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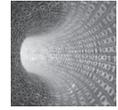
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Abstract

The ubiquitous nature of online news, especially in social media, increasingly exposes readers to news even when they are not seeking it. Based on 50 semi-structured interviews with Spanish incidental news consumers, we inductively explore the effects of incidental news consumption and problematize the phenomenology of encountering news passively on social media. Our results first question previous quantitative analysis on the potential positive effects of incidental news exposure, evidencing its minimal or null effects on how citizens make sense of, and are informed about, public affairs and politics. Second, our findings indicate that citizens appraisals of incidental news content varies according to the producers involved, the topics addressed and the interest triggered. Our study contributes to current discussions of incidental news exposure, arguing that both quantitative and qualitative studies should consider the direct and indirect impact of structural, cognitive and situational variables to holistically account for incidental news effects.

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Keywords

Incidental news exposure, media effects, news consumption, political knowledge, qualitative analysis, social media

Introduction

Social media platforms have dramatically changed the mechanisms whereby users consume, share and encounter news digitally. Incidental news exposure (INE) has always existed, but has recently increased due to the growing weight of social media platforms for news sharing and consumption (Bode, 2016). Extant research has addressed the significant effects of incidental news exposure in reducing knowledge gaps (Morris and Morris, 2017), and in fostering political discussion, participation and engagement (Karnowski et al., 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016). Moreover, a burgeoning literature on news repertoires has started to address how social media users make sense of their news consumption based on the broad palette of digital and traditional media services available (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017), and the subtended practices that shape incidental news consumption on social media (Boczkowski et al., 2018). While these studies have provided insightful evidence about the quantitative effects and micro-practices associated with incidental news consumption, we still lack a phenomenology of how incidental news is encountered and how it impacts people's daily lives, based on the morphology of incidental news as well as the producers involved and the topics covered.

This study addresses these gaps in the literature by interviewing 50 social media users in Spain. Specifically, we focus on how people without a direct and conscious interest in news consumption passively encounter online news through social media and how this news content is appraised according to the sources and topics covered, exploring the potential impact on citizens' everyday lives. Our results first suggest that audiences generally do make sense of the source/producer of incidental news content and perceive legacy media and thematic social networking service (SNS) groups as more credible than platform-generated ones. Our findings also suggest that the main topics that individuals are most likely to accidentally encounter are a combination of breaking news (and current conversations about public affairs and politics), as well as viral, sponsored or promoted news content. This study contributes to current discussions on the potential impact of INE, arguing that incidental news producers, topics and effects are interrelated and thus news engagement/knowledge may vary accordingly.

Incidental news exposure: theoretical foundations

Traditionally, media audience studies have focused on active/selective exposure behaviours, neglecting as a result incidental/passive news discovery (Yadamsuren and Heinström, 2011). In recent years, however, the growing popularity of social media as a channel for news consumption and dissemination has spurred a new scholarly interest in serendipitous, opportunistic, or incidental news consumption (Goyanes, 2020). New digital technologies and platforms provide new opportunities for citizens to encounter news in an incidental way as a by-product of their online activities or just through

serendipitous inadvertent exposure, changing their media practices (Boczkowski et al., 2018), and affecting their knowledge of public affairs and politics (Kim et al., 2013).

The concept of INE is frequently employed empirically and theoretically in different approaches and fields. While there is a budding literature on the topic, there is a general lack of agreement on its conceptualization, definition and measurement (Goyanes, 2020). Two main fields have formed the theoretical foundations of INE research: library and information sciences (Yadamsuren and Heinström, 2011) and communication research (Tewksbury et al., 2001).

The contribution of the first discipline emerged in connection with the rise of Spontaneous Information Retrieval (SIR) as a research topic (Yadamsuren and Heinström, 2011), focusing on the effects of serendipity over information-seeking behaviour in different contexts and settings (Miwa and Kando, 2007). This stream of research has examined incidental exposure as the serendipitous retrieval of information and has labelled the term in multiple ways: incidental information acquisition (Heinström, 2006), opportunistic discovery of information (Erdelez, 2005), serendipitous discovery (Yadamsuren and Heinström, 2011) and so on. Despite the myriad of definitions, in all cases, the delineation and application of the construct refer to an opportunistic/serendipitous discovery of information (in a broad sense). However, there is no reference to its potential applicability in understanding how people inadvertently encounter news online and offline, limiting its connection with media audience research.

The second discipline, communication science, has conceptualized opportunistic/serendipitous discovery as incidental exposure, in contrast with traditional studies on intentional or selective exposure. This theoretical tradition has empirically applied this concept to specifically gauge its potential effects related to news consumption and knowledge acquisition, especially in the new digital realm: the Internet (Tewksbury et al., 2001). It is generally agreed that the rocketing interest in INE has stemmed from the observation by Tewksbury et al. (2001), that surfing the Internet has made it easier for people to encounter news while searching for other types of information. After this study, a growing wave of scholarship emerged as the result of the progressive popularization of social media platforms and their power to incidentally expose citizens to news as a by-product of them using these platforms (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Therefore, the empirical evolution of incidental news exposure research in communication is fundamentally linked to the power of two application settings (Internet/SNS) that have a decisive impact on determine how INE studies are conducted, both theoretically and empirically.

In a broader sense, incidental news exposure (Lee and Kim, 2017), accidental news exposure (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016), incidental news consumption (Boczkowski et al., 2018) and incidental consumption (Bergström and Belfrafe, 2018) all refer to an elementary pattern of digital consumption: the probability that a user will encounter news on the Internet or in social media with no intention of doing so.

Incidental news exposure and social media

Although most news consumers in developed countries still reach online news sites through direct access or search engines, social media referrals have become indispensable for many (Kümpel et al., 2015), exposing many individuals to online news even

when they are not seeking it (Bode, 2016). Recent data on news consumption indicate that most individuals (78%) encounter news content on Facebook when they are using the site for other purposes, and only a minority (22%) actually think of the site as a useful way to get news (Matsa and Mitchell, 2014).

The rise of social media has arguably contributed further to the phenomenon of accidental or unintentional exposure, because this content is often ‘pushed’ to people by their acquaintances (Tang and Lee, 2013). In contrast to the ideological polarization that occurs when people intentionally seek out political information and discussion online (Bowyer et al., 2017), incidental exposure to political information online has been shown to be associated with greater exposure to diverse viewpoints (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009), political knowledge and engagement (Morris and Morris, 2017).

Extant research has mainly examined the potential effects and antecedents of INE on Facebook (Kaiser et al., 2018), which is indicative of the need to expand our understanding to include other globalized social media platforms. Moreover, of the few studies that have concentrated on other social media platforms, most studies do not differentiate between them and thus examine INE under the umbrella of ‘social media’. For instance, Ahmadi and Wohn (2018), analysing the antecedents of INE on different social media, found that frequency clicking on news related links on social media was correlated with incidental exposure. Similarly, Goyanes (2020) examining the media antecedents of INE, found that users who trust social media are more likely to stumble upon news in this way.

More surprisingly, there are limited studies regarding INE on Twitter (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), despite the fact that a recent study found that this platform is one of the main sources where audiences encounter breaking news (Tandoc and Johnson, 2016). Likewise, social media platforms like Snapchat or Instagram that are especially popular among young adults were relatively overlooked, although they may engender new forms of incidental news production and thus exposure. For example, Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal and López-García focused on Instagram stories and found that ‘the media are producing ephemeral stories for Instagram with the main purpose of adapting their news content to the functionalities of this platform and the users’ preferences’ (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019: 2). We argue that these news affordances of social media platforms permeate new forms of incidental news production and exposure, and either promote or limit its effects accordingly.

Incidental news exposure: quantitative and qualitative effects

Earlier studies analysing the relationship between INE and news consumption in social media have mainly focused on three aspects: the practices that subtend incidental news consumption (Bergström and Belfrage, 2018; Boczkowski et al., 2018), how people navigate news through SNS and their attitudes towards editorial and algorithm selections (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018), the media consumption predictors of INE (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Goyanes, 2020), and the role of engagement in INE (Kümpel et al., 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). First, one of the few qualitative studies that investigates the practices of INE on SNS (Boczkowski et al., 2018) provides substantive findings to illustrate the increasing connection between technology and content, the lack of a temporal/spatial

forum for incidental learning, the routinization of news checking on SNS, as well as the connection between INE, sociability and passing the time.

Second, studies on news consumption and INE through social media platforms mainly address the process of news selection (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018), arguing that most people navigate news on social media based on a 'generalized scepticism' where readers question all kinds of selection (journalistic and algorithmic). Third, in relation to the media consumption predictors of INE, research suggests that INE is stronger in young people with a low interest in news, and stronger for users of YouTube and Twitter than for Facebook users (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017). In addition, incidentally exposed users have more online news sources than non-users, while users who report higher levels of social media use for news are more prone to be incidentally exposed (Goyanes, 2020).

Finally, a growing number of empirical studies has focused on the relationship between INE and engagement. These argue that although it is widely accepted that SNS has become a main driver of INE, very little is known about the factors that influence whether users engage with the news encountered there. The factors studied so far have included how interesting the post is perceived to be, prior knowledge about the issue in question, social factors unique to SNS (i.e. feelings towards the person posting the news), content-independent news usage (all perceptions directly related to a specific news post that a user encounters in their news feed) and cognitive elaboration.

Findings suggest that news engagement is determined by users' perceived level of interest and prior knowledge about the issue treated by the news post (Kümpel et al., 2015), as well as both active seeking and incidental news exposure (in SNS and news sites) are linked to engagement, which is linked in turn to greater cognitive elaboration about the content (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). In addition, engagement mediates the relationship between both types of news exposure and cognitive elaboration. This stream of literature provides two main contributions for INE studies, as they suggest that (1) further engagement with incidentally encountered news articles is mainly influenced by the specific interplay between the user and their perceptions of the content (interest in the topic) and (2) the key role of SNS for news is not knowledge gain, but the ability to engage users incidentally or intentionally.

While the aforementioned quantitative studies on INE research have generally failed to provide fine-grained descriptions of how INE is experienced, some recent work has begun to question both the underlying mechanisms and the effects of INE on different political outcomes (Heiss and Matthes, 2019). According to recent studies (Heiss et al., 2019; Heiss and Matthes, 2019), the effects of INE on political participation are mixed or even contradictory, which is explained by two competing frameworks. The first is the equalizing model (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016), which states that INE might decrease participatory gaps because it has a stronger effect on individuals with a lower initial political involvement (Heiss and Matthes, 2019).

The second model is considered to be the reinforcing model (Heiss et al., 2019; Heiss and Matthes, 2019). It states that INE even reinforces existing gaps in political participation, because politically interested people might follow more political sources (Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson, 2014; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), and thus develop a politically oriented social network (Knoll et al., 2020). As a result, users encounter more incidental news about politics and become more involved as well (Heiss and Matthes, 2019). Our

study contributes to these discussions, furthering our understanding on the phenomenology of incidental news consumption and arguing that beyond direct positive or negative effects, incidental news exposure should be accounted for as a context-dependent phenomenon in which different sets of individual mechanisms (prior knowledge, interest, momentum, etc.), news features (source, producers, topics, etc.) and behavioural responses (thorough reading) permeate the potential effects.

Problem statement

Extant research on incidental news exposure has mainly focused on examining the potential effects of inadvertent news consumption on different political outcomes, such as political engagement, political participation, or political knowledge (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Kümpel et al., 2015). These studies, following quantitative premises, have typically sought to test the positive impact that passive news encountering might have on citizens' participation, awareness, engagement or knowledge about public affairs and politics. While these studies have provided robust empirical and theoretical accounts on the potential effects of INE (Kümpel et al., 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009), there is a surprising lack of context-driven research that empirically disentangles the morphology, phenomenology and nuances that articulate the nature and impact of incidental news exposure on citizens' daily lives.

Specifically, we have limited empirical accounts on how people encounter and make sense of incidental news, how incidental topics and sources/producers are appraised, and how citizens perceive the potential impact of incidental news consumption on their daily routines. It could be argued that sources, producers, topics and effects are intrinsically interrelated with the phenomenology of incidental news consumption, making it essential to analyse in a holistic narrative each element and the interconnections between them. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 50 Spanish incidental news consumers, we address these gaps in the literature and provide an analysis of the phenomenology of incidental news consumption, empirically outlining the formal paths that drive citizens from becoming incidental news producers, to incidentally exposed users, and finally, to incidental news consumers. Based on the foregoing discussion, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1. How do social media users encounter and make sense of accidental news in the myriad of social media platforms today available?

RQ2. How do users cognitively appraise the different topics and sources/producers of accidental news in social media?

RQ3. How do users socially construct and perceive the main effects of incidental news exposure on their daily lives?

Methodology

Empirical evidence for this study comes from in-depth face-to-face interviews with 50 Spanish incidental news consumers. As implemented in prior studies (Boczkowski et al.,

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

	Sample	Spanish census
Sociodemographics	Percentage	Percentage
Age (range = 20–54)		
20–29	54	10.3
30–54	46	37.9
Female	50	50.9
Education		
High school or less	26	39.9
Some college	20	22.9
College degree or more	54	37.2
Employment status		
Working	88	86.22
Unemployment	12	13.78

2018), we combine the snowball sampling technique with randomly approaching potential participants in public spaces (cafés, bookstores, libraries, etc.). Specifically, in the case of the snowball sampling technique, we first invite several distant contacts of each interviewer to be interviewed. These participants should be diverse in terms of their age, occupation and gender. At the end of each interview, the interviewee was requested to provide the name of three potential participants, posing a key criterion: respondents should belong to different social networks and be diverse in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. Based on our sampling requirements, some participants were contacted at random.

In order to be eligible to participate in the study, respondents had to meet two criteria: they must (1) regularly check and use social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook or Instagram and (2) their use of such platforms should not be related to information and news purposes. The first questions of the interview guide verified these criteria. Respondents who answered these questions in the negative were excluded from the study. The aim of these preliminary questions was to guarantee that all respondents were potential incidental news consumers. Table 1 provides sample characteristics. Briefly, the mean age of our sample is 27 (range = 18–54), with men and women equally represented, 50% each. At the time of the interview, 88% of participants were studying or working, while 12% were unemployed. Higher educated and younger adults are over-represented, as compared with the Spanish census. However, given the age breakdown of social media users in Spain, our sample is better adjusted (social media users: 18–34: 19.25%; 35–54: 20.6%).

According to the 2019 Reuters' Digital News Report, online news consumption in Spain is relatively high: about 80% of audiences consume online news, while only 72% consume news from TV. An increasing number of people use smartphones for news (over 60% in 2019), and 2019 was the first year in which consumption of online news on smartphones was higher than news consumption on computers (45%). The overall usage of social media for news was 53% in 2019. In this sense, the main social media source

for news in Spain is Facebook (47%), followed by WhatsApp (26%), YouTube (26%), Twitter (16%) and Instagram (12%).

We used purposive sampling, specifically, maximum variety sampling. Following Patton (2002), participants were chosen to reflect a large diversity in information-rich cases relevant to the research interest: we included young and senior social media users from different rural and urban areas, and with different economic and social backgrounds. The interviews include participants from Madrid, Galicia, Cataluña, Valencia, País Vasco and Andalucía, and the final sample represented a wide range of demographic data and work profiles. One of the authors and a team of research assistants carried out the semi-structured interviews in Spain between May and June 2019.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes and were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed by a research assistant. The researchers analysed a total of 75 hours and 15 minutes of recorded interviews. The interview guide addressed three topic areas, the first of which concerned participants' use of social media. Questions addressed how and why they use social media regularly, and which platforms they prefer. Specifically, we inquired about respondents' usage and attitudes towards several social media platforms and asked them to describe their experience with and perceptions of them. The second part concerned the role of incidental news exposure on shaping their news repertoires, addressing the main typologies and producers that they had perceived in the course of their incidental consumption. Finally, the third part focused on how incidental news had affected or influenced their knowledge about current events and politics and the main paths for incidental news engagement. Our respondents readily reflected upon how they were being exposed and on the potential effects of such exposure. As our main ambition was to inductively explore the phenomenology of incidental news exposure, we only relied on the subjective experiences of respondents as they communicated them.

The analysis of data was carried out based on interview transcripts and personal notes taken during the interview conversation. In order to identify, analyse and report patterns (i.e. themes) within data, a thematic analysis was executed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Finally, the different codes and themes that emerged from the data were discussed with two independent scholars in order to refine our conceptualizations and themes.

Results

Forms and ways of encountering incidental news on social media

When speaking about the most relevant platform on which our participants encounter incidental news, most of them typically referred to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. There were two most common paths: (1) when certain profiles (the media, interest groups, individual journalists, individual citizens, celebrities, etc.) are the producers and the posts are shared by friends or themselves, or when (2) social media platforms suggest the consumption of news based on users' interests. These two types of incidental consumption structure the nature of incidental news and their main effects. Whether written news or pieces of information, they are typically encountered on Facebook or Twitter, while on Instagram the most common channel is through short visual

stories called Instastories, as Claudia, a school teacher, introduces, 'I constantly encounter news incidentally. Lately I'm surprised that I see it mostly on Instagram, in the stories'.

As a necessary condition to be incidentally exposed to news, our respondents find them while doing other things: checking their friends' updates, uploading a personal photo or 'reviewing' their Instagram stories. This ephemeral consumption through Instagram stories may be considered as a complementary, spontaneous, personal and visual mode of being incidentally exposed to news beyond textual content. Many respondents suggest that, while they routinely check 'what's going on out there' on Instagram, they frequently encounter breaking news on their friends' Instastories or the different profiles they follow. According to our evidence, these visual accidental news stimuli are usually mixed with ephemeral personal accounts, descriptions or emotions.

Social media platforms are increasingly a space for killing time and entertainment, and many of our respondents share and consume different types of content (videos, information, news, etc.) from different sources (media, entertainment platforms, influencers, etc.). These interests are captured by social media platforms and converted into personalized suggestions corresponding to our respondents' interests. Among these suggestions, many participants acknowledge the existence of news and pieces of information about current events and politics. Sara, a master's student in biotechnology, said she encounters 'promoted' or 'suggested' news because 'my Facebook account told me: *maybe you are interested in . . .*'.

As shown, incidental news is not only produced and shared by acquaintances or certain profiles but also 'promoted' or 'suggested' by social media platforms. Despite their potential differences, our respondents typically normalize their consumption regardless of who the sponsor/producer is. Adriá, a college sophomore, clarifies, 'Twitter, for instance, has a sponsored section. That means that, indirectly, even if you don't want to read news, you always encounter and read news that you neither wanted to encounter nor read'. It is difficult to calibrate the amount of incidental news depending on the producer, but a majority of respondents referred to and reflected upon the growing relevance of cookies – and the resulting promoted content – in shaping their incidental exposure repertoire.

Typologies of incidental news and main producers

The biggest difference and thus the element that usually demarcates the potential impact of INE is the main producer involved and its credibility. According to our evidence, respondents accidentally encounter a combination of (1) breaking news and/or impactful social, political, economic or natural information, usually produced by traditional/native media and/or shared by acquaintances and (2) incidental news with little or no informative value. The latter may be promoted and sponsored content or information shared by acquaintances from low-credibility media platforms such as blogs, unknown online news organizations, technology companies, etc.

Regarding the first category, our respondents describe news contents that might inform them about current events and politics or trigger their interest in the topic covered. This category includes a broad range of news: from breaking news about a catastrophe to news about the economy, politics, climate change, the environment, gender violence, feminism, animal rights, and so on. The main producers of this first typology are usually media organizations (directly or indirectly through social media peers), and

individual/group profiles (in Facebook). Sofia, an unemployed make-up artist, perfectly explains the first category of incidental news, summarizing many of our respondents' reflections:

What I usually encounter is news related to politics, animal abuse, disappearances . . . I don't know, I get an incredible range of things, but basically events or very flashy news, like the ones that they put at the beginning of the news. It has to be something very shocking or something that provokes you, something strong so that people want to read it and then share it with others.

When asked about who the main producers of incidental news are, most respondents acknowledged that traditional or native media organizations are dominant. Many respondents acknowledged that often they do not know 'who the producers are' because they do not 'check the source', but in general terms, most interviewees acknowledge its traditional/native nature. Breaking news incidentally encountered can also be consumed because friends share them. José, an unemployed mechanical engineer, explains how he usually experiences it: 'I don't follow news much on social networks. But when there's a serious accident or a terrorist attack, everyone shares a lot of news about it and I become informed thanks to them'. Beyond media platforms and friends, respondents also rely on their interests, specifically, following particular profiles or 'Facebook groups'. For instance, Felipe, a ski enthusiast, follows several Facebook groups related to his interest, and typically encounters 'news about winter sports or snow conditions in the Pyrenees'.

The second category of incidental news (i.e. news with limited informative value or new information) is typically described as content promoted or sponsored by social media platforms and might include advertisements and news content itself. First, most of our respondents receive promoted or suggested content based on their interests or previous consumption and associate its emergence with the use of cookies. Advertisement is the most common incidental content based on suggestions, but also news, insofar as our respondents had consumed or sought for news or information previously. David, a civil servant, explained that the promoted or suggested content he usually gets is

news that interests me or topics that I like, because I've read it other times, I've searched for it on the internet or given it a 'like'. They [social media platforms] know and control all my interests! Despite their efforts, I never pay attention to such content because it is typically annoying.

Impact of incidental news on people's daily lives

The main elements explaining the impact of incidental news are its source and topic. Therefore, not all incidental news is relevant to people's daily lives, nor is it central in informing them about public affairs and politics. As was generally addressed by our respondents, the impact and general effect of incidental news is minor. 'I often bypass the accidental news I find on Facebook, such news stories are typically annoying to me. I do not consider that consuming them makes me better informed', said Ana, a civil servant. However, many others acknowledge that incidental news gives them a general sense of what is going on at the national and international levels and also an awareness and

knowledge about certain specific topics. For instance, Juan Ramón, a senior architect explains that he knew that Julen, a small child who had fallen into a well in Totalán, Malaga, had finally died, by checking his Facebook:

When the child fell into the well, they were there, I don't know how many days, trying to get him out. When they finally managed to reach him and get the body out, I remember that it was about three or four in the morning and I was partying with my friends. Suddenly, I took out my phone to check my Facebook and saw all the stories about that.

In general, incidental news produced by legacy and digital media organizations and shared by acquaintances, and those produced by (Facebook) groups based on our participants' interests, may provide relevant information that may help our respondents gain an understanding of social reality, while incidental news suggested or promoted by social media platforms typically has no impact on participants' ability to make sense of current events and politics.

According to our respondents, the impact of incidental news is related more to its power of propagation and its capacity to spread current conversations about relevant topics than its capacity to fully inform them. In addition, a lot of incidental news is only read superficially, and many items are not even clicked. This means that incidental news is on many occasions bypassed, as Claudia stated, 'There are things that you see and you say "wow, it's awful what happened"', and you click on it because you're curious. But effect – I don't think they have much effect. Most of the time you ignore this news'.

The basic nature of incidental news is therefore to approach, be in touch with, or follow breaking news conversation about public affairs and politics. Incidental news might reduce knowledge gaps and foster participation, but the effects are very much limited to trending conversations (on many occasions avoided) and breaking news about current or dramatic events. Luís, a TV producer, explained that it is difficult to be informed through social media platforms, 'but more or less, you'll know a little about what's happening in the world or what the topic of the moment is'. In the same vein, many other participants emphasized the role of incidental news in 'superficially' informing them about current events, rather than the depth of their reading and the quality of the content itself.

However, in some occasions, incidental news can have a significant impact on readers, specifically in relation to their 'awareness' of certain topics, issues and consequences. In this regard, Yamina, a factory worker, explained the role of incidental news in shaping her understanding of male violence:

With everything about women and violence against women, you have more awareness and you are more realistic with the situation, you become a little more critical and you are sensitized to the cause and thus you see the injustices more easily.

Similarly, Lucía explained the role of incidental news in her awareness of climate change in the following terms:

Maybe news about climate change, the environment and all that, have had some effect. I encounter a lot of accidental news about climate change, I think because it affects us all. Now I recycle more, which before I honestly did not.

Many of our participants get incidental news because they generally do not consume or get information by directly consulting news organizations. By checking their social media accounts on their smartphones, tablets or PCs, our respondents typically believe that they get exposed to important topics and current events through the omnipresence of incidental news in social media. This means that many respondents rely on social media to get a 'superficial' account of current events and politics. Mario addresses this perspective in the following terms:

For young people now it's much easier to be informed and follow the news on social networks, because we're used to using them, not a newspaper or on TV. On Twitter you already have several newspapers, media, politicians, journalists, whatever. So you already get what you're interested in or share, you don't get things that you're against.

Many participants have long working hours and other personal issues that prevent them from consuming news directly. As Demetrio puts it: 'Last week I had internships in the hospital and classes, so I spent the whole day away from home, and I found out that there were many fires in Asturias because I encountered this info on Instagram'. Therefore, a busy life and the general lack of interest in news are crucial factors that influence incidental news exposure and thus the lack of direct consumption.

However, the manner in which incidental news is consumed might vary depending on the topic and the interest triggered. Therefore, incidental news can be avoided, superficially checked or fully read, changing its potential effects accordingly. Many participants acknowledged that encountering news on social media had triggered their interest in the news, meaning that some respondents decided to search for the topic voluntarily after having read it. Sergio, a bus driver, states,

I remember how I accidentally encountered news about the effects of climate change in La Manga del Mar Menor. As the news interested me, I looked for more information about it by searching in Google. I used to spend the summer there with my family.

Finally, several interviewees noted that social media might produce a misleading perception that they can be fully informed by consuming the news they incidentally encounter as a by-product of using these platforms, following the news finds me perception theory (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). As Laura, a university sophomore, explained,

I think news on social media gives me the false impression that I'm up to date, but just because you know what happened or they tell you that a certain situation happened doesn't mean that you understand it and that you really understand the reality.

Sofia perfectly summarized the most common path to incidental news consumption: time constraints that prevent her from directly checking news, incidental news spotting in social media, incidental news consumption if the topic is interesting and more research about the topic if needed:

I usually spend the whole day at work and I can't watch the news or read the newspaper. In my case, with Instagram, my friends start to upload stories because everyone always shares or comments when something important happens. I then encounter news, if something serious happened, and then I search on the internet or the press and I learn more. Incidental news is for that, to find out about something that I couldn't see because I was working.

Discussion and conclusion

Recent empirical findings suggest that many citizens feel that they do not need to consume news directly, as peers and networks will eventually inform them about current events and politics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Kümpel et al., 2015). In this context, the ubiquitous nature of online news increasingly exposes readers to news even when they are not seeking it (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), something that has dramatically changed the way in which news consumption and exposure is theoretically defined and empirically measured (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Drawing upon 50 in-depth interviews with Spanish incidental news consumers, we provide three context-driven insights that further our budding understanding of the potential impact of incidental news exposure on citizens' daily lives, showcasing the phenomenology of how news is inadvertently encountered, according to the main producers/sources involved and the impact derived from citizens' engagement and reading behaviour.

Our first two findings relate to the morphology and thus the definition of incidental news in social media (RQ1). First, we found that there are generally two ways in which our respondents encounter INE: (1) when certain profiles (the media, interest groups, individual journalists, individual citizens, celebrities, etc.) are the producers and the posts are shared by friends or themselves, or when (2) social media platforms suggest the consumption of news based on users' interests. Our respondents reported that, while the proportion of professionally generated content is seemingly greater, the share of algorithm-generated INE that is based on the user's search and browsing history is continuously emerging. This finding suggests that users typically normalize both modes of accidental news and are aware of the algorithmic-based processes of news dissemination.

Second, traditional research on INE commonly presumes incidental news to be written content encountered on social media as a by-product of using these platforms, typically on Twitter and/or Facebook (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017; Matsa and Mitchell, 2014). Although our results empirically probe the dominance of this definition in accounting for our participants' understanding and formal incidental consumption, we also found that ephemeral consumption through Instagram stories could also be a complementary, personal and visual mode of being incidentally exposed to news. The specificities of incidental news on Instastories could be conceived as visual pills of news content, mixed with personal narratives and visual information about far-reaching current events and packaged in ephemeral constructed personal stories. Although this definition does not significantly change the theoretical considerations on INE, it widens our understanding of it by outlining the paths to news engagement in different platforms: while textual incidental news on Facebook or Twitter directly links users with news, on Instagram there must be a voluntary effort and therefore an intention to seek news after the accidental, visual stimuli.

The second theory-driven insight (RQ2) of our study relates to the main agents involved in the production of incidental news. While previous research usually has not problematized the agents involved in incidental news creation, and has thus taken for granted that for every incidental content, there must be a clearly identifiable individual creator (social media users, news outlet, social media groups, etc.), our results show that content promoted or suggested by Facebook or Twitter also plays a relevant role as a source for INE. In line with this reasoning, a majority of our respondents mentioned the growing relevance of cookies and algorithms – and thus of promoted or suggested content – in shaping their incidental news repertoire. In addition, as far as our study is concerned, participants clearly differentiated between platform-sponsored incidental content and incidental news created by news organizations, generally perceiving the former as less credible, biased and annoying. In addition, our findings suggest that citizens gave far more credit to journalistic selection and to incidental news content based on legacy media production than to algorithm-generated content. Accordingly, this evidence slightly challenges the concept of ‘generalized scepticism’ (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018) whereby people purportedly question all kinds of selection (journalistic and algorithmic).

Our study also contributes to clarifying the thematic patterns of incidental news. Specifically, our results show that the main topics that individuals are most likely to encounter in the myriad of social media platforms today available are a combination of breaking news, current conversations about public affairs and politics, and viral, sponsored or promoted news contents that have a limited informative value at best. An accurate measure of each category is a challenge that warrants further investigation, as this distinction is determined by curation processes. Likewise, the finding that the influence of INE is dependent on consumers’ existing interests is in keeping with previous research (Kümpel et al., 2015), but raises the question of what sort of things citizens will find interesting. As far as our study is concerned, newsworthy topics that are in vogue are the most significant, including news about climate change, feminism, animal abuse and so on.

The third finding of our study (RQ3) relates to the potential effects of INE. In this regard, while previous studies (Tang and Lee, 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016) have suggested that INE has a positive effect on different political outcomes (such as political engagement, participation and knowledge), our findings nuance these quantitative studies, suggesting that incidental news has typically a very small or a limited impact on citizens’ knowledge about current events and politics as well as on their engagement. Usually, incidental news is regarded as low-grade filler content or mere information regarding trending topics, enhancing readers’ knowledge only when they are already aware of the topic or when the corresponding incidental news content is extremely relevant for them.

Generally, incidental news might serve to provide a general sense of what is going on, and to develop awareness and superficial knowledge about certain specific topics. Therefore, the impact of incidental news is more related to its power of propagation and the capacity to spread current conversations and breaking news rather than their depth, interest or knowledge generated. Incidental news may increase the level of knowledge in a sense that it informs the reader of a broader range of current conversations. However, this impact is very limited, as most accidental news are typically ignored or superficially

read. As in agenda-setting (Funk and McCombs, 2017), where news producers could determine the main topics of discourse without necessarily determining what to think about these topics, INE might have similar effects. Specifically, in the cases when there is a knowledge vacuum, the effects of INE may be particularly relevant, triggering an unconscious attitude and potentially activating cognitive elaboration about salient issues (Knoll et al., 2020).

Therefore, INE could potentially imply an increase in some forms of participation. For example, increased awareness of important social issues might prompt some citizens to engage in collective actions. This poses the question of how we understand and measure the effects of INE, and the ambiguous results in the literature might be a result of measuring effects we would expect from selective exposure, where, as opposed with INE, the audience face voluntary stimuli (Barnidge et al., 2020). In line with the assumptions of agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005) and cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998), we can assume the presence of long-range and unconscious INE processing. In this case, similarly to the phenomenon of long-range media effects, INE could attune consumers' attitudes, and this adjustment could have an unconscious effect on their future thinking and behaviour (Knoll et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be expected that INE consumers might unconsciously pick up specific patterns of thinking and behaviour that might come into play when they face real-life situations in which these patterns could be useful. As a consequence, it is possible that, through these indirect processes, INE could impact different kinds of social participation.

In summary, our study suggests that the effects of incidental news consumption might vary depending on a myriad of cognitive, behavioural or situational variables at play. In fact, incidental news could be avoided, superficially checked or fully read as a result of the interest triggered, the topics covered or the credibility of the source, changing its effects accordingly. Accidental news in SNS may or may not trigger users' interest in, and engagement with a piece of news, meaning that some citizens may decide to directly look up the topic after encountering it, increasing their potential learning as a result. However, according to our findings, a more in-depth consumption of accidental news is not typical, as most news stories encountered accidentally are ignored. Therefore, the effects of INE would be better examined by indirect cognitive, situational or behavioural processes that holistically account for readers' consumption patterns, clearly defining what is measured, as the paradoxical results so far might be a result of measuring effects that can be expected from selective exposure.

Limitations and future research directions

The goal of the study was to examine the phenomenology of incidental news exposure on social media, based on a purposive sample of Spanish adults. Although previous research has suggested that young adults were potentially the most important recipients of INE, we allowed several threats to generalizability due to the implementation of snowball sampling. Therefore, future work might apply a more systematic sampling technique to examine this phenomenon, widening the sample to other countries to explore potential differences in social media uses and effects. Second, our study did not probe the differences between social media platforms regarding INE. Thus, future

research should try to explore platform-dependent variations in order to get a more specific description of incidental exposure across platforms. Future investigations might find that there is no single definition of INE common to all social media, and the current study could be the first step in this direction. Finally, future quantitative studies may consider examining the different direct and indirect mechanisms that connect incidental news exposure and political outcomes. As our findings illustrate, topic interest, news relevance, prior knowledge of the news topic and reading behaviours are crucial to explaining the effects of INE. Therefore, future studies may include different cognitive processes, reading behaviour variables and news features to account for potential differences. Finally, the qualitative approach of our study has limitations, too, since it might be difficult for people to reflect upon their own experiences on how their knowledge has been affected by incidental exposure. While qualitative research can help deepening our understanding on how INE affects citizens' daily lives, future quantitative studies may test our main findings on a representative sample.

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