



## Attention as a Valuable Resource

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## The Forum

# Attention as a Valuable Resource

NATALIE JOMINI STROUD

*Keeping up with the news and monitoring public affairs are typically considered civic obligations. Yet there is a great deal of competition for people's limited attention. Some studies explore when people tune in to the news and what sorts of public affairs content attract our time, but these topics warrant more research. Scholars concerned with the news media's political role must better understand what leads people to the news in the first place. The practical import of this work is pronounced in an era where news organizations struggle to make ends meet. The purpose of this essay is to categorize what we know about what motivates people to tune in to news and then to propose a research agenda for analyzing attention to public affairs content.*

**Keywords** attention, news, social media

Our attention is a fixed resource. The race to capture it has become known as the attention economy, where various entities compete for our cognitive focus. Competition occurs in large part because attention can be turned into revenue, whether through advertising, subscriptions, or nonprofit funding. There are clear winners in today's attention economy. Facebook, for instance, boasts that users spend an average of 50 minutes each day with its platforms (Stewart, 2016). That the competition hinges on attracting and keeping our eyeballs, rather than working to benefit our productivity or well-being, has drawn criticism (Bosker, 2016).

News and public affairs are just another entity competing for attention in the public marketplace. They have certain aspects going for them—many feel a sense of civic duty to keep up with what is happening, the news can help people feel like they are part of a community, and trusted outlets help to whittle down the many events that take place to those that are most important. Yet for some, the news doesn't have the same allure as entertainment programming and it is easier than ever to avoid any particular form of content if one wants. How, then, should the news media compete? And what forms of news draw attention from what types of audiences?

The purpose of this essay is to review what we know, and what we do not know, about attention to public affairs content, particularly news about local and national politics. This is not meant to be a comprehensive review of what has been written on the topic; rather, it

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is a highly selective overview, highlighting only a few exemplars in our current scholarship. The main intent is to derive a list of questions to guide future research. In the pages that follow, I first discuss what we know about attention to public affairs. Next, I outline several possibilities for future research.

## **Paying Attention To Public Affairs**

We have some information about what leads us to pay attention to public affairs. There are several factors that prompt us to pay attention to news in general, and others that motivate us to pay attention to some stories and not others. Next, I review seven categories of research on what prompts individual attention to news.

### ***Emotional and Neuro-Biological Impulses***

The ability to allocate attention is hard-wired. We cannot possibly pay attention to everything that goes on around us. Rather, we allocate our attention to particular stimuli in the environment and ignore everything else.

Particular aspects of the environment trigger our attention. Music from a favorite song, for example, can shake us out of automatically processing the world around us and lead us to dedicate attention to the music source (Potter, 2015). In describing attention triggers, Wu (2016) notes that “motion, color, critters of every kind, sexualized men and women, babies and monsters seem to work best on us” (p. 21). Environmental triggers can vary by personal characteristics, such as one’s political leanings (Dodd et al., 2012).

Attention to news specifically is affected by our emotions. The affective intelligence approach posits that we have disposition and surveillance systems. The surveillance system allows us to “monitor the environment for novel and threatening stimuli” (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000, p. 53). When activated, the surveillance system motivates more careful information processing. Anxiety brought about by the environment and activating the surveillance system can lead people to seek out more information about political topics. Aversion, a distinct type of emotional response, can stunt information seeking (MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010).

News outlets and other organizations competing for our attention try to tap into our human needs and hard-wired proclivities. Sites look to maximize attention and are designed to make us spend more time on them and keep us coming back. As a recent article in *The Atlantic* notes, “The most-successful sites and apps hook us by tapping into deep-seated human needs. When LinkedIn launched, for instance, it created a hub-and-spoke icon to visually represent the size of each user’s network. That triggered people’s innate craving for social approval and, in turn, got them scrambling to connect” (Bosker, 2016). What needs are satisfied by public affairs information and how to most effectively tap into these needs merits additional attention. Uses and gratifications research, as reviewed next, represents a possible starting point.

### ***Gratifications Sought and Received***

The classic “uses and gratifications” tradition asks why people turn to media and what they get out of the experience.

One early model, described by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973–1974), proposes a series of steps to explain media exposure. First, people are part of specific social situations

and have particular psychological characteristics. Working in politics would constitute a social situation, for instance, and a high need for cognition could be a psychological trait. These social and psychological pre-conditions cultivate needs.

Needs represent a second step in the process. Although there are many possible needs, some are satisfied by news consumption more than others. Cognitive needs related to gaining information, for instance, could be sated by tuning in to the news (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973).

Needs lead to particular expectations, such as an expectation that viewing a particular news program could provide relevant information. These expectations then motivate people to make media exposure decisions.

Exposure decisions result in gratifications and other consequences. If one sought out news media to gain information, hopefully one's need is gratified by doing so. What people seek from a media experience can affect what they take away from it, so someone going to the news media for information will leave more informed than someone who tuned in for a distraction (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Yoo, 2011). Other, unintended, consequences also can result from media exposure. Although one may tune in to *Law and Order* to be entertained, one's attitudes about the criminal justice system also may shift (Mutz & Nir, 2010).

Applied to attention to public affairs information, the model reveals several possibilities. First, it highlights that media exposure can have diverse effects. Programming designed to be entertaining, for instance, also can be educative. This broadens the possible ways in which news could reach the public. Second, it emphasizes that changing patterns of attention requires understanding the psychological and sociological factors that give rise to news use.

Criticism of this model, and others like it, is instructive. Most simply, the proposed model is linear and feedback loops are absent. It assumes that preferences and individual characteristics are unaffected by exposure (Webster, 2014). Extending the model to reveal more complicated paths helps to remedy this concern—and provides greater insight into how attention is allocated. For example, people can encounter content that they didn't set out to see. When stumbling across an unanticipated headline, needs and expectations may be spontaneously generated. When learning something unexpectedly, one may update expectations about that source for the future. These feedback loops suggest that we should explore how people come into contact with news in nontraditional ways and, as Webster (2014) explains, how we can create preferences that weren't there before.

Another instructive analysis of media attention that emerges from the uses and gratifications tradition has to do with habits. During a newspaper strike in the 1940s, one of the things that people missed most was their habit of reading the newspaper; they missed the “ritualistic and near-compulsive character of newspaper reading” (Berelson, 1949). It seems quaint to think about people addicted to reading the newspaper each morning, but think about today's obsessive smartphone and e-mail checking. The point of this anecdote is that the use of news is, at least for some, part of their daily routine. Consistent with this view, news organizations see predictable ebbs and flows in traffic over the course of a day and during a week. Understanding how to fit within modern routines becomes an opening for purveyors of public affairs information.

### ***Social Identity***

Social identity involves the groups with which people identify (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although any given person is a member of multiple groups, a person acts as a member of a

particular group when that identity is called to the fore by the environment. For this review, social identity is important because it is “central to how individuals pay attention to several stories in the news out of the thousands that drift by without notice” (Neuman, 2016, p. 185).

Several categories of social identity have been analyzed for their influence on attention. First, partisanship and political ideology affect how people allocate their attention to news. Liberals and Democrats are more likely to turn to left-leaning sources of news like MSNBC and conservatives and Republicans are more likely to turn to right-leaning sources like Fox News (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011). In my own research, I have consistently found that people select information matching their political beliefs more often than information favoring an opposing viewpoint. At a more micro level, people also choose news media articles on the basis of the political viewpoint articulated in the headline and lede (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

This is not to say that most partisans wall themselves off into echo chambers where they encounter only views agreeing with their own. This is inconsistent with the evidence to date. Even some of the most fervent partisans occasionally look at information opposed to their views and tune in to more mainstream news sources (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b). Rather, it is to say that in general, partisans allocate a greater proportion of their attention to likeminded information than to information with a different political point of view.

Second, demographics influence news attention. Men and women attend to news articles differently; both prefer articles depicting a person of the same sex compared to articles about the opposite sex (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). Race is another social identity category that influences the allocation of attention. One study asked people to browse a news site where the image accompanying each available story included, at random, either a Black or a White individual (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). Results showed that Black participants paid more attention to news stories that included images of Black people. Age also affects the information to which people attend (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). Younger people are more likely to attend to positive stories about young people. Older individuals, however, are drawn toward negative stories about young people, which can boost their self-esteem (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). One’s sense of national identity, as an American for example (Theiss-Morse, 2009), also may influence the sources to which one attends; indeed, thoughts about who counts as an American could affect exposure in a manner similar to partisan and demographic markers of attention discussed thus far.

### *Social Context*

Demographic differences in news use—older and more educated Americans are more likely to get news (Rainie, 2012)—are particularly important when examined with a social lens. People tend to have social networks consisting of others from similar age groups and educational backgrounds, which means that news topics are more likely to come up in some circles compared to others. These social circumstances affect how much attention people pay to news and information.

Social indicators conveyed via social media, such as the number of “likes” or “recommends,” also can influence whether people pay attention to a piece of news. In one research project, study participants were asked to browse a news website listing several different articles. The articles were randomly assigned a different average rating. The results showed that people spent more time with an article when it was accompanied by a higher average rating (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005). The same study also looked at

website-viewing behavior when articles are accompanied by information about the number of times each article had been viewed. In the research, the number of times each article had been viewed was randomly varied. Articles that had been viewed the most and the least attracted more attention than those that had been viewed a middle number of times.

“Likes” and “recommends” also can affect partisans’ tendency to look at likeminded news. In one study, some participants saw a list of news articles accompanied by social recommendations, some saw news articles attributed to particular sources (e.g., Fox News and MSNBC), and a final group saw articles with both source attribution and social recommendations (Messing & Westwood, 2014). The source attribution and number of recommendations were randomly varied. Compared to the condition showing only the news source, Republicans and Democrats were more likely to choose articles based on social recommendations than on partisan grounds when looking at news displaying both the number of times that the article was recommended and its source.

As these studies show, social indicators affect where people turn for news and information. Highly recommended content increases the chances that we click on it, which, in turn, makes the content even more popular and recommended (Webster, 2014).

### ***Design of Public Affairs Information***

To this point, much of the research I have reviewed focuses on how the characteristics of an individual embedded within a social context influence media attention. Another important factor affecting media attention is how information is designed and presented.

Headlines are often the first way in which people encounter news content. Audiences make decisions about whether they will attend to the content on the basis of the few words making up the headline. Clickbait headlines that require a person to click on a link in order to understand (e.g., “You’ll Never Guess Why Congress Didn’t Get Any Work Done”) were originally seen as a way to attract audience attention, but recent research suggests that audiences are not terribly interested in this sort of headline, particularly for hard news topics (Scacco & Muddiman, 2016).

Site design and layout also affect the allocation of attention. The Engaging News Project has documented large shifts in attention based on site design. They contrasted classic websites using a traditional, newspaper style of design with contemporary websites that include more images and a grid-like structure for the stories (Stroud, Curry, Cardona, & Peacock, 2015). Contemporary websites increased page views by at least 90% over traditional websites. Images, in particular, can powerfully attract attention to news stories.

Once on a news site, story recommendations can affect whether people leave the site after reading a single story or click to read another. There are many different types of recommendations, from the “most popular” content on a site, to content topically connected to the current article, to personalized content recommendations. Deeper engagement with public affairs content could be increased by developing better ways to deliver recommendations (Hindman, 2015).

Other features of news sites, such as their load time, the number of available stories, and the rate at which the content is updated, influence the amount of attention they attract. As Hindman (2015) notes, news sites that load quickly, have lots of stories, and update often will attract more attention over time compared to those not possessing these qualities.

### ***The Choices Available***

The available choices influence what we pay attention to. As choice increases, people who prefer entertainment are better able to avoid the news in favor of more entertaining fare

(Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2007). For those inclined to look at public affairs content, they have innumerable choices. Across the news sites available online, however, only a handful get the majority of traffic. Many of these are familiar brands that developed a large market share offline; CNN, Fox News, and *The New York Times* are leading examples.

Not only do people attend to particular media outlets, they also sometimes elect to pay attention to multiple forms of media at the same time. This behavior is known as second screening, where people divide their attention between platforms (Gil de Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, & McGregor, 2015).

Not all selections are purposeful, however. Advertisements are a prime example of content that looks to gain attention from people who have not intentionally sought the content. Technology, however, is making avoiding this content possible. The advent of DVRs and ad blockers, for instance, change the attentional dynamics associated with advertising (Neuman, 2016). Other technological advancements aim to make advertising more useful—Google, for instance, serves up ads only when they seem closely related to your search terms (Wu, 2016).

As the amount of available information has increased, structures that facilitate our ability to navigate it have become increasingly important (Neuman, 2016). Google, for instance, gives us a way to find sites that best match our interest. Facebook allows us to keep up-to-date with our friends. News sharing on the platform gives us a glimpse into the stories that are attracting attention in our networks. The algorithms used by these companies are becoming increasingly important in directing our attention (Napoli, 2014). Yet the use of algorithms to determine what will be shown to audiences has come under increasing scrutiny in several ways.

First, one component of the Google algorithm is how connected a site is to other sites. This privileges those sites that are better known and, in turn, helps to make them even better known and more connected. The “Googlearchy,” as it is known, is identified as creating a rich-get-richer phenomenon (Hindman, 2009; Neuman, 2016; Webster, 2014).

Second, when these companies change their algorithms, it can have profound effects on news organizations. As Hindman (2009) describes, “even substantial investments in social media can evaporate without notice when Facebook or Twitter changes their rules” (p. 21).

Third, algorithms that present news and information based on a person’s behavior may unintentionally increase the chances that people end up seeing only preferred forms of content (Pariser, 2011). To the extent that people choose information from partisan sources sharing their views, algorithms will learn these preferences and serve up more of the same. How much this occurs, however, has been questioned (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

In sum, the number of choices affect what we choose. Organizations and technology affect what options are available to us, sometimes in ways that enhance our choices (e.g., ad blockers) and sometimes in ways that may filter content less transparently (e.g., personalized search results) (Webster, 2014).

### ***What Is Happening in the News***

What takes place in the news affects the degree to which people pay attention. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) find that the news media and audiences prioritize articles differently by comparing articles featured most prominently on a news website—those that are highlighted as most important by newsroom staff—and the



articles that top “most popular” lists—those that attract the most attention by audiences. In general, they find that news organizations privilege public affairs content to a greater extent than these articles find their way onto “most popular” lists.

Particular attributes of news make it likely to draw attention. Events that could have a large effect, that are likely to occur, and that are imminent receive more attention than other types of news (Knobloch, Carpentier, & Zillmann, 2003). Given these considerations, it’s hardly surprising that weather-related news tops the types of news to which audiences devote the most attention (Texas Media & Society Survey, 2016). Useful news can even overcome partisan tendencies to look at likeminded information. People are willing to look at information about a political candidate that they oppose if it seems likely that the candidate will win (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012).

The relationship between what attracts public attention and what the media covers is not one-way. Rather, audience attention can affect what news organizations cover. Monitoring traffic data is common in newsrooms and, according to one survey, news editors attuned to the economic returns of high traffic numbers are more willing to change news content in response to traffic data (Vu, 2014). Other research shows that the substance of Google searches can predict topics covered by the news media (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2017). This suggests that the audience can influence media considerations of what is news.

### **Summary**

Attention to news and public affairs content is affected by several individual factors. Certain emotions can attract people’s attention to media content. Neurobiological impulses that prompt attention to particular stimuli, such as a loud noise, influence attention. Preferences for certain types of content, such as news, may change based on one’s social situation or psychological state. Our social identities also can influence our attention to news media. Beyond the individual, the design of public affairs information affects whether we pay attention. Poorly designed news presentations will attract less attention than those with dynamic layouts and constantly refreshed content. The choices that are available and what is taking place in the broader environment also influence whether people will choose to allocate their attention to the news.

Some of these components are more amenable to change than others. Those that seem particularly promising are how the news is presented, how social recommendations are used, and when people come into contact with the news. I return to several of these ideas in proposing new areas of research shortly.

### **Next Steps In The Research Agenda**

Although we have some information about what motivates attention to public affairs content, there is much to be learned. Next, I outline several questions to motivate future research.

What motivates news consumption and how could news organizations, and other purveyors of public affairs content, better cater to these motivations?

Attention to public affairs content fulfills different needs for different members of the public. For some, keeping up with the news may be a way to pass the time when waiting for public transportation. For others, their job may require them to keep abreast of what is happening. For yet others still, their network



may demand that they are well-versed in current events in order to keep up at social gatherings. Rethinking the news from the perspective of the user could yield advances in news design. This requires more research into the various reasons that people use the news and what sorts of news best meet these needs. It also may require better understanding of the neuro-psychological underpinnings of attention. When audiences have infinite channels at their disposal, what, specifically, triggers their attention to news?

What barriers prevent news organizations from creating more engaging content and how can these barriers be overcome?

Scholars such as Hindman (2009) have outlined ways in which news could attract more attention. But many newsrooms continue to weigh their sites down with plug-ins that increase load time, use cluttered layouts that hinder news retrieval, and do not make good use of recommendation systems. Understanding more about why newsrooms do not adopt these recommendations and then devising ways to assist would be a useful next step. Robinson's (2011) ethnographic work on the cultural barriers in the transition to digital news represents a helpful step.

When do the media divide us versus bring us together?

In some instances, such as the presidential debates or the Super Bowl, the media play a binding role that brings people together. Yet in other instances, the media divide us. From a business perspective, it is desirable to attract the most attention possible. In a highly competitive media environment, catering to various social identities, such as partisanship, can be an effective segmentation strategy.

Research shows that sometimes social identities, such as partisanship and gender, affect news use, and sometimes they do not. The question of *whether* it matters should be reframed to ask *when* it matters. By shifting the focus, we can identify circumstances in which identity affects exposure in undesirable ways and then investigate how it can be interrupted. This way of thinking opens up new questions, such as "How can partisans be encouraged to engage with information that runs counter to their beliefs?"

How are platforms changing the way in which we consume news?

What are the implications of having audiences increasingly obtain news from mobile and social networks like Facebook? How does the increasing importance of social networks and social media in the transmission of news change the public's allocation of attention? We have some insights into this process, but new questions arise about how news could be best integrated into social networks and presented on mobile to capture public attention.

How will the news media thrive in an environment where their key revenue sources are dissipating?

News organizations are seeing a dramatic decline in advertising revenues. This change is connected to how people allocate attention. Rather than subscribing to a newspaper or watching local news, people are reading one article online and then moving on to something else (Wu, 2016). Given this reality, news organizations need to think about new ways of attracting funding so that they can do their work. Figuring out how to monetize attention becomes important as audiences use news content, but often don't pay for it.

Switching away from an advertising model to a subscription model also could alter patterns of attention by affecting the availability of different types of news. Corporately owned newspapers and television stations, for example, are less likely to produce issue coverage because of their profit motivation compared to privately owned entities (Dunaway, 2008).

What are the democratic consequences of attention?

Attention to public affairs does not always motivate participation. Understanding how and when news promotes public involvement is a necessary next step. It is possible that participatory processes where news and action are combined, such as public events, represent an important way forward. It also may be desirable to have the news media primarily involved in transmitting information and then use other channels to motivate participation.

By answering these questions, we will have a much stronger understanding of how attention to public affairs operates. New habits and platforms offer both challenges to and opportunities for motivating attention. Organizations like Facebook and Google can structure their algorithms in ways that make it more or less likely that people will encounter news. News organizations can create content that maximizes short-term returns on traffic or look for long-term strategies to develop relationships with their users. Individuals can eschew political information or can take advantage of its abundance. Identifying ways to make public affairs content more attention-worthy represents an important challenge for scholars, the news media, and foundations alike.

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