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The POPC Citizen: Political Information in the Fourth Age of Political Communication

1. Introduction

A woman checking messages on her phone while standing next to a newspaper rack. A girl waiting in line scrolling down the Facebook timeline, stumbling upon a video clip explaining the outcome of the recent US presidential elections. A young man playing a game on his tablet, with TV news running in another window. These are just three everyday scenarios that illustrate how today's "permanently online, permanently connected" (POPC) communication environment has created new conditions for the access to and consumption of political information: A myriad of options to choose from regarding the form and content of communication makes it easy to acquire political information continuously, but also to avoid political content given the many other interesting options to do online. At the same time, social networking sites (SNS) have made it more difficult to abstain completely from political information, as they often push news to unsuspecting users. With the permanent potential activation of social ties through SNS and instant messaging services, the political information of citizens has become embedded into their mediated social networks whose members like, share, and comment on it. The implications of widespread digitization and mediatization for the political domain are so profound and far-reaching that they inspired Jay Blumler (2016) to announce the "fourth age of political communication." Political communication in the fourth age is characterized by "yet more communication abundance" (p. 24) compared to the preceding ages, particularly due to new, mobile access devices that have led to an ever more intense competition for audience attention. The fact that the internet has gone mobile reinforces developments it had initiated much earlier: Mobility increases the frequency of communication and thus the frequency of situations in which more or less conscious choices regarding the medium and content of communication are necessary. Because people often initiate and process digital communication in parallel with an ongoing "offline life," communication acts may also become more impulsive and automatic (van Koningsbruggen, Hartmann & Du, this volume) and attention paid to content becomes more superficial than in the past.

However, the affordances of a POPC media environment affect more than just the way people selectand process political communication. In this chapter, we propose that the POPC environment interacts with the individual characteristics of citizens with profound implications

for some of the most important communication outcomes for a well-functioning democracy such as political knowledge, involvement, and participation. Prior (2007) demonstrated a growing importance of people's entertainment preferences vis-à-vis their appetite for serious news in high-choice media environments. We build on his insights and argue that well-known predictors of news use, like the preference for news relative to entertainment or political interest, will become even more important under POPC conditions and in a high-choice and high-stimulation environment. Put simply, a person not interested in anything political does not only lack the motivation, but also—more than ever—the necessity to follow and elaborate on the news, because there are always more appealing messages to enjoy online and on the go. In addition, personal characteristics such as a general disposition to be distracted (Reinecke & Hofmann, 2016) may become more influential in the political information process: The seemingly unlimited number of options to communicate and receive information as well as greater technology-enabled stimulation through push messages are likely to cause new variation among citizens concerning their routine contact with political news.

The goal of this chapter is to describe how the POPC environment operates in tandem with personal characteristics to influence people's exposure to and processing of political information. In describing the political consequences of the POPC phenomenon we take a social-psychological perspective and focus on the individual level (for a more sociological perspective see the chapter by Vromen, Loader, and Xenos, this volume). We sketch the psychological contours of the contemporary "POPC citizen" and outline recent developments in citizens' use of mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs) for political information, which have consequences for their individual civic competencies as well as democracy at large.

2. "Political" Characteristics of the POPC Environment

In the last decades, our media environment has changed drastically. Mobile phones have been a catalyst for this development as they enabled us to be permanently online and permanently connected (Klimmt, Hefner, Reinecke, Rieger, & Vorderer, this volume). Its central component is the modern smartphone as a device that bundles new and traditional mass media (e.g., digital TV and radio, newspaper content, music, and video) together with interpersonal communication channels (e.g., SNS, email, and texting). These various media, services, and functions can be used at virtually any time, in any place, and even simultaneously. And because the smartphone is

a steady companion, this flow of mediated cues seems to neither have an end nor a start. More than anything else, this high-choice, high-stimulation POPC media environment produces a high load of information and continuous affordances for the user: Unread instant messages, newsletters in the mailbox, the online game to be continued, or the never-ending updates, tweets, retweets, or link shares of online news pages and social network sites—they all are opportunities and obligations for information, communication, and entertainment at the same time. Recent data show that today digital media are one of the most important and most frequently accessed sources of news, second only to television (e.g., Hölig & Hasebrink, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2016). The POPC environment has created a whole new context in which political information is produced, disseminated, and received. Accordingly, the mechanisms through which the information environment may be of political importance may be changing dramatically as well. Especially the aspects of permanence and ubiquity raise the probability that individuals get intentionally or incidentally in touch with political information.

3. Exposure to Political Information in a POPC Environment

.For POPC users, a multiplicity of information flows intersect, compete, and feed into one another, leading to a dizzying array of channels and opportunities through which they may get exposed to political information. The contemporary political information ecology is increasingly complex and contingent (Thorson & Wells, 2016), and the affordances of smartphones and other mobile ICTs as well as the POPC mindset of many citizens today contribute significantly to that complexity and contingency in the reception of political news.

Recent assessments of audiences for political news in many countries reveal that the consumption of political information is becoming increasingly integrated into the POPC media routines of citizens, at least in countries with high internet penetration rates. In 2015, in most countries of Western Europe as well as in the US, around 40 percent of citizens used their mobiles for consuming news and almost as many indicated they were using social media as a gateway to political information (Hölig, Nielsen, & Schrøder, 2016). Indeed, Swedish data show that 2015 was the first time that citizens accessed online news more frequently via mobile devices than via stationary computers (Westlund, 2016).

These changes towards the use of mobiles—the technological bedrock of the POPC condition—for political information are significant in several ways. Mobile devices are often, and increasingly (Westlund & Färdigh, 2015), used for cross-media news consumption and as a complement to traditional sources of news (Damme, Courtois, Verbrugge, & Marez, 2015). While much of the content consumed on the go on mobile devices is content produced by legacy news media (Wolf & Schnauber, 2015), the technological affordances of mobile ICT introduces important inequalities in media activities, decreasing potential benefits for those accessing the web primarily on handheld devices (Pearce & Rice, 2013). Indeed, research shows that citizens accessing the news through mobile devices do so more expansively, but also more superficially (Westlund, 2016).

The increasing exposure to news anywhere, at any time through mobile online media brings about several problems related to their technological makeup: Mobiles come with smaller screens, which limits choice, reading ease and, consequently, the average time spent reading an article as well as the amount of learning from the news. Their connections to the internet are often slower than those of stationary computers, which may lead to higher defection rates during news consumption and a lower probability of users returning to news sites, especially if they rarely use news. Moreover, mobile internet connections are more costly and are likely to remain so into the foreseeable future (Dunaway, 2016). While mobile ICTs open up new times and spaces for news consumption (Struckmann & Karnowski, 2016), these opportunities are seized particularly by those who are better educated and generate higher incomes, at least when it comes to high-quality journalistic news content (Thorson, Shoenberger, Karaliova, Kim, & Fidler, 2015).

Given this reproduction of well-known inequalities in political information with regard to education and income, some have concluded that the proliferation of mobile online communication has led to the emergence of a mobile internet underclass that is characterized by diminished levels of political engagement (Napoli & Obar, 2014; also Dunaway, 2016). This assessment seems to be more valid than the occasionally expressed optimism regarding citizen engagement through news exposure on mobile media (Martin, 2015, 2016).

A specific POPC-related phenomenon that recently has garnered particular attention by political communication researchers may even aggravate the outlined development: The increasing

proclivity, especially among younger citizens, to rely on purely incidental news exposure for their political information. The "news finds me" (NFM) expectation underlying such behavior may be seen as a product of the permanent salience and vigilance associated with a POPC mindset and enabled by mobile ICT. But while vigilant NFM use of mobiles may lead to occasional unanticipated informational engagements with political information, its primary effects appears to be a more apathetic stance toward the political world: Adopting an NFM posture in reaction to POPC conditions leads to gradual decreases in political interest and knowledge, which, in turn, makes people engage less in political participation (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2016). Even worse, incidental news exposure—such as that anticipated by high-NFM individuals—benefits the political participation of particularly those citizens that are already interested in politics (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; see also Tewksbury, Weaver & Maddex, 2001), which may deepen political divides. Importantly, this conclusion may not to the same extent apply to incidental news exposure via SNS (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). One possible is that SNS users do not have many choices once they have decided to 'enter' a particular SNS (Bode, 2016). On Facebook, for example, posts of friends are listed in a single-column content stream so that users are virtually forced to at least take note of every post—be it one with political content or without. However, as a result of "learning" algorithms of the SNS politically uninterested users will find progressively fewer political messages on their SNS, because——the less interest in and engagement with political posts they have demonstrated in the past, the less content of this kind will be displayed to them (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

A second relevant phenomenon in media exposure patterns related to POPC is the tendency to use "second screens", consuming political news events via an additional web-connected device attended to in parallel to a primary media source. Such behaviors have been cast as a new form of online political engagement that may also translate into offline political participation and civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, & McGregor, 2015; Vaccari, Chadwick, & O'Loughlin, 2015). However, if looked at more closely from an information-processing perspective, the multitasking nature of the reception situations produced by dual-screen use may well lead to diminished cognitive benefits of exposure to the news (Jeong & Hwang, 2016; see next section).

4. Processing political information in a POPC environment

The POPC environment may not only influence citizens' exposure to political information but also how individuals process the news. Two characteristics of the POPC environment may influence in particular how the POPC environment impacts the way individuals process political information, both with likely consequences for politically relevant outcomes such as political knowledge and participation: (1) The abundance of variegated content on almost any conceivable topic made available to people through the mobile internet anytime and anywhere, and (2) the social embeddedness of large portions of political content available to citizens through social media. With regard to the abundant availability of information and communication options in a POPC media ecology, we may expect that multitasking while processing political information becomes the norm rather than the exception. Multitasking, however, tends to reduce productivity in fulfilling the primary task (in this case: processing news) and affects learning negatively (e.g., Chen & Yan, 2016; Junco & Cotten, 2012; Wood et al., 2012; see also the chapters by David and by Xu & Wang, this volume). A recent study demonstrated that the general frequency of media multitasking (i.e., engaging in additional media activities such as text messaging, watching TV, or using SNS) during exposure to political news is negatively associated with general political knowledge, but positively related to subjective political knowledge (Ran, Yamamoto & Xu, 2016). Multitasking news users thus not only learn less while following the news, they also seem to overestimate their knowledge.

We may assume, however, that people will differ in the degree to which they translate the affordances of a POPC environment into multitasking behavior as a function of their personal characteristics. Individual polychronicity, for example, has been proposed as a personality trait that reflects the preference for multitasking (Poposki & Oswald, 2010). Individuals high in polychronicity prefer to perform multiple threads of tasks at a time rather than only one single task. A polychronic individual, hence, will more likely engage in parallel activities at the same or a activate an additional screen while watching the news. Another relevant and probably related individual characteristic is the general distractibility (Forster & Lavie, 2016), which influences how easily individuals become sidetracked from pursuing their primary goal. The more distractible, one may assume, the higher the probability that individuals will get disturbed by the permanent opportunity to access multitudes of unrelated contents or engage in alternative communication activities. For example, easily distractible users should be more prone to react to

messages coming in on their mobile phone while they read an online newspaper article (Reinecke & Hofmann, 2016; Klimmt et al., this volume).

There is, however, also an argument for a more optimistic outlook regarding the news processing of politically uninterested citizens. It relates to the social embeddedness of political information in a POPC environment mentioned earlier. In SNS and mobile online applications, much news content diffuses through sharing: Friends forward media messages to their circles of relevant others and thus create a social context to news items. Consequently, as POPC users hold greater knowledge about which political articles their friends and network members are reading, which videos they are watching and which petition they are signing, they may base their selection of content more and more on the selection of their friendsIn other words, the POPC environment may magnify the social dimension of news consumption, with political information serving as preparation for anticipated (political) talk with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. The amount of effort people expend on preparing for political interactions with others by seeking out news also increases their elaborative processing and political knowledge (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004). This socially induced effect even outsizes learning effects due to a motivation to achieve surveillance of the social world and obtain guidance on political issues (Eveland, 2001). If the POPC environment in fact produces more frequent triggers of such anticipated interaction motivations in citizens through the presentation of information on the political interests of relevant others, users' motivation to elaborate socially relevant political news could increase. This effect would of course apply to all individuals independent of their political interest. Because of its general mechanism, it could, however, possibly contribute to alleviating gaps between the politically more and less involved. On the other side, the likelihood for such an effect depends very much on the political interest of one's social network and its members' willingness to (digitally) communicate about the news (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Another positive effect of today's media ecology and people's POPC mindset could be that they open up new opportunities for citizens to engage in political talk and deliberation online. Social media offer new low-effort opportunities to participate in political opinion expression and debate, because there are always opportunities to like, share and comment news, to talk about politics and deliberate. The POPC environment may thus strengthen the degrees to which citizens process the news collectively (e.g., Graham, 2015; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). All this may

stimulate at least situational political awareness (such as in the case of breaking high-profile news stories), but may also lead to greater, possibly sustained political interest, discussion, knowledge, and participation (Ahmed, 2011). However, here again, the degree to which these benign consequences of POPC environments transpire likely depends on individuals' predispositions (e.g., their political interest) more strongly than in the pre-POPC world.

5. Conclusion

The POPC phenomenon relates closely to what has been introduced as the fourth age of political communication. It is an era that is, for the first time in history, characterized by a permanently available, ubiquitous, and borderless system of political information and discourse. In this chapter, we have outlined both well-established and rather speculative consequences of the POPC environment on exposure to and the processing of political news. Under conditions of "abundant choice" (Webster & Nelson, 2016), individual characteristics such as informational preferences, motives, and personality traits, individual mediated social networks, and individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their media environment are gaining in influence on people's everyday exposure to political news. The plethora of opportunities for citizens to acquire information, to participate in political discussions and activism is unprecedented: Citizens today can access political information from different sources and in different modes at almost anytime and anyplace. Moreover, there are plenty of opportunities to discuss politics with others online and participate in the political process with little effort.

However, the reality of sociopolitical life often looks different: Citizens rarely exploit the new opportunities (Norris, 2001). The reasons can likely be found within the POPC environment: Not only does the mobile internet offer permanent access to political information; it also offers entertainment, lifeworld content that is not primarily political (such as weather forecasts or public transportation information), and opportunities for digital interpersonal communication. Today's citizens are thus constantly confronted with a myriad of options for reading, watching, to searching or otherwise engaging with information and communication. Our brief overview of the literature reinforces these concerns. Moreover, due to the growing importance of personal preferences and interests, gaps between the politically interested and uninterested segments of society regarding their exposure to and processing of news are likely to increase rather than decrease in the future. In addition, new factors such as citizens' individual distractibility come

into play in a high-choice, high-stimulation environment characterized by a ceaseless stream of incoming messages.

In contrast, this environment is also prone to promote incidental encounters with news bits, especially in SNSs (Bode, 2016). Furthermore, due to the fact that a lot of political information on the internet is shared, liked, and commented on within social networks, social norms like a perceived civic duty to keep informed (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001) or social motives for being ready to discuss current events can stimulate news consumption. This, once more, indicates the growing importance of curation processes executed by SNS, but also by algorithms of web applications (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

The current POPC media environment is one that is no longer characterized only by citizens being faced with a great number media channels to choose from. Instead, it is one in which an ever-increasing number of citizens self-selects into a media environment characterized by high stimulation through permanent information. Citizens in the fourth age are not only required to make more media choices at a faster pace but also to navigate the increasing oversupply of information and communication opportunities under conditions of limited human capacities to process information.

We have good reason to believe that how rich in political information people's individual media environments will be and how productively they will react to them will, more than in earlier ages of political communication, depend on their individual characteristics—their personal qualities, both innate and obtained. While systematic empirical study of these tendencies is lacking and sorely needed, we may, for the time being, suggest that the current move into a POPC world will tend to aggravate individual inequalities in political knowledge and participation, rather than reduce them.

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