and disengages others.

## Keywords

journalism, media effects, political participation, exemplars, similarity

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When journalists cover political issues or problems, they often include ordinary people to make their news reports appealing and understandable for the audience (Hinnant et al. 2013). For example, stories based on statistics showing a steep increase in the unemployment rate typically feature someone who was laid off talking about how it affects the family's economic situation. By including exemplars, journalists illustrate the consequences of a general issue for the individual in a vivid and concrete way.

The use of exemplars is a well-established and widespread journalistic practice across different countries and different topics (e.g., Beckers et al. 2016; Daschmann and Brosius 1999; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015; Iyengar 1991; Lewis et al. 2005). A recent comparative study showed that exemplars are especially prevalent in market-orientated media systems, where the competition for audience attention is highest (Umbricht and Esser 2016). However, as other media systems are becoming more market-orientated, this practice can be expected to become even more widespread (Hallin and Mancini 2004; 2017).

Research has consistently shown that exemplars trump base-rate information when news consumers form perceptions of the extent of a problem or a trend (Brosius and Bathelt 1994) and when they form opinions on an issue (Aarøe 2011; Boukes et al. 2015; Ostfeld and Mutz 2014). Because exemplars can be argued to be a less valid foundation than more objective base-rate information for forming perceptions of, as well as opinions and attitudes on, political issues, this common journalistic practice is typically seen as a potential problem for democracy.

In this study, we examine whether inclusion of exemplars in news reports may also be beneficial for democracy, that is, increase intentions to participate in political activities—a core dimension of a healthy democracy. Previous research has shown that exemplars affect emotions and that the emotional response tends to affect opinion formation on the relevant issue (e.g., Aarøe 2011; Gross 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004). Some emotional reactions have also been shown to have a positive effect on political action (e.g., Jasper 2011), which implies that exemplars in the news have the potential to increase political participation through the emotional response of the audience (see also Powell et al. 2015). This psychological process is supported by studies from decision-making literature showing that when a person is presented with an identified victim, an emotional response mediates the willingness to help this victim (Kogut and Ritov 2005a, 2005b). Based on these findings and drawing on the empathy–altruism hypothesis from social psychology literature (Batson 2011), we suggest that the effect of being exposed to exemplars in the news media on political participation intentions is mediated by what Batson (2011: 11–12) terms “an empathic concern”, which these exemplars may trigger in the audience.

However, research on exemplars also shows that the effects are rarely uniform and straightforward. Thus, it is clear that “understanding the conditions under which specific exemplars help or hurt is both far more interesting and far more complex than previously suggested” (Ostfeld and Mutz 2014: 68). Studying the mediating role of emotions is one step in understanding the underlying mechanisms of the effects of exemplars, but this indirect effect is likely not to be identical across the audience. Ostfeld and Mutz (2014) showed that similarity between audience and exemplars

moderates the effects of exposure to exemplars on political opinions. The underlying argument is that similarity increases positive emotions toward exemplars, which in turn affects opinion formation or willingness to help the exemplars (e.g., Loewenstein and Small 2007). Building on these findings, we suggest that the indirect effect of exemplars in news reports on political participation intentions through an empathic concern is contingent on the degree of similarity between audience and exemplars.

To test these expectations, we draw on a survey experiment utilizing an original television news report. The respondents were randomly assigned to watch either the original news report with exemplars, a manipulated news report without exemplars, or no news report at all. The news report covered a potential closedown of a number of public schools. After watching the news report, all respondents were asked how likely they would be to engage in certain political activities in relation to this situation. Likewise, the respondents were asked how the news report made them feel emotionally.

The article is structured as follows. First, we elaborate on the theoretical argument and present our hypotheses. Next, we describe the experimental design in detail and present the results. Finally, we discuss the results and their implications for journalism practice and democracy, as well as future studies of exemplars in the news media.

## **Exemplars in the News**

Studies have shown that journalists around the world frequently include exemplars in news reports in combination with base-rate information on the relevant issue (e.g., Daschmann and Brosius 1999; De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012; Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015). According to exemplification theory, base-rate information provides the basic status of an issue, such as descriptive information or statistical facts. Exemplars are added to put a human face on an abstract issue and to support the angle of the story (Daschmann and Brosius 1999); they provide an “anecdotal hook” that can help the journalist “rope” people in (Hinnant et al. 2013). This type of journalistic reporting is seen as a cornerstone in human-interest framing (de Vreese 2005) and episodic framing (Iyengar 1991), which is common in tabloid newspapers and soft television news (Reinemann et al. 2012; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000).

## ***Effects of Exemplars***

The framing of a news story is defined by “the selection, organization and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of other” (de Vreese et al. 2001: 108). By the same logic, exemplars in a news story highlight some aspects of the issue while excluding others and thereby draw the attention of the audience in a specific direction (Zillmann et al. 1996). In line with research on framing effects, exemplars have been shown to influence not only how people perceive and assess the magnitude of a problem or a trend but also how they form their opinions on the issue (e.g., Boukes et al. 2015; Brosius and Bathelt 1994; Gibson and Zillmann 1994; Iyengar 1991; Perry and Gonzenbach 1997). These studies have mainly focused on effects on attitudes and

opinions. Because opinions, attitudes, and behavior overlap and further affect one another (Potter 2012: 44–45), we draw on these studies with opinions and attitudes as dependent variables to generate expectations for the effects of exemplars in the news on political participation intentions (see also Powell et al. 2015).

While studies consistently find that exemplars in news stories have an impact on political opinions and attitudes, they find contradictory results when it comes to exactly *how* the public is affected. In his seminal book *Is Anyone Responsible?* Iyengar (1991) argues that episodic framing (i.e., exposure to exemplars) leads people to attribute responsibility to the individual, while thematic framing (i.e., exposure to base-rate information) causes people to attribute responsibility to the government or society more generally. Thus, when people are exposed to specific exemplars, they tend to blame these individuals for the situation they are in and to support policies that favor the exemplar less. Following this argument, people should be less likely to participate in political activities in favor of the exemplars—and the group they represent—when they are exposed to these exemplars in the news. However, others have questioned Iyengar’s experimental design (see, for example, Gross 2008; Ostfeld and Mutz 2014), and a recent study of the effect of exposure to a news report, including an exemplar, found the exact opposite effect. In this study, Boukes et al. (2015) showed how exposure to exemplars increases attribution of responsibility to the government instead of the individual, which in turn causes a more positive attitude toward policies that favor the exemplar. Based on this finding, people should be more likely to participate in political activities to support the exemplars, and the group they represent, when they are exposed to these exemplars in the news.

Building on these inconsistent findings, Ostfeld and Mutz (2014: 66) suggested that the effects are more complex and that “any theory predicting an across-the-board effect in one particular direction due to the presence of a case report is probably mistaken.” Instead, they suggest that the effect of exemplars on political attitudes is moderated by similarity between audience and exemplars. In other words, high similarity increases support for policies in favor of the exemplars or the group they represent, while low similarity decreases support for such policies. These opposite effects imply that in a diverse population they potentially cancel each other out, with the consequence that no direct effect can be found. Based on these findings on attitudes and opinions, we refrain from formulating an expectation on the overall direct effect of exposure to exemplars in news stories on political participation intentions. Instead, we move on to theorize about the possible mediating effect through emotional reactions and moderating effect of similarity between the audience and the exemplars.

### *The Mediating Role of Emotions*

The emotional impact of exposure to exemplars is a central part of human-interest and episodic framing. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000: 95) describe how these types of frames bring “a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.” However, research in journalism studies and political communication on the role of emotions in framing effects has been limited (for exceptions, see, for example, Aarøe

2011; Gross 2008). Studies in other fields have examined the emotional effect of exemplars to a larger extent. Decision-making studies show that exemplars generate a moral responsibility in the audience, also known as the “identifiable victim effect” (Small and Loewenstein 2003, 2005; Small et al. 2007), especially when exemplars lose something they used to have (Small 2010). In line with exemplification theory, the main conclusion is that when an issue is illustrated via specific individuals rather than unidentified “statistical” victims, the audience sees the issue from the perspective of these exemplars. In turn, this perspective increases emotional reactions among the audience.

The emotional response also seems to be what motivates journalists to use exemplars in their news reporting (Hinnant et al. 2013). Gross (2008: 171) argues that journalists “believe them [exemplars] to be more compelling and more likely to draw the reader or viewer into the story” and, thus, “more emotionally engaging.” Her findings support this notion, because episodic framing is found to be more emotionally engaging than thematic framing. Aarøe (2011) also found that episodic frames (with exemplars) increase the emotional response and are more persuasive than thematic frames. In other words, when people react emotionally to an exemplar in a news story, the effect of this news story will be more pronounced.

The emotional response to exemplars may also play a central role in how exemplars in news affect political participation. Past research has shown how emotional reactions can function as action tendencies (Frijda 1986) and, thus, affect political action (Brader and Marcus 2013; Jasper 2011). Likewise, research on visual framing has shown that images containing exemplars have an indirect effect on political participation intentions through emotional reactions (Powell et al. 2015). In other words, an emotional reaction caused by exposure to exemplars can motivate one to take specific actions in relation to an issue.

In this study, we focus on the mediating role of an empathic concern for exemplars facing a potential loss. Based on the empathy–altruism hypothesis from the social psychology literature (Batson 2011), we expect that an increase of empathic concern will lead to an increase in intentions to participate in political activities. Here, empathic concern is understood as an “other-orientated emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need” (Batson 2011: 11). The empathy–altruism hypothesis posits that empathic concerns for others in need, such as compassion, sympathy, or pity, produce altruistic motivation to help these others with the ultimate goal of removing their need for help. The stronger the empathic concern, the more motivation people will have to take action to increase the welfare of these others. This line of reasoning is directly applicable to our study. Thus, exposure to a news report with exemplars suffering consequences of a political decision can be expected to increase empathic concerns in the audience. According to the empathy–altruism hypothesis, such a concern can be expected to trigger altruistic motivation and, thus, more willingness to help the group of individuals represented by the exemplars. Based on this argument, we have the following expectation:

**Hypothesis 1:** The effect of exposure to exemplars on political participation intentions is mediated by an empathic concern.

## *The Moderating Role of Similarity*

Research in micro-level media effects has increasingly examined the conditional effect of individual predispositions (Valkenburg and Peter 2013). Recent studies on the effect of exposure to exemplars on emotions as well as political opinions and attitudes are no exception. As Gross and D'Ambrosio (2004: 21) write, "people are not unthinking consumers of frames; thus, their emotional responses are not completely at the mercy of media frames. Rather, their emotional reactions are conditioned by both predispositions and the information available in a given frame."

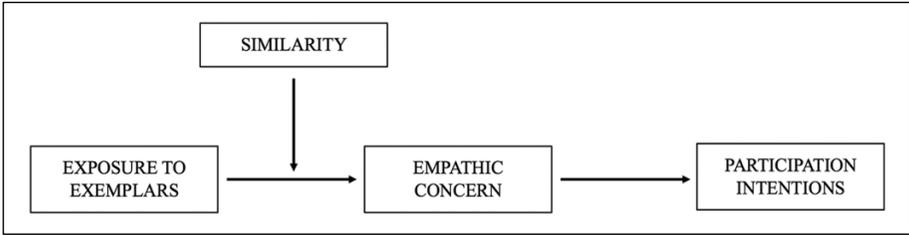
Drawing on the same line of reasoning, Ostfeld and Mutz (2014) argue that a crucial factor for the effects of exposure to exemplars is the degree of similarity (or dissimilarity) between the exemplar and the audience (see also Brosius 1999). In their experimental study, they manipulated the race and cultural background of exemplars and showed how these differences moderate support for immigration policies in favor of the exemplars. The sample of white Americans who served as respondents in the experiment supported a more lenient immigration policy when the exemplars were light-skinned immigrants. When the exemplars were dark-skinned immigrants, the respondents were more supportive of a restrictive immigration policy.

According to Ostfeld and Mutz (2014), the mechanism behind this relationship is that the degree of similarity with exemplars affects the audience's personal affinity with and liking of these exemplars (see also Loewenstein and Small 2007; Small and Simonsohn 2008). In other words, the emotional response to exemplars is likely to be dependent on their similarity with the audience. As a consequence, a high degree of similarity can also affect attribution of responsibility and cause support for policies that favor the exemplars. When the exemplars are similar to the audience, the audience will see the exemplars as an extension of the self and, therefore, attribute responsibility to external actors. As Ostfeld and Mutz (2014: 58) write, "when the exemplars used to illustrate social problems are similar to the respondent, audience members will have 'affect-rich', positive reactions to them, and thus be more willing to endorse public policies that favour them." That is, similarity moderates the emotional response to exemplars, and, in turn, the emotional response affects the audience's policy opinions.

Applying the same argument to effects on intentions of participating in political activities, we expect that the indirect effect through an empathic concern will be more pronounced for people who are similar to than for people who are dissimilar to the exemplars. Hence, people similar to the exemplars should be more likely to experience an empathic concern and, in turn, more likely to participate in political activities that will help the exemplars. This leads to the following expectation:

**Hypothesis 2:** The indirect effect of exposure to exemplars through an empathic concern on political participation intentions is moderated by the level of similarity between the audience and the exemplars, such that the indirect effect will be more positive for audiences who are similar to the exemplars.

Summing up, we expect that exposure to exemplars in news reports affects the likelihood of political participation in relation to the issue presented. We expect that this



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model of the conditional indirect effect of exposure to exemplars.

effect is mediated by an empathic concern for the exemplar in the news story and that this mediation is moderated by the degree of similarity with the exemplar. Figure 1 presents a model of these expectations.

## Data and Method

Our study relies on an online survey experiment, structured as a between-subjects design with respondents randomized into three groups. One group was exposed to a news report with exemplars, a second group was exposed to the same news report but without exemplars, and a third group, the control group, was not exposed to any news report. Randomization of respondents into these three groups ensures that the comparison between the control group and the group exposed to a news report with exemplars shows the overall effect of being exposed to a news report with exemplars, while the comparison between being exposed to the same news report with and without exemplars shows the specific additional effect of including these exemplars.

## Sample

The experiment was embedded at the end of a panel survey conducted in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> In all, 715 individuals participated in the experiment presented in this study. A total of 140 respondents were deleted from the analysis for one or several of the following reasons: twenty-seven respondents went back in the survey and saw the news report more than once; 118 respondents spent either too little (less time than the duration of the news report) or too much time (more than an additional sixty seconds) on the page with the news report (the news report lasted fifty-three seconds without exemplars and seventy-eight seconds with exemplars). Thus, the final number of respondents used in the analyses was 575 (50.3 percent females, age: min. = 18, max. = 85,  $M = 54.3$ ,  $SD = 13.9$ ). Importantly, conducting the analyses with or without the deleted respondents does not affect the results substantially.

The respondents were randomly assigned to the two experimental groups and the control group. In all, 168 respondents were exposed to the news report without exemplars and 172 respondents to the news report with exemplars. A total of 235 respondents were not exposed to any news report. Because respondents were only excluded for not properly viewing the news report, the control group is larger than the two

treatment groups. However, the three groups did not differ significantly in terms of gender, age, or number of respondents who have children, which function as our operationalization of similarity (see Appendix A, Table A1). This result indicates that the randomization was successful.

### *Stimuli*

To secure high ecological validity of the experiment, we used a television news report originally broadcasted as part of the main evening news program *TV-Avisen* on the public service channel DR1 in 2010.<sup>2</sup> The news report covered a potential closedown of four public schools in a mid-sized Danish municipality. Although unsalient in the news at the time the experiment was conducted, it is an issue that most people in Denmark are consistently concerned about (e.g., Baes-Jørgensen 2013; Bræmer and Redder 2009). In the original news report, the base-rate information was supported by interviews with two exemplars—a boy facing a school closedown and his mother. The news report opens with the news anchor presenting the base-rate information. The setting shifts to a typical classroom, and the speaker describes that the closedown affects a lot of children and that the thought of going to a new school can be frightening for many of these children. Thus, the news reports with and without exemplars apply the same basic human-interest frame. In the news report including exemplars, the boy and his mother are interviewed to support this framing. They tell how they think it is a bad idea to close the school and that the children should be treated properly. Thus, the difference between the two versions of the news story is the absence or presence of exemplars.<sup>3</sup> Screenshots and full transcription of the news report can be found in Appendix B, Figure B1 and Table B1. Before the respondents watched the news report, they were asked to turn on the sound on their device.

### *Dependent, Mediating, and Moderating Variables*

After watching the news report, all respondents—also those in the control group who did not watch any news report—were asked to imagine that school closings were taking place in their own community and indicate on a scale from 0 = *not at all likely* to 10 = *very likely* how likely they would be to engage in different political activities in relation to this situation. The political activities included signing petitions, attending public meetings, attending demonstrations, contacting politicians, and contacting the media. These participation forms were combined into an index ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ).

To capture empathic concern, we asked the respondents to which degree the school closings made them feel compassion on a scale from 0 = *not at all* to 10 = *to a high degree* ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 3.01$ ). Compassion is a common indicator of empathic concern (see Batson 1991), and similar straightforward approaches to measuring emotional responses have been used in prior research on the effect of exposure to exemplars (e.g., Aarøe 2011; Gross 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004).

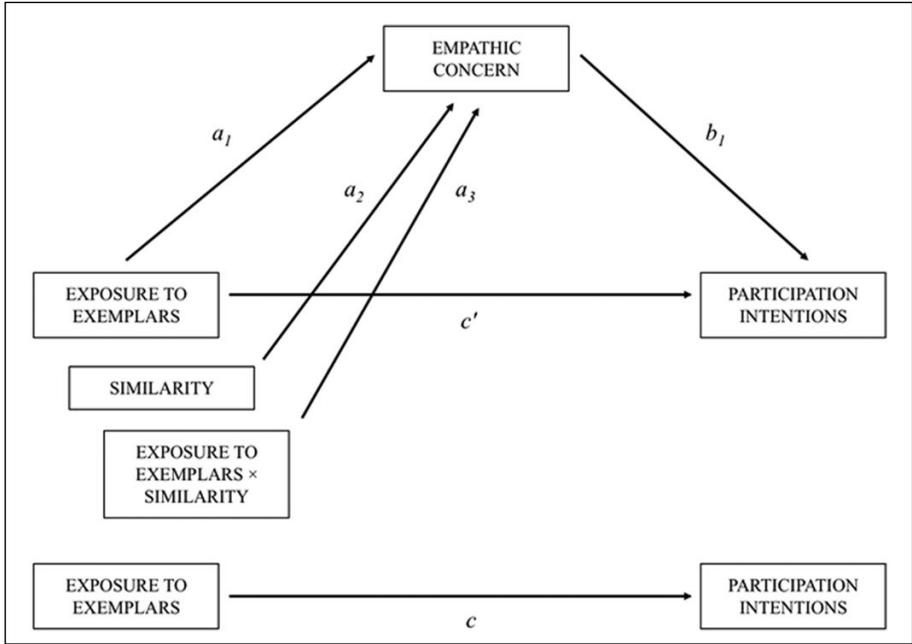
As we used an original news report in our stimulus material, we were not able to manipulate similarity directly (e.g., as Ostfeld and Mutz 2014, who manipulated the skin color of the exemplars). An alternative approach is to operationalize similarity based on observable sociodemographic traits shared by the exemplars and audience (see, for example, Brosius 1999; Kim et al. 2016). To capture the degree of similarity with the exemplars, the respondents were, therefore, asked whether or not they have children (70 percent had one or more children). Given the issue of the news story and character of the exemplars used in the experiment, this measure is a good proxy for similarity. If you are a parent, you will feel a stronger connection to other parents (the mother in the news report) as well as a stronger connection to children (the boy in the news report).

### *Analytic Approach*

We first examine the average treatment effect of being exposed to either a news report with or without exemplars by comparing the means of intentional political participation between the three randomized groups using analysis of variance (ANOVA). In addition, we use PROCESS modeling with a bootstrap resampling technique (Hayes 2013) to test the mediation through an empathic concern and how this indirect effect is conditioned by similarity with the exemplars. To take account of potential confounding variables in this analysis, we include gender and age as control variables. People are more likely to have children the older they are. Likewise, we control for gender, as the presented exemplars are a mother and her boy, with the potential consequence of other mothers being more likely to perceive themselves as similar. In addition, gender and age are also related to participation in political activities (e.g., Burns et al. 2001; Jennings 1979).

### **Results**

We start by testing the direct effect of exposure to a news report with and without exemplars by comparing means of the intentional political participation for the three experimental groups. We find an overall significant effect of exposure to the news report on political participation intentions,  $F(2, 572) = 3.22, p = .04$ . Post hoc Bonferroni tests further show that the mean score for political participation intentions is significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) in the group that saw the news report with exemplars ( $M = 3.327, SD = 2.748$ ) than in the control group ( $M = 2.649, SD = 2.719$ ). Furthermore, the mean score for political participation intentions in the group exposed to the news report *without* exemplars ( $M = 2.929, SD = 2.479$ ) was higher than in the control group and lower than in the group exposed to the news report *with* exemplars, but these differences were not statistically significant. These results indicate that exposure to a news report *with* exemplars increases the overall intentions to participate politically, but it is not possible for us to say that this overall increase is *exclusively* due to the exemplars, as the difference to the group exposed to the news report *without* exemplars is not significant. As mentioned, such direct effects should be interpreted with



**Figure 2.** Statistical diagram for the conditional indirect effect of exposure to exemplars. Note. Conditional indirect effect =  $(a_1 + a_3 \times \text{Moderator}) \times b_1$ ; indirect effect =  $a_1 \times b_1$ ; direct effect =  $c'$ ; total effect =  $c$ .

caution, as they are likely to be conditioned by other factors. Therefore, we now turn to the potential mediating and moderating effects.

To further examine how exposure to exemplars affects political participation intentions, we use conditional PROCESS modeling with a bootstrap resampling technique (Hayes 2013; for a similar approach, see Schuck and de Vreese 2012). Based on two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for each comparison between two experimental groups—one model with empathic concern, that is, compassion, and one with political participation intentions as the dependent variable (see full models in Appendix C, Table C1)—this method provides us with the conditional indirect effect. This is the indirect effect through an empathic concern for those who are or are not similar with the exemplars, that is, have/do not have children:  $(a_1 + a_3 \times \text{Moderator}) \times b_1$ . The direct effect ( $c'$ ) and the indirect effects sum to the total effect ( $c$ ). The statistical diagram is illustrated in Figure 2 below (see also Hayes 2013: 447). We do not report the direct and total effect in the following results because we focus on the conditional indirect effects.

The results of the conditional PROCESS modeling are presented in Table 1. Comparing the group exposed to a news report *without* exemplars to the control group, we find no conditional indirect effects through an empathic concern on political participation intentions. That is, watching the news report on school closings without

**Table 1.** Conditional Indirect Effects on Political Participation Intentions via an Empathic Concern.

Comparing	Similarity (Children)	Conditional Indirect Effect	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
				LL	UL
No exemplar vs. control (N = 359)	No	0.134	0.164	-0.194	0.475
	Yes	0.182	0.116	-0.017	0.445
Exemplar vs. control (N = 385)	No	-0.296*	0.173	-0.736	-0.015
	Yes	0.459**	0.131	0.242	0.753
Exemplar vs. no exemplar (N = 274)	No	-0.517**	0.203	-1.007	-0.190
	Yes	0.290*	0.135	0.054	0.585

Note. Conditional mediation test with bootstrap (1,000 resamples), unstandardized regression coefficients. LL = lower level; UL = upper level; vs = versus.

\* $p < .5$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . See full models in Appendix C, Table C1.

exemplars does not indirectly affect the intention to participate in political activities related to the issue through an empathic concern—neither for people with nor for people without children.

However, adding exemplars to the news report makes a difference. When we compare respondents who were exposed to the news report *with* exemplars to the control group, we find a negative indirect effect on political participation intentions for people who do not have children and a positive indirect effect for people who do have children. The same pattern emerges when we compare the groups that watched the news report *with* or *without* exemplars to see if adding exemplars to a news report makes a difference in itself. Thus, adding exemplars to the news report increases empathic concern and, in turn, political participation intentions for people with children, while exposure to these exemplars decreases empathic concern and, in turn, political participation intentions for people without children.

These findings support both our first and second hypotheses that the effect of being exposed to exemplars is mediated by an empathic concern, that is, compassion, and that this mediation is moderated by degree of similarity with the exemplar, that is, having children or not. In other words, respondents without children express less empathic concern and are, therefore, less likely to participate politically. In contrast, respondents who have children express more empathic concern and are, therefore, more likely to participate. The results also show that watching a news report with exemplars does not only affect political participation compared with watching no news report. The effects are also significant when compared with watching the same news report without exemplars. Thus, the inclusion of exemplars appears to have an indirect effect on intentions to participate politically above and beyond the other information presented in the news report.

## Discussion

Research on the effects of exemplars in the news has mainly focused on how these exemplars trump other information in news reports and cause potentially problematic biases in perceptions of and opinions on political issues (e.g., Boukes et al. 2015; Brosius and Bathelt 1994; Ostfeld and Mutz 2014; Zillmann and Brosius 2000). Consequently, the inclusion of exemplars in news reports has often been discussed as a potential problem for democracy. Our study adds to the earlier studies of the effects of exemplars by exploring whether exemplars in the news media could also benefit democracy by increasing intentions to participate in political activities.

Our results showed a positive main effect on intentions to participate politically of watching a news report *with* exemplars compared with not watching any news report. Although we found no significant main effect when we compared the group that watched the news report *without* exemplars and the control group, these results indicate a potential mobilizing effect of exposure to exemplars in the news. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrated that the effect on political participation intentions is mediated by empathic concern triggered by the exemplars. However, our analysis also showed that this indirect effect of exemplars on political participation intentions is not positive across the board, but is dependent on the similarity between exemplar and audience. Thus, respondents with children exposed to the news report about school closings *with* exemplars expressed more empathic concern and, as a consequence, more willingness to participate in political activities related to this issue. For respondents without children, the relationship was the reverse, as watching the news report *with* exemplars led to a decrease in empathic concern for these people, which further discouraged them from taking political action on the issue. Thus, our results show that including exemplars in news reports is not a universal mobilizing tool, because for some respondents, the exemplars actually had a demobilizing effect.

The results are in line with other studies that stress the importance of taking emotions into account when examining the effect of exposure to exemplars (Gross 2008; Gross and D'Ambrosio 2004). However, our results also stress the moderating role of similarity in the relationship between exposure to exemplars and relevant outcome variables (Ostfeld and Mutz 2014). Our findings thereby add to the literature by supporting the call for taking relevant mediators (in our case, an empathic concern) and moderators (in our case, similarity) into account when examining media effects, instead of looking for across-the-board effects (see Valkenburg and Peter 2013). By following this approach, our study has taken a first step to explore the effects of exemplars in news reports on a democratically important outcome variable, political participation.

Although we conducted our study on a diverse population-based sample and increased the ecological validity by employing an original news report in the experiment, our study invites further exploration of the relationship. First of all, we conducted our study in a single country, namely, Denmark. This raises the important question of whether we can expect to see similar results in other settings. A recent study on the effects of exemplars indicates that this might be the case. Drawing on a

most different systems design, Aarøe and Petersen (2014) showed that when presented with identical exemplars, Danes and Americans formed similar attitudes on welfare policies related to these exemplars. This goes against the general expectations of different attitudes toward welfare recipients in countries with very different welfare systems. To explain why people in different contexts react similarly to exemplars, the authors point to deep-rooted, individual-level psychological predispositions developed through human evolution (see also Petersen 2012). If this logic also applies to political participation intentions, we would expect our findings to replicate in other settings. However, this claim, of course, needs to be tested empirically in a cross-national design, which allows for a more formal test of contextual factors.

Even if people across different contexts react similarly to exemplars in the news, another central question related to the implications of our findings remains. Are exemplars presented similarly in different countries with different media systems and different political systems? Even though the inclusion of exemplars is widespread across countries, we know very little of how these exemplars are presented and which characteristics they have. A comparative study (Larsen and Dejgaard 2013) of how poor people are depicted in the news gives an indication. In the United Kingdom, which is part of the liberal media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and the liberal welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990), the poor are presented much more negatively than in Denmark and Sweden, which are part of the democratic-corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and the “social democratic” welfare regime (Esping-Andersen 1990). This is in line with Aarøe and Petersen (2014), who suggest that initial differences in welfare attitudes are not caused by different responses to exemplars across countries, but rather differences in the available information across countries, that is, different types of exemplars in the news. Thus, while we might expect people to react similarly to similar exemplars, the *type* of exemplars in the news and their characteristics might vary across countries with different media and political systems. An important next step would, therefore, be a comprehensive cross-national, comparative study of news coverage with particular focus on the inclusion of exemplars and their characteristics.

The propositions above also highlight the question about which characteristics of the exemplars are important. One characteristic of persons at the receiving end of policy decisions, which has repeatedly been shown to influence people’s reactions toward these people, is how much they deserve the help (e.g., Aarøe and Petersen 2014; Petersen 2012). A recent study suggests that the degree of deservingness of an exemplar drives opinions on the welfare benefit received by the group that the exemplar represents (Hopmann et al. 2017). Thus, people are willing to support policies in favor of exemplars, but only if they find them deserving. In our study, we only vary the presence of exemplars and not the characteristics of the exemplars. Based on the results discussed above, people might have different emotional responses based on varying degrees of deservingness of exemplars, and, in turn, a varying degree of willingness to take political action. Thus, varying deservingness as well as other characteristics of exemplars in future studies would tell us more about how exemplars affect people’s willingness to participate politically.

In addition, we studied the effects of exemplars based on one topic only. Thus, even though it is plausible to expect that the effects we found would be repeated if we use news reports on similar topics, further studies in relation to other topics are needed to substantiate the claim. Likewise, we only examined the emotional indirect effect through an empathic concern, operationalized as compassion. Other emotions, in relation to exemplars with different characteristics and across different topics, should likewise be explored further in future research.

Last, news stories never appear in a vacuum. In a real-world setting, news stories on the same issue but with different framing may cancel out the effects of exemplars (Chong and Druckman 2007). Also, people may use other information channels than the news media before they decide to engage in political activities, for instance, interpersonal communication, and are perhaps personally affected by an issue. These questions speak for further exploration outside an experimental setting.

Despite the concerns and possible advancements discussed above, our study clearly indicates that journalists’ use of exemplars in news reports should be taken seriously. This common reporting practice has often been discussed as a democratic problem due to its effects on perceptions of and opinions on different issues. However, our results show that exemplars can also evoke an emotional response that leads to an increase in political participation—at least for people who are similar to the exemplars. This finding raises the normative questions whether this is good news for democracy and whether emotional reactions are a valid foundation for political attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. Some would argue that the public needs objective information to form rational political attitudes and opinions and engage in political activities on a valid foundation. But, as argued by Jasper (1998), emotions are fundamental to our culture and social life, and without emotional reactions, there might be no social action at all. Thus, emotional reactions are important for a well-functioning democracy. However, it is also important that both journalists and the public are aware of such emotional mechanisms. By showing how inclusion of exemplars in news reports can mobilize some citizens and demobilize others dependent on their similarity with the exemplars, our study has contributed to this understanding.

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Comparing Experimental Groups.

	Group 1 (Control)	Group 2 (No Exemplar)	Group 3 (Exemplar)
Gender	0.52 (0.50)	0.50 (0.50)	0.48 (0.50)
Age	54.87 (13.21)	53.60 (14.19)	54.23 (14.41)
Have children	0.71 (0.46)	0.70 (0.46)	0.70 (0.46)
N	235	168	172

Note. The table shows means and standard deviations. No significant differences between the groups were found.

## Appendix B



**Figure B1.** Screenshots from the news report.

**Table B1.** Transcription of News Report (Translated from Danish to English).

News Anchor: “Billions have to be cut in the municipal budgets in coming years. This is a difficult exercise, which in the municipality of Køge, for example, means that the politicians are actually considering closing several schools.”

Speaker: “When you are 11 years old, the thought of a new school and new classmates can be quite frightening.”

*Marcus Nygaard Skaaning (schoolboy): “I think it is absolutely bad. And our class even has to be divided. And then right in the seventh grade, where you really need to just know everybody and stuff like that.”*

Speaker: “*Marcus Nygaard Skaanings’s school is one of the schools which the politicians in the municipality of Køge are considering closing down. And it concerns a lot of children. The proposal, which Køge’s politicians are considering right now, will close four schools: Alkestrup, Gørslev, Lellinge, plus either Søndre school or Sct. Nicolai school. In addition, four other schools will be merged into two larger schools. This means more students in the class and longer transportation to the school for many of the students.*”

*Tenna Skaaning (Marcus’s mother): “We really need to treat these kids properly. And you don’t do that by throwing them around in this way.”*

Note. Base-rate information = ■ (roman text); Exemplars = ■ (italic text).

## Appendix C

**Table C1.** Effects on Empathic Concern and Political Participation Intentions.

	No Exemplar vs. Control		Exemplar vs. Control		Exemplar vs. No Exemplar	
	Empathic Concern	Participation Intentions	Empathic Concern	Participation Intentions	Empathic Concern	Participation Intentions
Empathic concern		0.295*** (0.040)		0.320*** (0.042)		0.360*** (0.047)
Stimuli	0.455 (0.563)	0.085 (0.248)	-0.295 (0.537)	0.436 (0.257)	-1.437** (0.538)	0.365 (0.262)
Similarity	0.271 (0.443)		0.137 (0.423)		0.319 (0.469)	
Stimuli × Similarity	0.161 (0.672)		2.360*** (0.640)		2.242** (0.643)	
Gender (female)	0.892** (0.303)	0.079 (0.246)	1.054*** (0.288)	-0.008 (0.256)	0.768* (0.295)	0.015 (0.264)
Age	-0.038** (0.012)	-0.015 (0.009)	-0.019 (0.011)	-0.022* (0.009)	-0.026* (0.011)	-0.012 (0.009)
Constant	6.468*** (0.701)	1.959** (0.591)	5.453*** (0.669)	2.237*** (0.588)	6.449*** (0.656)	1.504* (0.611)
R <sup>2</sup>	.054	.141	.099	.153	.102	.165
N	403	403	407	407	340	340

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. vs = versus.  
 \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The study was conducted within the ‘Communication and Public Engagement’ project at the Centre for Journalism, funded by a ‘2020’ research grant of the University of Southern Denmark.

### Notes

1. The six-wave panel survey was conducted as part of the ‘Communication and Public Engagement’ project at Centre for Journalism, University of Southern Denmark, in collaboration with the research agency Epinion. The experiment was implemented at the end of the last survey wave together with another experiment. Approximately 40 percent of the respondents received the present experiment first; the rest received the other experiment first. We base our analyses on the former group. The other experiment also examined the effect of a journalistic product in relation to a political topic. If the respondents

who received that experiment first are included in our analysis, the results change in some regards. For example, the negative indirect effect for the dissimilar respondents turns insignificant. As we cannot rule out that a pretreatment effect has contaminated these data for those who received the current experiment second, we only conduct our analysis based on respondents who received this experiment first.

2. Before the experiment was implemented in the panel survey, it was pretested on approximately eighty students at University of Southern Denmark to observe how the stimuli would work in practice. The pretest showed that the news report was quite long and time-consuming. When the news report was originally broadcasted, it also included an interview with the mayor in the affected municipality. To limit dropout, we cut out this interview before implementing the news report to the final experiment. Thereby, we also avoid potential contamination of the results due to interaction between the mayor's party and the respondents' party cues.
3. As a consequence, the news report with exemplars was twenty-five seconds longer than the news report without exemplars. This variation is, of course, a limitation to the study design, as we cannot rule out that the length of the news report influenced the results. However, an equal duration would require adding information to the news report without exemplars and, thus, introduce unwanted informational variation between the two news reports. The current approach allows us to study the additional effect of adding an exemplar while keeping the rest of the news report constant.

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