Origin and evolution of the News Finds Me perception: Review of theory and effects

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Abstract

Research revolving social media and democracy has exploded. For almost two decades, scholarship has offered new theories, revisited some old ones, and provided empirical evidence that helped cast a strong light on social media effects over people's social life, and democracy at large. Thanks to social media, citizens consume news, express their political views, discuss political matters, and participate in political activities. However, social media also cultivates the dissemination of fake news and misinformation, exposure to hate speech, media fragmentation, and political polarization. In short, social media seems to simultaneously be a springboard for encouraging and undesirable outcomes that foster and challenge democracies alike. One of these phenomena that stems from social media news use is the *News Finds Me perception* (NFM), which takes place when individuals feel they do not have to actively seeks news any more to be well-informed about public affairs, as they expect to receive relevant news and information by relying on their peers in social media. This article traces back the origin of the theory, its evolution, and the set of effects found in the literature. It also presents guidelines for future research and potential challenges as the scholarship centering on NFM continues to grow.

Keywords

News Finds Me perception; News Finds Me effects; News use; Political knowledge; Social media; Democracy; Citizens; Audiences.

1. What is the News Finds Me Perception? - Origins

1.1. Social media is everywhere

For almost two decades society has witnessed the thriving of social media as a global phenomenon (**McFarland**; **Ployhart**, 2015). The popularity of social media has steadily grown since the early 2000's in both developing and more established democracies (e.g., **Mitchell** *et al.*, 2008; **Newman** *et al.*, 2017). News organizations have embraced social media as a new way to produce news and to engage with their audience (**Alejandro**, 2010), where professional journalists report original news content, and interact with their followers on social media platforms (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2018; **Hermida**, 2012). Likewise, news users increasingly integrate social media news use within their daily media routine. According to existing data from *Smart Insights* (2021), the number of social media users world-wide has surpassed 2 billion, and a recent *Pew Research Center* survey of U.S. adults (**Auxier**; **Anderson**, 2021) showed that 69% of U.S. adults use *Facebook*. With this unprecedented widespread usage, social media has profoundly changed the way people get entertained, socialize and more importantly for this study, gain and disseminate information in their daily lives (**Sterrett** *et al.*, 2019).

Social media was initially designed as a space where people can get *life* updates from their friends and social contacts (**Lewis**, 2010), but now it has also organically become one important source for getting public affairs information. About 86% of U.S. adults indicate they often use a digital device to get news while traditional news sources like television (68%), radio (50%) and print news (32%) are much less used for this purpose.

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One of social media distinct news features revolves around the *prosumer* theoretical accolade, converging consumer and producing aspects of the news (**Ritzer** *et al.*, 2012). On the one hand, users have access to various kinds of either professionally curated or individually generated news from journalists, strategic communicators, individual media users, social contacts, and algorithmic filters (**Thorson**; **Wells**, 2016). As the media environment increasingly move towards digital and mobile realms, people progressively enjoy more access to news information in a much more rapid and convenient way (**Boczkowski** *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, users can create and share news contents to social contacts in one's social network, which deals with the *producing* aspects of the news cycle (**Holton** *et al.*, 2013; **Newman** *et al.*, 2018). As many social media news users create political content, or just share news with others, inevitably, other users within the same social network will effortlessly see the news content shared or created by their friends, and contacts (**Fletcher**; **Nielsen**, 2018; **Kim** *et al.*, 2013).

1.2. News are always on

This widespread use of mobile devices and social networking platforms enable people to constantly stay connected, which leads to individuals' ambient awareness of the social others (Levordashka; Utz, 2016). The asynchronous, lightweight and always-on online communication system gives birth to an ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010), in which citizens can easily access digitally fragmented news from both official and unofficial sources. Micro-blogging spaces such as *Twitter*, for instance, provide means for citizens to gain immediate awareness of political information. Social networking sites serve as news awareness systems where users receive public affairs' information revolving around people's consciousness (Hermida, 2010; Markopoulos *et al.*, 2009). Given this context, the NFM has been defined as

"the extent to which individuals believe they can indirectly stay informed about public-affairs –despite not actively following news– through Internet use, information received from peers and online social networks" (**Gil de Zúñiga** et al., 2017, p. 107).

Prior research argued that the need for surveillance is on decline as the media choices become more diverse (**Hopmann** *et al.*, 2016). An excessive reliance on the ambient informational environment might detach oneself from the traditional surveillance use of news media, which is characterized by the purposeful gathering of the information. An alternative view suggests that the surveillance practice has shifted from news media sources to peer groups (e.g., **Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019). In the past, people remain informed about the news by actively seeking news outlets which informed them about the latest events; now they believe they just need to stay connected with their social feeds and online social networks to maintain the same informational objective.

One explanation for the shift from news outlets to social network feeds is that the ambient information environment is overwhelming, thus creating an information overload for digital news users. To manage the influx of information, citizens depend on other social ties and their networks to filter the news for them (**Pentina**; **Tarafdar**, 2014). These news users rely on those who, in general, more actively discuss political news in social media as they tend to be perceived as opinion leaders in one's network, and they are more likely to be trusted (**Owen**, 2017; **Turcotte** *et al.*, 2015).

1.3. Perceptions matter

Perception is the process of information selection, organization, and interpretation (**Fiske**; **Taylor**, 1991). It affects how individuals communicate as every individual responds to environmental stimuli in a different way. At times, particularly within the political arena, people's perception towards other objects or phenomena can be biased, misleading or not reflective of the reality (**Gil de Zúñiga**; **González-González**; **Goyanes**, 2021). This is important because perception has historically played an important role in the development of communication theories. One example is the third person effect hypothesis, which suggests that individuals tend to *perceive* the mass media message will exert a greater influence on others than on themselves (**Davison**, 1983; **Gunther**; **Thorson**, 1992). The spiral of silence theory also specifies that a *perceived* opinion dominance affects one's opinion expression (**Glynn**; **Park**, 1997; **Noelle-Neumann**, 1974), as those who *perceive* themselves in the minority are less likely to speak up in front of others (**Noelle-Neumann**, 1974; **Gearhart**; **Zhang**, 2014). Similarly, drawing on cultivation theory, people's *perceived* realism judgments over a message narrative affect their level of trust in the personalities that emit those messages, and its persuasiveness capabilities (**Lippman** *et al.*, 2014; **Quick**, 2009). These are just few examples to illustrate the role of perception in information interpretation processes, particularly showing how individuals assign meaning to their daily experiences based on perceptions.

Similarly, social media algorithms, which contain user-driven (user-tracking) algorithms and socially driven (peer-filtering) algorithms (**Feezell** *et al.*, 2021; **Thurman** *et al.*, 2019), can elicit individual's perception of being well-informed about current news events and political affairs. Prior studies on algorithmic journalism have provided three theoretical pathways to explain the *being well-informed* perception. first of all, machine algorithms as an information source, can activate what has been coined as 'machine heuristic' (**Sundar**, 2008), or the propensity to perceive machines as more objective, credible, and bias free (**Clerwall**, 2014; **Gillespie**, 2014). Second, as social influence theory suggests, individuals tend to be influenced by those who are in their social circles (**Hong**; **Rojas**, 2016; **Katz**; **Lazarsfeld**; **Roper**, 1955). People are more likely to select and trust the news that are endorsed by

One of the phenomena that stems from social media news use is the News Finds Me perception (NFM), which takes place when individuals feel they do not have to actively seeks news any more to be wellinformed about public affairs, as they expect to receive relevant news and information by relying on their peers and social media

close friends and family members than strangers or media institutions (e.g. **Anspach**, 2017; **Messing**; **Westwood**, 2012; **Turcotte** *et al.*, 2015). Third, people are exposed to enormous amount of information on social media, including constant news updates. This avalanche of information might lead to the belief that they are informed about the political world and their surveillance needs may have already been thoroughly satisfied (**Van-Erkel**; **Van-Aelst**, 2020).

But there is a problem. This perception of being well-informed is not necessarily true. According to utility maximization theory literature from the field of economics, the expected value of some utility function is defined by its prospective payoff (**Meyer**, 1987). That is, people will choose to do what they think will provide them with the maximum benefit, but with the least effort (**Tversky**; **Kahneman**, 1973). In this regard, individuals may perceive that social media provide them with maximum informational benefit at minimum news surveillance effort.

But what is perhaps most useful about the utility maximization theory is that at many instances, subjects are simply wrong (**Kahneman**, 2003; **Loewenstein**; **O'Donoghue**; **Rabin**, 2003). For instance, depending on how hungry an individual may perceive she is, one may overestimate the amount of 'pizza' she is able to consume over a week period, purchasing more than what they could possibly consume with the minimal effort of a single trip to the grocery store. This person "has made a forecasting error that has led to a bad choice" (**Kahneman**; **Thaler**, 2006, p. 222).

Similarly, individuals may overestimate how well they can be informed by only relying on their social networks to inform them about important news and public affair issues. Like the naive and unsuspecting shopper from the prior example, this person may be simply wrong. NFM may deceive subjects into thinking they do not need to seek information about public affairs as they will remain well informed without any active effort (**Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019; **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Lee**, 2020).

With social media news displayed in 'preview mode,' bombing headlines, snack news features, and a waterfall of text snippets, users only know the broad idea of a story rather than a full detailed narrative, which can hardly be considered as a knowledge internalization process (**Fletcher**; **Nielsen**, 2018). This may be one of the explanations as for why prior research has shown a null or negative relationship between social media news use and surveillance political knowledge (**Bode**, 2016; **Oeldorf-Hirsch**, 2018; **Shehata**; **Strömbäck**, 2018). In addition, social media users tend to follow the 'similar others' and actively or passively tune algorithms to access news contents aligned with their ideology and past behavior (**Bisgin** *et al.*, 2010; **Fletcher**; **Nielsen**, 2018), which might create echo chambers online (**Pariser**, 2011).

Previous NFM literature concluded the phenomenon encompasses three conceptual dimensions: being informed, not seeking, reliance on peers (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Lee**, 2020; **Song** *et al.*, 2020; **Strauß** *et al.*, 2021). The following section captures these three dimensions and proposes a new one named *reliance on algorithmic news*.

2. Dimensions of the News Finds Me Perception – Theory

2.1. Being informed

NFM people hold the epistemic belief that they are well-informed about current political affairs and public events (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Song** *et al.*, 2020; **Strauß** *et al.*, 2021). To point out, different from news avoiders (**Newman** *et al.*, 2017), NFM people do have the intention to stay informed about the news as they take place, just engaging less actively and more strategically. It is the ambient news environment that leads to the belief that they will be informed without actively seeking the news (**Lee**; **Xenos**, 2019), generating the passive news consumption habit. The passive browsing behavior will elicit an ambient awareness of the activities by one's friends, colleagues, and family members (**Levordashka**; **Utz**, 2016). Furthermore, fragmented digital news disseminated on new media platforms, also referred as pa-

ra-journalism, helps citizens reach immediate awareness and instant knowledge of the surrounding information (**Sunstein**, 2006; **Hermida**, 2010). This fast, lightweight, always-on mode of information acquisition on social media supports the mental *news around me* model, which is featured with low requirement of time and thought investment (**Java** *et al.*, 2007).

Individuals may perceive that social media provide them with maximum informational benefit at minimum news surveillance effort

2.2. Peer reliance

Building on the original incidental news exposure hypothesis (**Tewksbury** *et al.*, 2001), it is natural to think that when people use social media, they will inadvertently encounter news posted by their friends (**Kim** *et al.*, 2013; **Park**; **Kaye**, 2020). NFM theory argues that one intends to stay informed through peers and online social networks. This hypothesis can be traced back to the two-step-flow theory (**Lazarsfeld**; **Berelson**; **Gaudet**, 1948), which suggests that peers can reduce the cognitive efforts of seeking political information by facilitating the diffusion and acquisition of opinion elite information. News users can easily receive political news updates from their opinion leaders in the online social network, which will satisfy one's information surveillance need (**Weeks**; **Ardèvol-Abreu**; **Gil de Zúñiga**, 2018). **DeVito** (2017) iden-

tified that friend relationships is one of the key predictors of the news feed presented on one's *Facebook* feed. For instance, social influence of familiar individuals, with friends and family at the forefront, will become a better

The perception of being well-informed is not necessarily true

predictor of one's news selection than ideological cues on *Facebook* (**Anspach**, 2017), relying on mental shortcuts or heuristic cues to evaluate the information (**Sundar**, 2008) and fostering a dependance on peer and social network to get information, over other sources. Ultimately, receiving information from socially proximate sources can legitimate the validity of information shared in one's network, even though the accuracy of the news contents is uncertain (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2021; **Tandoc** *et al.*, 2017).

2.3. Not seeking

NFM people believe that the important public news will find them eventually anyway. Looking way back to the mass media era, traditional news gathering behavior is a purposeful and directed activity, which requires people to deliberately seek news to stay informed (**Ostertag**, 2010; **Tewksbury** *et al.*, 2001). However, the dynamics of social media have increased the likelihood for people to encounter news as a byproduct of their online activities and majority of people have become passive news consumers (**Nielsen**; **Schrøder**, 2014), perceiving news consumption to be an unintentional activity. For NFM people, social media provides them news from different sources simultaneously, including professional media outlets, citizen journalists and the proximate social networks (**Park**; **Kaye**, 2020). Thanks to social media, people can consume brief news pieces and obtain an overview of news events with little effort, as a part of their checking cycle each day (**Costera-Meijer**; **Kormelink**, 2015). To some degree, the technical affordances of social media enable users to choose whom to interact with, which information source to follow and further curate the information flow on one's news feed (**Lee**; **Ma**, 2012).

Table 1. Question wording for NFM and its sub-dimensions in USA, Italy, and Portugal (N = 3,363). The newly theorized two item subdimension of *Algorithmic reliance* is included.

Items	Dimension	Item wordings		
1	Da ana mali ana an	I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happen		
2	Peers reliance	I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media		
3		I do not worry about keeping up with news because I know news will finds me		
4	Well-informed	I can be well-informed even when I don't actively follow the news		
5	Netection	I do not have to actively seek news because when important public affairs break, they will get to me in social media		
6	Not seeking	l'm up-to-date and informed about public affairs news, even when I do not actively seek news myself		
7		I rely on social media algorithms to tell me what's important when news happen		
8	Algorithmic reliance	I rely on social media algorithms to provide me with important news and public affairs		

Table 2. NFM Confirmatory factor Analysis Comparison of a Single Factor vs. Three-factor Models

Models	Chisq (<i>df</i>)	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CIs]	SRMR
Single factor	987.86 (9)***	.840	.733	.18*** [.170, .189]	.07
Three-factor	230.96 (6) ***	.963	.908	.10*** [.094, .117]	.03

Note: Model fit comparison yields χ^2 -diff = 756.9, df = 3, p < .001, showing fully theorized Three-factor model fits significantly better to the data than the Single-factor model, N = 3,363.

2.4. Algorithmic reliance

The most current empirical instrument of the NFM includes six items, two per dimension, tapping on the three dimensions of the construct [see Table 1; for similar results with Austrian data see **Song** *et al.*, (2020)]. Drawing on survey data collected in 2019 in the USA, and in 2020 in Italy and Portugal, results indicate the three-factor construct of NFM has a much better fit for the data than a single factor construct. These results support the notion of a three-interrelated-dimensional NFM phenomenon. Building on this instrument, this article offers the inclusion of *algorithmic reliance* in the theoretical and empirical concept explication as a fourth NFM dimension, since people are increasingly more likely to also rely on algorithmic news gate keeping and editorial selection in social media to introduce useful political information in their lives (**Bodó** *et al.*, 2019). That is, we argue that as much as there is an expectation that one's social network is working towards providing important information as it happens, social media users

Previous NFM literature concluded the phenomenon encompasses three conceptual dimensions: being informed, not seeking, reliance on peers. We discuss these three dimensions and propose a new one named *reliance on algorithmic news*

will be equally expecting that automated algorithmic mechanisms will present them with important current events and public affairs information as news break.

In fact, there is initial empirical evidence suggesting this may be indeed the case. Algorithmic news provides the benefit of presenting a coherent and legitimated array of news information to social media users (**Carlson**, 2018; **Gillespie**, 2014; **Thurman** *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, news users perceive machine-generated news to be more informative, accurate and objective than those selected by human journalists (**Clerwall**, 2014), and automated news can elicit people's machine heuristic where the algorithmic news carries higher credibility and bias-free (**Sundar**, 2008; **Waddell**, 2019). Besides, so-cial media covers a wide mix of professionally generated news content and user-generated content (**Bode**, 2016), satisfying news users' surveillance needs. News users tend to believe that social recommendation makes them become aware of a broad range of news information (**Hermida** *et al.*, 2012), have access to more diverse views (**Sveningsson**, 2015) and also will be presented with more important news than what legacy news can offer (**Hogan**; **Quan-Haase**, 2010). Algorithm news driven by social recommendation and user behaviors also decreases information overload (**Pentina**; **Tarafdar**, 2014) laying out grounds to positively evaluating the role of social media in offering news, and perfectly catering political information with the least possible effort. In short, NFM would also encompass the belief that machines, via algorithmic curated information, will help people to be well-informed without actively surveilling or seeking for news.

3. Why the News Finds Me Perception matters – Effects

Extant literature on NFM suggest the theory is valuable at explaining a diverse array of effects, encompassing different levels. A first level of effects may be directly related to news and media consumption habits, explaining how people further interact with news ecosystems. A second level of effects highlights a diverse set of effects over democracy determinants. Last, a final level of effects in the literature deal with the antecedent, moderating, and mediating mechanisms that the NFM facilitate in assessing other phenomena.

3.1. First level of effects: News ecosystem

Previous research shows that NFM is directly and negatively associated with traditional news use (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Park**; **Kaye**, 2020). It also partially explains the ways in which incidental exposure to news decreases further active traditional news use (**Park**; **Kaye**, 2020). As citizens develop the NFM they will be less likely to tune into traditional news such as TV news, newspaper, and radio news, because they do not further find an active news engagement to be required to be fully informed. They only become more actively involved in social media news use. Algorithmic recommendations online and on social media, and the 24/7 availability of social media news provides the perfect means for NFM people to consume information, either directly (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2020) or by means of incidental exposure to news (**Park**; **Kaye**, 2020). What's more, qualitative evidence shows that young people with higher NFM are heavily reliant on social media news, where information is discovered via social connections, algorithms, and social curation (**Swart**, 2021). Building on this argument, **Toff** and **Nielsen** (2018) suggest that as people change their news reading habits and increasingly rely on distributed discovery on social media and online platforms, NFM can be seen as a folk theory (i.e., people's confidence in remaining informed about the public affairs information through the social networks and social media algorithms) which help users navigate information about public affairs in the distributed media environment.

But NFM not only explains news use patterns. It also contributes to clarify other news ecosystem features. For instance, NFM is also found to influence the perceived accuracy and factuality of news. Those who report higher NFM levels are more likely to rate news articles as accurate and factual, implying that NFM people tend to lower the expectation about the news and are less critical about news information (**Segado-Boj** *et al.*, 2020), or they simply expect that news curated and presented by friends and social connections are previously filtered, eliminating inaccurate and non-factual information. Also, recent research has started to investigate the link between NFM and fake news and misinformation cognitive processing. For example, **Chadwick** *et al.* (2021) have bridged the gap between media diet and vaccine hesitancy. Deploying a comprehensive study in the United Kingdom, findings reveal a stronger tendency toward discouragement of vaccine inoculation as peoples' NFM increases. In addition, **Giglietto** *et al.* (2019) suggest that NFM exposes people to conflicting news information, although confirmation bias remains the most important principle guiding people's information processing.

3.2. Second level of effects: Democracy determinants

Valuable NFM effects are increasingly rooted within democratic features and determinants. The effects revolve around NFM and people's political knowledge, political interest, political cynicism, and voting behaviors. NFM elicits a type of self-delusion of being informed about the political affairs when people consume online and social media news. In this context, NFM proliferates, and political learning is less likely to occur (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2018; **Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019) as the reliance on social media platforms and social networks to feed important news actually lowers citizens' political knowledge (**Lee**; **Xenos**, 2019; **Yamamoto** *et al.*, 2018). This effect has also been corroborated either directly or indirectly, by linking the relationship between social media usage and decreased political knowledge (**Lee**, 2020). Likewise, qualitative evidence also supports this empirical stance, as NFM does not motivate people to deeply learn about the news subject matter (**Oeldorf-Hirsch**; **Srinivasan**, 2021). This is troubling because NFM people will consume less information, will engage more superficially with it, and ultimately, considering how NFM people get news from their personal networks, will foster filter bubbles and homogeneous opinions (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2018), partially explained by some of the deleterious effects of incidental information consumption on political learning from three perspectives (**Boczkowski** *et al.*, 2018):

- (1) The users of social network services (SNS) have less time to devote to detailed news stories;
- (2) the loss of hierarchy and re-contextualization of news report; and
- (3) the reliance on acquaintances rather than professional media outlets or journalists for news information.

Overall, the NFM literature continues to accumulate robust evidence on the effect of NFM on political learning.

An important nuance that deserves attention within the NFM and political knowledge context is the difference between perceived knowledge and actual knowledge acquisition. That is, the perceived knowledge, understood as a subdimension of NFM negatively relates to tangible political learning. According to **Feezell** and **Ortiz** (2019), social media news use, particularly the information presented incidentally on *Facebook*, does not necessarily lead to real knowledge acquisition. Instead, incidental exposure to political news can change one's perception about what we think we know about the political world. Similarly, **Schäfer** (2020) found that SNS news increases people's perceived knowledge rather than actual knowledge. As the author argues, the algorithmic nature of SNS news –frequent repetition of topics and the favoring of similar posting, is related to a failure of actual knowledge acquisition. These findings on NFM and political knowledge showcase a rising concern about how new media technology can have negative consequences for a system of shared public knowledge (**Carlson**, 2020). Prior scholarship suggests the connection of political knowledge and social media media news use on political knowledge is moderated by the content on social media platforms and user characteristics. Whereas some of these characteristics may provide people with successful paths towards political learning within social media, NFM is clearly not one of these effective pathways.

NFM not only affects people's political knowledge. It is also inversely related to political interests over time (**Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019; **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2020). When individuals heavily rely on their own social network and curated news flow on social media as a backbone to acquire information, they are more likely to consume news more sporadically (**Molyneux**, 2018). Gradually, the absence of regular active exposure to news makes it less likely for users to cultivate political interests, and importantly, this steady decrease in political interest is further negatively associated to a decrease in voting (**Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019; **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, NFM has been linked with political cynicism, especially the reliance on peer dimension of NFM, indicating that an overreliance on peers from one's social network to provide political information may result in the detachment from the political process, thus increasing people's political cynicism (**Song** *et al.*, 2020).

3.3. Third level of effects: Antecedents, mediators and moderators

Although comparatively less developed, another strand of NFM literature specifically examined the antecedents of NFM, and the mediating and moderating variables that can affect the influence of NFM. Concluding from the diverse existing research on NFM, those who are younger (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2020; Strauß *et al.*, 2021), less educated (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2020; Strauß *et al.*, 2021), belonging to ethnic minorities (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019; Strauß *et al.*, 2021), with less income (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019), higher social media use frequency (Park; Kaye, 2020),

and with stark social media news use patterns (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Park; Kaye, 2020) and citizen journalism use (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017) tend to develop the perception that the news finds them. Similarly, individuals who report more group memberships, higher discussion frequency, lower information elaboration and living in countries with lower GDP (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Strauß et al., 2021), lower political interests (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019; Park; Kaye, 2020), lower internal political efficacy

As much as there is an expectation that one's social network is working towards providing important information as it happens, social media users will be equally expecting that automated algorithmic mechanisms will present them with important current events and public affairs information as news break (Park; Kaye, 2020) and lower political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019) are also more likely to show higher NFM levels.

In terms of relevant mediating mechanisms, empirical data suggests that NFM negatively mediates the relationship between social media usage and political knowledge (Lee, 2020), while Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) failed to find a significant indirect association for this connection. NFM mediates the relationship between incidental exposure to social media news and active news consumption on both online and social media news over time (Park; Kaye, 2020), which suggests that those who encounter news incidentally on social media tend to develop the NFM, which in turn, facilitates further news exposure but only in virtual spaces. As indicated above, there is a negative influence of NFM on voting behavior, wholly mediated by political knowledge and political interests (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, 2019). NFM also negatively mediates the relationship between social media news use and political cynicism, with nuanced disparate effects between NFM subdimensions (Song et al., 2020). As for the moderating effects, Lee (2020) shows that when NFM mediates the relationship between social media and political knowledge, the mediating mechanism is moderated by the degree of

traditional news use. In other words, those who use social media as well as traditional media for news will be less vulnerable to the negative effect of social media use on political knowledge. Clearly, the available research on the potential moderating variables that contribute to clarify NFM effects is rather limited, introducing a fruitful avenue for future studies.

According to utility maximization theory literature, people will choose to do what they think will provide them with the maximum benefit, but with the least effort

4. NFM future directions

This paper contends that NFM construct should continue to be refined by including a *reliance on algorithmic news* subdimension, particularly knowing that recent research has already linked some NFM features such as network reliance, with positive attitudes toward algorithmic news selection and gatekeeping process (**Bodó** *et al.*, 2019; **Scheffauer** *et al.*, 2021). We argue that NFM people will show positive attitudes and evaluations of algorithmic selecting news for them, as they will (*wrongfully*) expect algorithms to help them 1) be aware of a broader range of news information (affecting the 'being informed' dimension), 2) obtain brief news pieces with little effort as their daily news checking cycle (affecting the 'not seeking' dimension), and 3) stay informed through peers and online social network (affecting the 'peer reliance' dimension). Therefore, future research should integrate the reliance on algorithmic news dimension when measuring NFM and should provide empirical evidence to support this theoretical proposition (see Table 1 for specific items).

Future studies may also have a closer look into NFM differential effects across various social media platforms. Current theory on social networking platforms already advocates for a more nuanced empirical observation of social media effects, considering distinct social media architectures and their audiences (**Bossetta**, 2018; **Boukes**, 2019). Different social networking sites potentially serve varying informational or social purposes. As pointed out by **Gil de Zúñiga** and **Diehl** (2019), the need for entertainment and social bonding might be more salient on some social networking sites. For example, *Facebook* has an architecture oriented towards bi-directional relationships, and the algorithms favor social network matters over public affairs content (**Lee; Oh**, 2013). Conversely, *Twitter* is an information sharing, sending-oriented community, with an emphasis on one-directional relationships (**Davenport** *et al.*, 2014). The social structure of connections, and the perceptions that these different social and informational interactions generate may also be distinct. Accordingly, for example, some social media platforms may better enable perceptions about how one can rely on others to provide information, fostering the being well-informed perception, etc. While other social media platforms may potentially attenuate this effect.

Likewise, the way people consume news in social media, and how they interact with information in these contexts may also matter. NFM people may exhibit varying degrees of engagement and interaction with news and its contents. Having the perception that the news will find me should have an effect not only on whether a person decides to consume and pursue information, but also how this news engagement takes place. From reading to sharing, liking, and commenting, NFM people would interact with the news content differently. Previous research suggests that news users tend to relate differently to digital news (**Sang** *et al.*, 2020), carrying unique effects with regard knowledge acquisition (**Beam** *et al.*, 2016; **Lee**; **Yang**, 2014), political efficacy (**Moeller** *et al.*, 2014) and political participation (**Hyun**; **Kim**, 2015). We expect NFM people to devote less reading and cognitive efforts when engaging with news information.

Future research should investigate the preference of different news contents, information overload and news avoidance as possible antecedents or correlates of NFM. People who prefer soft news rather than hard news, may be more likely to select algorithmic news that are based on what their friends have read (**Fletcher**; **Nielsen**, 2019), implying that a preference for soft news can predict higher level of NFM. Additionally, news content might serve as a moderating variable in the relationship between NFM and political learning. **Gil de Zúñiga** and **Diehl** (2019) pointed out that a deeper understanding is required about what kinds of news contents (e.g., entertainment, news reporting, soft news) would lead to the formation of the 'being well-informed and up to date' perception. Some scholars argue news information on social media fails to provide people with pragmatic increased in political learning (**Bright**, 2016). Thus, it will be interesting to investigate people NFM levels, the specific news contents people consume on social media and how the varying

contents might moderate the political learning process. Second, information overload and news avoidance are two additional concepts that are closely related to NFM perception. Prior research has found that information overload leads to avoidance of news consumption on social media (Lee *et al.*, 2017; Park, 2019; Song *et al.*, 2016) and recent empirical research shows that news overload positively predicts news avoidance behavior and social filtering of news (Goyanes *et al.*, 2021), signaling that news avoidance serves as a coping strategy when news users face oversupply of news information (Lee *et al.*, 2017). The reliance on news stories that are filtered and curated by their friends on social media are a less effort-requiring tactic for news consumption (Ler-

A first level of effects may be directly related to news and media consumption habits, explaining how people further interact with news ecosystems. A second level of effects highlights a diverse set of effects over democracy determinants. Last, a final level of effects in the literature deal with the antecedent, moderating, and mediating mechanisms that the NFM facilitate in assessing other phenomena

man, 2007). Unpacking the relationship between news content type, information overload, news avoidance, and NFM warrants a fruitful theoretical contribution to the literature.

NFM research may also delve into other communicative community structure effects. For instance, over time, people's discussion and information networks may be shaped by individuals' levels of NFM. Reporting higher levels of NFM could potentially explain why citizens create homogenous political discussion groups and information sources, fueling homophilic virtual and face to face social groups. This will strengthen the tendency for people to associate with like-minded individuals or congenial news viewpoints on social media (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2021). Although whether the information tailoring practices create echo chambers is still under debate (e.g., **Bruns**, 2017; **Dutton** *et al.*, 2017; **Flaxman** *et al.*, 2016; **Garrett**, 2009), NFM and social media algorithms enable users to tailor their news feed based on user inputs and peer filters (**Thurman**, 2011), which might be particularly related to homophilic social media news use, creation of filter bubbles and ideological segregation (**Auxier**; **Vitak**, 2019; **Barberá**, 2020).

Political polarization and populist attitudes might also serve as NFM antecedents. Populists tend to hold an anti-elitist attitude towards the political and media systems. Social media gives them a platform to consume, articulate and circulate their own messages (**Engesser** *et al.*, 2017; **Schumann** *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it stands to reason that the populists may be more likely to rely on their peers to stay informed about public affair news, rather than simply relying on governmental, mainstream news sources or other 'elitists' out-groups beyond 'the people' (**Gerbaudo**, 2018). With respect to political polarization, **Feezell** *et al.* (2021) have found that algorithmic news do not generally predict people's political schism. However, it remains to be investigated whether political polarization will be related to NFM. Partisans choose media contents that are aligned with their existing attitudes and interests (**Iyengar**; **Hahn**, 2009; **Peterson** *et al.*, 2019; **Stroud**, 2010) and a partisan selective exposure to news is further driven by social media algorithms that enable news users to personalize their news feeds (**Pariser**, 2011). According to this line of research, we expect political polarization to positively relate to higher levels of NFM.

Prior work established that NFM is negatively associated with political knowledge (**Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Gil de Zúñiga**; **Diehl**, 2019; **Lee**, 2020). Future research can explore the mediating variables in the relationship between NFM and political knowledge, for example news sharing behavior (**Weeks** *et al.*, 2017) and media efficacy (**Kim** *et al.*, 2018). Another promising direction is to test the influence of media efficacy or news epistemic efficacy on NFM and knowledge acquisition. The former refers to perceived helpfulness of the news media in understanding political issues and is found to fully mediate the relationship between social media news use and news elaboration (**Kim** *et al.*, 2018). The latter, deals with whether citizens are able to find the truth in politics which also elicit essential cognitive processes to better understand complex issues within the political realm (**Pingree**, 2011). The cognitive mediation model (**Eveland**, 2001) has suggested that attention and elaboration mediate the news and discussion process explaining knowledge gain. It will be reasonable to further test whether media efficacy, epistemic efficacy, and cognitive elaboration sequentially or altogether mediate the relationship between NFM and political knowledge.

An alternative exciting direction of NFM research is to examine how NFM news consumption habits will relate to people's conspiracy mentality and fake news exposure processing. Prior work suggested that those who are reliant on social media for news are more vulnerable to unverified news and misinformation (**Chadwick** *et al.*, 2018). A recent research has shown that those with higher NFM and news avoidance levels posed serious challenges for public health communication campaigns during Covid-19 pandemic. These people became the hardest ones to reach on social media and had lesser opportunities to learn about the Covid-19 vaccines information online (**Chadwick** *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, we argue that the reliance on friends-recommended contents might play a role in misinformation dissemination processes. Today's social media dynamics have enabled fake news stories to rapidly disseminate through "short-attention-span social sharers" (**Rainie** *et al.*, 2017, p. 11). When it comes to news sharing, source characteristics will influence the likelihood of individuals sharing misinformation on social media (**Buchanar**; **Benson**, 2019), and individuals are more likely to trust news stories that are shared by sources they trust as close friends and family members (**Sterret** *et al.*, 2018). Based on these findings, NFM people who are reliant on peers to feed them with important news as they break, might

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be more likely to trust peer-generated contents, which does not necessarily correspond to verified factual professional news sources.

Last, research revolving NFM should broaden current available methodological choices by going beyond qualitative studies, survey research, and experimental designs, by for instance, applying computational techniques collecting social trace data or modelling agents to simulate community behavior. Existing research on NFM mostly applied either qualitative interviews or survey research methods (e.g., **Gil de Zúñiga** *et al.*, 2017; **Song** *et al.*, 2020; **Lee**, 2020; **Park**; **Kaye**, 2020; **Toff**; **Nielsen**, 2018; **Oeldorf-Hirsch**; **Srinivasan**, 2021), which is prone to measurement error, including social desirability bias and inaccurate recalls, failing to fully capture detailed context underneath the concept. For example, when measuring social media use, we can't capture the specific news content and sources that users have consumed. Another example is the measurement of political knowledge. Existing studies measure factual knowledge, disregarding other types of knowledge such as connotative information (**Eveland** *et al.*, 2004). Future research can measure knowledge by incorporating the knowledge structure density (KSD) to measure user's ability to connect various political issues and concepts (**Eveland** *et al.*, 2004). Second, the advantage of experiment method is increasing the power in making claims of causal relationships, which is particularly useful in investigating the antecedents and consequences of NFM. Third, a combination of physiological measures and self-reported measurement is another viable option. Promising studies have developed both eye-tracking method and NFM questionnaire to evaluate the perceived believability of the news

stories (Sümer, 2021). Finally, traditional qualitative methods including in-depth interview and focus group data (Kümpel, 2019; Oeldorf-Hirsch; Srinivasan, 2021; Swart, 2021; Toff; Nielsen, 2018) offered more NFM detailed insights, which creatively helped discover unexplored sub-dimensions and possible consequences of NFM, so as to develop comprehensive sets of measurement items about NFM and advance the theorization of NFM (Song et al., 2020). All in all, NFM research will become more prominent as social media news use continues to gradually permeate across societies.

We argue that the reliance on friends-recommended contents might play a role in misinformation dissemination processes. NFM people who are reliant on peers to feed them with important news as they break, might be more likely to trust peer-generated contents, which does not necessarily correspond to verified factual professional news sources

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