



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Q1 **The PFAD-HEC Model: Impacts of News Attributes and Use Motivations on Selective News Exposure** 5

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*This study examined effects of four common news attributes—personalization, fragmentation, authority–disorder bias, and dramatization (PFAD)—on news exposure and the moderating impacts of hedonic, epistemic, and civic news use motivations. In a lab experiment, participants browsed online news while selective exposure was unobtrusively logged. Findings yielded longer exposure to personalized and dramatized articles and news with low authority–disorder bias. Fragmentation had no significant impact. However, selective exposure to fragmented news was influenced by participants’ political understanding (epistemic motivation), exposure to personalization by news enjoyment (hedonic motivation), and exposure to authority–disorder bias by civic duty to keep informed (civic motivation). Results suggest that news styles may need to become more diversified to better address the informational needs of today’s fragmented audiences.* 15

**Keywords:** Selective Exposure, Personalization, Fragmentation, Authority–Disorder Bias, and Dramatization (PFAD), News Enjoyment, Internal Political Efficacy, Epistemic Political Efficacy (EPE), Civic Duty to Keep Informed. 25

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Many political theories build on the assumption that functional democracies rely on attentive citizens who keep informed about public affairs. Today’s high-choice media environments, however, pose various challenges for political news to attain widespread public attention, many not entirely new. Already the advent of new television channels in the 1980s faced news producers with what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) called an “age of media abundance” (p. 209). The Internet era, however, reinforced this trend tremendously, with “traditional” (i.e., mainly journalistic) news providers increasingly competing with alternative news outlets—like BuzzFeed or Reddit—on social media sites, news aggregating sites, and 35 40

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crowdsourcing platforms, altogether challenging our understanding of news and what news needs to be known (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Stanyer, 2011). To attract a wide audience in this increasing "hyper-competition" (Stanyer, 2011, p. 104), current news tends to become more entertainment-oriented, human interest-centered, and conflict-focused; this trend is commonly reflected in the concept of "soft news," usually contrasted with traditional journalistic "hard news" coverage that relies less on these features (Boukes & Boomgarden, 2015; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2011).

Scholars elaborated on typical soft news and hard news features to explain what attracts recipients to or deters them from political news in times of increased market competition (e.g., Patterson, 2000; Reinemann et al., 2011). However, even after initially operationalizing soft news and hard news with multiple indicators, most studies ultimately treat these terms as anchors of a bipolar continuum (see Boukes & Boomgarden, 2015). Hence, these studies cannot predict news exposure based on specific news attributes and instead examine complex bundles of news characteristics, for example a whole news program. Yet specific news attributes within a program may have distinct, even opposite impacts on news exposure, which are then not covered in related research. As a consequence, it is still controversial what political news may look like in order to instigate or retain recipients' interest in public affairs in increasingly eclectic media environments (e.g., Baum, 2002; Feldman & Young, 2008; Nguyen, 2012; Prior, 2003).

The present work adds to this line of work by disentangling what specific news attributes influence users' exposure to or avoidance of political news. Instead of drawing on the "soft vs. Hard" dualism, we build on news attributes proposed by Bennett (2012) as general "information biases that make news hard to use" (p. 44): personalization, fragmentation, authority-disorder bias, and dramatization—referred to as PFAD attributes, which Bennett discussed with a special focus on journalistic news media but also apply to online news.

Beyond PFAD attributes' impacts, we propose a moderating role of recipients' news use motivations: We postulate that certain PFAD attributes increase exposure to political news for some recipients while reducing it for others. Specifically, we will discuss news enjoyment (*hedonic* motivation), internal political efficacy (*epistemic* motivation), and civic duty to keep informed (*civic* motivation). An experiment tests the resulting model, examining effects of these four dominant news attributes on selective news exposure, in conjunction with use motivations. Per selective exposure paradigm (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015), news exposure will be captured via time spent on news with different PFAD attributes.

### PFAD attributes: prevailing news characteristics in high-choice media environments

The first of the four attributes discussed by Bennett (2012) is *personalization* of political news. Although its operationalization varies across studies (Van Aelst,

Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011), scholars agree personalized news stresses human-interest perspectives and personal angles to abstract political topics (Baum, 2003; Bird, 1998; Boukes & Boomgarden, 2015). This tendency in many Western media systems (see Aalberg & Beyer, 2015) may further intensify through the often highly personal user-generated content that surrounds political news in interactive online environments. 5

The second attribute *fragmentation* pertains to an increase of “encapsulated” news stories with emphasis on most recent events (Bennett, 2012, p. 59). Although news media always emphasized timeliness to get new information to the public as quickly as possible (e.g., Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007), today’s competitive media environments further spur this trend by making fast and short reporting styles an inevitable part of today’s 24/7 news cycles, increasingly characterized by temporal proximity (Tandoc, 2018; Witschge & Nygren, 2009). 10

The third attribute pointed out by Bennett (2012), the *authority-disorder bias*, refers to a predominantly “institutional picture” of politics in the news, focusing on authorities. Although news producers oftentimes include laypersons in news, many Western media still acknowledge citizens mainly through randomly selected “vox pops” and seldom as crucial constituents of the political life (Kensicki, 2004; Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010). Even novel alternative news providers online adopt this traditional pattern: A content analysis by Tandoc (2018) showed that *BuzzFeed* quotes ordinary people only slightly more often than *The New York Times* does; in both cases, government officials remain the most frequently cited sources, reflecting a reemergence of the traditional authority bias in online contexts. 15

Fourth, Bennett (2012) discussed *dramatization* of politics through conflict and disputes. Per news value theory, drama has always been prominent in guiding journalists’ as well as recipients’ selections (e.g., Eilders, 2006). In times of increasing media choice and competition from entertainment offerings, however, news producers also began to frame initially non-dramatic topics in more dramatic ways, leading to a more sensational portrayal of politics in many Western democracies, with depictions of conflict today clearly outweighing consensual portrayals of politics across media outlets and countries (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011; Wang, 2012). This trend recurs in online news environments where social news platforms primarily expand on controversial (rather than consensual) political topics (Tandoc, 2018) and users preferably comment on such topics (Weber, 2014). 20

All four news features usually occur in combination (Bennett, 2012), implying a summed negative impact on recipients’ interest in political news. Although the relative effects of the four PFAD attributes on news exposure have not been empirically examined yet, studies in related areas do not unanimously confirm an overall detrimental effect. Prior comparisons between soft and hard news, for instance, illustrated that features such as personalization or dramatization may make political information more accessible to politically less interested audiences, while users with higher public-affairs interest favor hard news (e.g., Baum, 2002, 2003; Boukes & Boomgarden, 2015; Prior, 2003). These studies usually capture user 25

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predispositions with generalized measures of political interest or entertainment versus information preferences. However, for studying effects of specific news features—such as the PFAD attributes—broad measures may not be sensitive enough to reveal actual user differences. In the following, we therefore propose more nuanced measures of user predispositions for motivational facets regarding news use that likely condition effects of PFAD on selective news exposure. This endeavor serves to clarify if and for whom these four common attributes of political news increase or depress news exposure.

## PFAD attributes and selective news exposure

### Personalization

Despite common concerns about increasing personalization of political news (e.g., Patterson, 2000), personalization was often shown not to depress but rather enhance news interest. The vividness and concreteness of exemplars were found not only to increase the salience and perceived seriousness of political issues but also to facilitate processing and understanding of political topics (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Bas & Grabe, 2015; Jebril, De Vreese, Van Dalen, & Albæk, 2013). An experiment by Hong (2013) showed that personalization enhances news attentiveness by giving a human face to political complexity: Human interest-framed articles led to higher reported involvement in and attention to news stories. Similarly, selective exposure experiments in health communication demonstrated exemplar articles caused longer exposure than messages without personalization (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Sarge, 2015). Accordingly, personalization should enhance rather than reduce the attractiveness of political news by exemplifying political complexity. We therefore expect media users to spend more time on personalized than non-personalized political news articles (H1a).

Regarding specific user characteristics potentially moderating this relationship, personalization may especially attract citizens with a low *hedonic* motivation for news use, that is, a low emotional involvement in news reception as indicated by concepts such as “news enjoyment” (Lee & Chyi, 2014; Nash & Hoffman, 2009). News enjoyment reflects perceived pleasure of keeping up with the news and should determine exposure to personalization due to an enhanced emotional appeal of personalized stories. For instance, previous research showed that most users who otherwise find news “boring” perceive personalized stories as more pleasant (Bas & Grabe, 2015; Bird, 1998). Media users who do not enjoy keeping up with news should thus exhibit a stronger preference for personalized news than users who perceive news use as generally enjoyable regardless of additional emotional stimulants. We thus expect that the selective exposure pattern suggested in H1a is more pronounced among users with low hedonic news use motivation than among users with high hedonic news use motivation (H1b).

### Fragmentation

In contrast to personalization, effects of fragmentation on news exposure were rarely investigated so far. Related research, however, points to an interesting paradox: User-centered news quality frameworks suggest that incident-based news styles likely attract more attention than in-depth stories. Surveys in this area show that media users first and foremost expect news stories to provide a brief, timely update on events of the day and judge “good” journalism primarily by its function to get information to the public as quickly as possible (e.g., [Van der Wurff & Schoenbach, 2014](#)). A study by [Nguyen \(2010\)](#) indicates that the outstanding appreciation of 24/7 updates directly translates into increased user interest, with “immediacy” being the strongest of nine predictors of frequent online news use. Experimental studies on selective news exposure and news sharing substantiate this finding. Drawing on informational utility frameworks, research shows that perceived temporal proximity of reported events result in longer exposure times ([Knobloch, Dillman Carpentier, & Zillmann, 2003](#)) and an increased likelihood to share news content with others ([Bobkowski, 2015](#)). In contrast, however, studies based on uses-and-gratifications frameworks indicate that such brief, incident-based news updates may at the same time increase news avoidance. Several qualitative studies yielded news recipients often feel overwhelmed by the constant flow of fragmented news ([Associated Press, 2008](#); [Zerba, 2011](#)). Similarly, experiments examining implications of more context-oriented, interpretive news styles found positive effects on users’ news interests, such as perceived interestingness and informativeness of news reports, satisfaction of informational needs, and future news use likelihood (e.g., [Pingree, Brossard, & McLeod, 2014](#); [Yaros, 2006](#); [Zerba, 2013](#)). Given inconclusive findings on fragmented news and its implications for selective news exposure, we examine the following research question: Do media users spend more time on fragmented or non-fragmented political news articles? (RQ1a).

While it was expected that exposure to personalization depends on users’ hedonic motivation to follow political news, fragmentation is especially likely to be moderated by *epistemic* motivational factors such as “internal political efficacy” ([Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991](#)). Numerous studies found that perceived ability to understand political issues positively impacts news interest ([Curran et al., 2014](#)), whereas lack of perceived competence has discouraging effects ([Blekesaune, Elvestad, & Aalberg, 2012](#)). Such epistemic motivations may matter especially for studying exposure to fragmented news, as such news demands higher cognitive resources to infer from an incident-based news story to the broader context of the reported event or at least a certain level of perceived political confidence in making sense of such event-centered stories. Since this relationship has not been examined yet, we propose the following research question: Does epistemic news use motivation moderate exposure to fragmentation (RQ1b)?

### Authority–disorder bias

The third attribute, the authority–disorder bias, mainly addresses citizens’ perceptions of being active parts of the political system. These perceptions are often thought to enhance external political efficacy, that is, the “feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen could bring about this change” (Campbell, Gurin, & Warren, 1954, p. 187). Citizens’ perceptions of how their actions matter in society can be affected by several means, one of which is verbal suggestion via message cues. High-efficacy cues are thought to elicit user interest in the information at hand by emphasizing positive outcome expectations. Low-efficacy cues, in contrast, can lead to defensive avoidance by creating a “disconnect between the problem and the reader” (Kensicki, 2004, p. 65), leading to the question of “[W]hy would people find any of these issues directly relevant if they had no part in its cause, its effect, or its solution?” (p. 65). In fact, selective exposure experiments demonstrated that users exhibit a stronger preference for a news message if it advocates opportunities for readers to successfully engage (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Sarge, 2015). The inclusion of citizens as sources or actors in political news also enhances involvement (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2008), provides citizens with perspectives on politics they can better relate to (Lefevere, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2012), and promotes political interest through increased efficacy (Curran et al., 2014). Accordingly, users should spend more time on news with low authority–disorder bias than messages with high authority–disorder bias (H2).

However, preference for news reports that include citizen perspectives is likely moderated by media users’ *civic* motivation—the motivation to participate in political life. Users with low motivation for political participation may not appreciate the additional effort of news makers to emphasize opportunities for civic engagement as much as citizens with a higher interest in political participation. For the “minimal prerequisite” of political participation is news use itself (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2012, p. 38), keeping up with the news as a civic obligation can be regarded as the simplest form of political participation, most clearly reflected in a person’s civic “duty to keep informed” (McCombs & Poindexter, 1983). Users with strong commitment to engaging in politics by staying current on public affairs may thus exhibit a stronger preference for news that addresses citizens as political actors, whereas users with a low perceived civic duty likely prefer news that spares citizens from political responsibilities beyond voting. Again, these differences have not been tested yet. We therefore investigate this relationship with a research question: Does civic news use motivation moderate exposure to authority–disorder bias? (RQ2).

### Dramatization

In comparison to these three biases, dramatization illustrates a special case, in that individuals appear to have a general propensity for negative information. This “automatic vigilance” toward negative stimuli is often explained from an

evolutionary perspective, suggesting that individuals are biologically “hardwired” to look out for threats (Pratto & John, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996). Accordingly, individuals react to negative messages with increased emotional and physiological response, deeper information processing and higher recall (e.g., Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Lang, Newhagen, & Reeves, 1996; Soroka & McAdams, 2015).

In political communication, negativity affects user interests at least along two dimensions: through overall negative tonality and depiction of conflict. In terms of *tonality*, selective exposure studies found consistent support for the attention-grabbing power of negative stimuli (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2017). The *conflict* dimension, in turn, can be understood as a subcategory of overall negative tonality. It refers to portrayals of disagreement and controversy between different groups, as opposed to more consensus-oriented stories, and points more directly to dramatization as outlined by Bennett (2012). This dimension is usually examined from a news values perspective: According to Eilders (2006), political controversies indicate the relevance of an event to users, as “[c]onflict either results in maintaining or modifying the status quo and thus represents potential consequences to society” (p. 15). In fact, her analysis revealed a significant impact of controversy on selective media use and information recall. Thus, we assume that media users spend more time on dramatized than non-dramatized political news articles (H3).

To what extent motivations influence exposure to dramatization is difficult to predict. Given the biological salience of negativity, individual motivations may not easily counteract the automatic appeal of dramatized news. Trussler and Soroka (2014), for example, found that even disdain for drama in political news coverage does not prevent media users from preferring dramatized news stories during actual selection. Regarding the three motivational components of news use as outlined above, we thus examine the following research question: Do hedonic, epistemic, or civic news use motivations moderate exposure to dramatization? (RQ3).

## Method

### Overview

A lab experiment with 144 student participants was conducted at a university in the Midwestern United States in 2015. Upon completion of an initial questionnaire soliciting news use motivations, respondents browsed four news webpages, one for each PFAD attribute. Each overview page featured two articles that contained high levels of the respective PFAD attribute and two articles with low levels of the same attribute. In sum, each participant encountered 16 article leads that were—along with the associated full texts—manipulated in a 4×2 within-subjects design, PFAD attribute (personalization vs. fragmentation vs. Authority–disorder bias vs. dramatization) × PFAD intensity (high vs. low), with two articles for each combination. Participants could click on article leads displayed on the overview pages to access the full texts. Exposure time to each article was unobtrusively logged by software.

After three days, participants completed a follow-up questionnaire, including a manipulation check for all articles.

### Participants

Student participants were recruited by the help of a university participant pool and through instructors of introductory communication classes and received credit for their participation. Of the initial sample of 164 participants, three cases with incomplete data were removed from the dataset. Further, data were screened for inattentive participants ( $n = 17$ ), who spent more than 70 seconds on each overview page (for a similar procedure, see [Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, Westerwick, & Donsbach, 2015](#)).

The final sample thus consisted of 144 complete, valid cases. The sample was 65.3% female. The mean age was 21.32 years ( $SD = 3.03$  years). The sample was 76.4% white/Caucasian, 9.7% Asian, 6.3% African American, 2.8% Hispanic or Latino, and .7% Native American; further 1.4% of participants had a multiracial background, while 2.8% indicated an “other” ethnicity.

### Procedure

The study was administered in laboratory sessions of about 25 minutes and a follow-up questionnaire of about 15 minutes three days later. After completing a pre-exposure questionnaire, participants were redirected to the news-browsing task, administered by a software application specifically developed to display the four news webpages and to record browsing activity for each participant. Each PFAD attribute was displayed in randomized order on a separate news website and displayed article leads on four different political topics (economy, health care, energy, and race relations). For each of the four political topics per overview page, participants randomly received the article with a high or low intensity in the respective PFAD attribute. The positioning of article leads on the overview pages was randomized, too. Each news magazine was presented for 2.5 minutes. This time frame was chosen to account for the 29 seconds that media users, on average, spend on web overview pages before making a selection ([Buscher, White, Dumais, & Huang, 2012](#)) and to allow participants to read at least half of the displayed articles, which—according to a recent Pew study ([Mitchell, Stocking, & Matsa, 2016](#))—translates into approximately 57 seconds per online article of less than 1,000 words (which applies here, see below). Within the scheduled browsing time, participants were free to read whatever they found interesting and to go back to the respective overview anytime to access further articles. Following the browsing, respondents completed a second questionnaire soliciting demographic variables, among others. After three days, participants took a third questionnaire that included a manipulation check of all articles.



### Stimuli and manipulation check

The news stimuli were developed for the present study, based on existing journalistic as well as alternative news websites or political webpages. They were edited for length and respective PFAD intensity. All articles consisted of a headline of  $M = 8.78$  words ( $SD = .87$ ), an article lead of  $M = 26.22$  words ( $SD = .83$ ), and a body with  $M = 601.88$  words ( $SD = 3.18$ ).

*Personalized* articles (“high personalization”) described political topics by focusing on single individuals who personally experienced the consequences of a political issue (e.g., “A Pennsylvania Mother’s Cost of Her Children Eating Healthy”), whereas non-personalized articles (“low personalization”) provided the same information from a societal perspective, emphasizing consequences for society instead of drawing on individual cases (e.g., “Cost of Healthy Foods is on the Rise”). *Fragmented* articles (“high fragmentation”) focused on specific events, addressing political facts in a rather decontextualized way (e.g., “MIT Conference Discusses Questions on America’s Energy Independence”), whereas non-fragmented articles (“low fragmentation”) put the same facts and singular events into causal perspective, clarifying historical developments and consequences of an issue (e.g., “Questions on America’s Energy Independence From Diverse Perspectives”). Articles with an *authority-disorder bias* (“high authority-disorder bias”) framed political issues as requiring action from the political and/or economic elite (e.g., “Why Can’t Business Leaders Seem to Fix the Economy?”), whereas articles without authority-disorder bias (“low authority-disorder bias”) focused on opportunities for citizens to cause change (e.g., “Why Can’t We Seem to Fix the Economy?”). Finally, *dramatized* articles (“high dramatization”) framed political issues as dominated by conflict, controversies, and disputes between different groups (e.g., “Businesses and Union Leaders Continue to Battle on Economy”), while non-dramatized articles (“low dramatization”) focused on compromise and emphasized signals of consensus and cooperation between these groups (e.g., “Business and Union Leaders are Finding Compromises on the Economy”).

A manipulation check ensured effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, utilizing single-item scales for each PFAD attribute with a range from  $-5$  (low PFAD intensity) to  $5$  (high PFAD intensity); details are reported in Online Appendix 1 (column “Intensity”). Personalized versions, in contrast to non-personalized versions, were perceived as focusing more on individuals rather than general society;  $M_{\text{HighP}} = 2.28$ , ( $SD = 2.90$ ) versus  $M_{\text{LowP}} = -1.70$  ( $SD = 2.83$ ),  $F(7, 137) = 10.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .352$ . Likewise, fragmented articles ( $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ), in comparison to their non-fragmented counterparts ( $M = -1.78$  ( $SD = 2.58$ )), were associated with a stronger focus on a singular event or instance rather than the context and background of an event;  $F(7, 134) = 5.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .216$ . Similarly, articles high in authority-disorder bias were perceived as attributing responsibility to public officials and institutions ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ), whereas articles with a low authority-disorder bias were conceived of as emphasizing citizen

spheres of influence ( $M = -1.48$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ );  $F(7, 136) = 8.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .296$ . Finally, dramatized versions ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ), in contrast to non-dramatized versions ( $M = -1.18$ ,  $SD = 2.93$ ), were perceived as focusing on conflict rather than agreement between societal groups;  $F(7, 132) = 7.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .282$ .

The manipulation check also ensured that neither version of an article pair caused longer exposure times for reasons other than the intended PFAD manipulation. An additional measure captured “authenticity” through perceived deviance of each article from what participants with different predispositions, such as political ideologies and news habits, usually encounter in their daily media diets. Authenticity was measured by the question “How typical is this article for news articles you generally encounter?” (1 = *not typical at all*, 11 = *extremely typical*). The manipulation check established the intended similarity between articles of each pair, in that “high” article versions ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ ) did not differ from their “low” counterparts ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 2.51$ ) (for further details, see Online Appendix, column “Authenticity”).

## Measures

### Selective exposure

For each PFAD attribute, presented on a separate news website, participants had two “high” and two “low” article versions available for selection and further reading. While participants browsed the four websites, their article choices and times spent on individual articles were unobtrusively logged by software. On average, participants spent  $M = 21.20$  seconds ( $SD = 6.90$ ) on each overview page and read  $M = 1.80$  ( $SD = .72$ ) out of four articles per PFAD attribute. Selective exposure was differentiated by PFAD attribute and PFAD intensity (high, low), such that two exposure measures were computed for each attribute, with one representing exposure to the “high” and one representing exposure to the “low” PFAD version.

### Hedonic news use motivation

To capture perceived enjoyment in following political news, participants indicated agreement with two statements, adopted from previous research on “news enjoyment” (Nash & Hoffman, 2009; Prior, 2003), on 9-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 8 = *strongly agree*): “I enjoy keeping up with the news” and “Following the news is not my idea of fun” (reverse). The items were averaged in an index of hedonic news use motivation ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ), with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .75$ .

### Epistemic news use motivation

Perceived capability to understand political news was measured by six items on 9-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 8 = *strongly agree*). Items were adapted from Pingree et al. (2014), whose concept of “epistemic political efficacy” (EPE) precisely captures the perceived (in)ability to understand political news, indicated by items such as “The details of political issues are confusing to me” (reverse) or “It’s

impossible to know what's really going on in politics" (reverse). The EPE items were complemented by a classic measure of political understanding as represented in the original concept of "internal political efficacy" (Niemi et al., 1991): "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" (reverse). The six items formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .74$ ) for an index of epistemic news use motivation,  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ .

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### Civic news use motivation

Participants indicated their felt civic obligation to follow news about public affairs by answering a four-item scale on their "civic duty to keep informed" as developed by McCombs and Poindexter (1983). Participants answered all four items (e.g., "We all have a duty to keep ourselves informed about news and current events") on 9-point scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 8 = *strongly agree*). The four items were averaged ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) for an overall index of civic news use motivation ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

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### Control variables

To ensure that topic interest can be ruled out as an alternative explanation for participants' article exposure, analyses controlled for individual interest in each of the topics used in the present experiment, measured on 9-point scales (0 = *not at all interested*, 8 = *extremely interested*). Overall, participants did not assign different interest scores to the four political topics ( $M_{\text{Economy}} = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ;  $M_{\text{Health}} = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ;  $M_{\text{Energy}} = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ;  $M_{\text{Race}} = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ );  $F(3, 429) = 1.05$ ,  $p = .370$ .

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Finally, although articles were designed to each present a balanced portrayal of different political stances, participants' political orientation was included to control for ideological differences, measured on an 8-point scale (1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*),  $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ .

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## Results

To test the effects of the four news attributes of PFAD on selective news exposure and the moderating impacts of individual news use motivations, a series of hierarchical OLS regressions were conducted, one for each PFAD attribute.<sup>1</sup> In these models, selective exposure is predicted based on PFAD intensity ("high" vs. "low"), news use motivations, and the interaction between both, while additionally controlling for topic interest and political orientation. The models were computed in two stages, first including PFAD intensity and participants' news use motivations, and then introducing three interaction terms representing the cross products of PFAD intensity with each of the three motivational predispositions toward news use (hedonic, epistemic, civic). Results are shown in Table 1. All metric predictors were standardized ( $M = 0$ ,  $SD = 1$ ) before the analyses.

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**Table 1** Impacts of PFAD Intensity and News Use Motivations on Selective PFAD Exposure, Beta Weights (p-Values in Parentheses)

	Personalization		Fragmentation		Authority Bias		Dramatization	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
PFAD Intensity (0 = Low)	.16 (.006)	.16 (.006)	.06 (.299)	.06 (.292)	-.17 (.005)	-.17 (.003)	.20 (.001)	.20 (.001)
Hedonic News Use Motivation	.01 (.953)	.16 (.129)	-.004 (.956)	-.07 (.524)	-.01 (.925)	.06 (.585)	.002 (.975)	-.03 (.781)
Epistemic News Use Motivation	-.003 (.956)	.04 (.658)	.01 (.873)	-.17 (.052)	-.01 (.847)	.01 (.879)	.003 (.959)	.06 (.510)
Civic News Use Motivation	.003 (.965)	-.05 (.612)	-.02 (.784)	-.03 (.800)	-.01 (.948)	.21 (.046)	-.01 (.870)	.12 (.245)
PFAD Intensity × Hedonic		-.22 (.033)		.09 (.389)		-.09 (.374)		.05 (.664)
PFAD Intensity × Epistemic		-.06 (.483)		.25 (.003)		-.04 (.668)		-.08 (.368)
PFAD Intensity × Civic		.08 (.438)		.01 (.939)		-.30 (.003)		-.19 (.066)
R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.05	.01	.05	.03	.10	.04	.06

*Note.* All analyses controlled for topic interest (energy, health care, economy, race relations) and political orientation. In addition, controlling for topic main effects and their interaction effects with PFAD level did not change the results, nor did these additional variables have substantial effects on selective exposure.

With regard to personalization, the analysis revealed longer exposure times for personalized articles,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p = .006$ , in line with H1a. On average, participants spent  $M = 79$  sec ( $SD = 58$ ) reading personalized news stories, compared to  $M = 60$  sec ( $SD = 58$ ) spent on non-personalized, more society-oriented articles. The analysis further yielded an interaction between exposure to personalization and hedonic news use motivation,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p = .033$ , supporting H1b. Participants who did not enjoy keeping up with news exhibited longer exposure to personalized news content than participants with a generally higher level of hedonic news use motivation. No other significant effects emerged in this analysis. With regard to research question RQ1a, no significant effect was found for fragmentation. Although participants spent more time on fragmented ( $M = 70$  sec,  $SD = 56$ ) than non-fragmented articles ( $M = 63$  sec,  $SD = 55$ ), this difference did not approach significance,  $\beta = .06$ ,  $p = .299$ . Regarding RQ1b, however, fragmentation yielded an effect of epistemic news use motivation,  $\beta = .25$ ,  $p = .003$ . The higher the perceived competence to understand political news, the stronger was an individual's exposure to fragmented articles. No other effects reached significance. Confirming H2, authority-disorder bias yielded an impact on selective news exposure,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p = .005$ . Participants spent more reading time with news emphasizing civic responsibilities ( $M = 76$  sec,  $SD = 55$ ), while articles focusing on the responsibility of authorities triggered less exposure ( $M = 57$  sec,  $SD = 55$ ). Regarding RQ2, the effect of participants' civic news use motivation was significant,  $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p = .003$ , indicating that users with stronger civic obligation to follow news spent more time on articles that emphasized citizens' opportunities in influencing political processes. Again, no other effects approached significance. In support of H3, dramatization also influenced news exposure,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .001$ . Dramatized, conflict-oriented news produced longer exposure ( $M = 77$  sec,  $SD = 53$ ) than non-dramatized articles that emphasized consensus ( $M = 54$  sec,  $SD = 55$ ). Addressing RQ3, the analysis revealed no significant effects of news use motivations on exposure to dramatization. Neither hedonic nor epistemic or civic motivations for news use had a significant impact on exposure to dramatized news. Topic interest and political orientation did not affect exposure to dramatization either.

## Discussion

With intense news outlet competition and continuous availability of news in more and more diversified forms, as well as abundant entertainment, the task of keeping citizens thoroughly informed is extremely challenging—with a growing trend among parts of the population towards “boredom and detachment” (Stanyer, 2011, p. 139) regarding political news (Prior, 2007; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2012). To advance our understanding of how different news styles encourage or reduce interest in news on public affairs, the present work examined the effects of four prevalent news attributes as proposed by Bennett (2012), that is, PFAD, and the moderating impact of three individual news use motivations (hedonic, epistemic,

civic) on selective exposure to political news. Our results yielded a preference for personalized news in line with H1a and greater exposure to dramatized articles, supporting H3. The effect of dramatization on news exposure was not significantly affected by any motivational component (RQ3), which corroborates prior work suggesting an “automatic vigilance” toward negative stimuli (Pratto & John, 1991; Shoemaker, 1996). Preference for personalization, however, was stronger for users with low general interest in news. Supporting H1b, hedonic news use motivation influenced selective exposure to personalization, with high news enjoyment causing higher exposure to non-personalized, society-focused articles, while participants with low news enjoyment spent more time on personalized versions that exemplified political topics by means of an individual case story. These findings align with earlier research on soft news effects (Baum, 2002; Feldman & Young, 2008) and speak to Baum’s (2003) assumption that soft news attributes such as personalization may mitigate the required “trade-off” of news consumption through embedding political information into more entertaining formats.

Regarding authority–disorder bias, a main effect showed participants generally spent more time on news articles that stressed potentials for civic engagement rather than responsibilities of societal elites, which supports H2. This finding aligns with earlier work (Curran et al., 2014; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008) and corroborates suggestions for news producers to put more emphasis on citizens as central agents in democracies, capable of contributing beyond casting their vote (Kensicki, 2004; Schaffer, 2002). Of course, there are good reasons for journalists to focus on authorities. Most of all, it reflects the media’s mandate to keep citizens informed about those in power who are thereby held accountable. Per present findings, the downside of this focus on elite actors is a reduced interest in attending to such stories, which may nurture a feeling of powerlessness in recipients. Our study speaks for a reassessment of the merit of an authority-focus in the news along the lines of concepts such as “public journalism” or “civic journalism” aiming to re-activate citizens as “committed readers and viewers” (Schaffer, 2002, para. 64). As put by an early proponent of this movement, citizens may “begin to reawaken when they are addressed as a conversational partner and are encouraged to join the talk rather than sit passively as spectators before a discussion conducted by journalists and experts” (Carey, 1987, p. 14). However, our findings also revealed that this need for political inclusion appears to be unequally distributed among media users with different levels of political news interest. Regarding RQ2, only participants with a high civic news use motivation favored articles that focused on opportunities for citizens to engage in political action. Participants who did not perceive this civic duty to keep informed, in contrast, preferred “traditional” versions focusing on the public officials’ responsibilities. This finding indicates that emphasis on opportunities for civic engagement is useful for news makers most of all to keep the politically interested involved. Yet, it may not be ideal for gaining attention of less interested users with a lower propensity for political participation.

These users may just not seek more political influence but merely, if anything, want to see how elected officials perform.

A similar moderating impact of user predispositions emerged regarding fragmentation. Although fragmented and non-fragmented articles attracted equal attention (RQ1a), our study yielded a moderating impact of epistemic news use motivation on selective exposure to fragmentation (per RQ1b). Specifically, participants with a low perceived political competence spent more time on non-fragmented, comprehensive background-oriented articles, whereas participants with a higher perceived ability to make sense of political news showed a stronger preference for fragmented, incident-based versions, as they may already feel knowledgeable enough about the broader context or do not feel the need for additional information. Hence, users with higher perceived uncertainty regarding their political competences may primarily seek a deeper understanding of context, background, and consequences, which may become harder to achieve in light of an ongoing proliferation of fragmented news styles. Users who are more confident about their capability to make sense of political news events, instead, appear to be better served by fragmented news, as these users may not want to invest additional time to (repeatedly) review the context of a given political topic but rather skim quick updates regarding its latest development.

Taken together, the present findings encourage a deeper look into specific news attributes—in contrast to investigating the news as a bundle of individual content features such as hard and soft news genres—and their relation to news use motivation as a multi-faceted concept that aims to capture news interest in more specific terms than most previous concepts. In brief, our study indicates that today's pervasive trends towards more PFAD in journalistic as well as alternative news formats may mainly be suited to address users who generally feel confident in their ability to make sense of political news (high epistemic news use motivation) but do not perceive news use as a particularly worthwhile activity (low hedonic news use motivation) and have rather little interest in getting more involved with political issues and their solutions (low civic news use motivation). Hence, news in its current form may primarily help attract or retain the attention of generally less involved users, as its inclusion of individual case stories (high personalization) makes political news use a more entertaining experience for them, while its focus on authorities (high authority-disorder bias) spares them from civic opportunities for political action that these users may not want to make use of anyway, and provides them with brief updates on recent political events (high fragmentation) to help them scan their environment rather than delving into exhaustive political thought. Users who acknowledge uncertainties in understanding of political news (low epistemic news use motivation), while generally enjoying the consumption of news (high hedonic news use motivation) and feeling an obligation for civic engagement (high civic news use motivation), may become increasingly neglected in contemporary news environments. If current trends further consolidate, these more involved (although also more uncertain) users may become discouraged from keeping up

with political news, as today's media environments make it less likely for them to encounter news that outlines opportunities and guidelines for civic participation that these users are particularly interested in (low authority–disorder bias) and that clarifies the relevance of political events for society at large (low personalization) as well as the context and background of political issues (low fragmentation) that these users may feel a need to get acquainted with. 5

The present study does have limitations. While Bennett (2012, p. 69) expects the four PFAD attributes to usually occur in combination, the present study tested the four news attributes separately at first to advance our understanding of their independent effects. A next step should thus be to investigate combinations of these news components. Further, future research should utilize selective exposure contexts of higher external validity. The present experiment utilized a small sample of undergraduate student participants in a lab setting without distractions, social influences, or alternative media use options, which are virtually unlimited in the real world. Also, the present study investigated selective exposure within a restricted time frame in an online-only context where opportunities for user selectivity may be greater than in more traditional media use settings. Findings may thus vary significantly between different media genres and may be highly conditional on the complexity of a given media use situation (see, e.g., Panek, 2016). These limitations could especially be consequential for effects of dramatization on user preferences, as the automatic appeal of dramatized news may vanish under certain circumstances—for instance, when users are given more time to engage in more deliberative behaviors, which may counteract automatic reactions to dramatized stimuli. In contrast, dramatization may attract even more attention when users have to deal with an increased “cognitive load” through multitasking and additional distraction. Hence, this study is a first step to examine the relevance of specific news attributes and individual news use motivations for news exposure. Future research is needed to replicate and extend the present findings on the basis of more representative samples and across different media use contexts. Hopefully, though, our study can give a first impression of how news presentations may be tailored more effectively than merely differentiating between soft and hard news to fit the variety of consumer needs in a more and more competitive news environment best. 10 15 20 25 30

From a normative viewpoint, our findings may contribute to a reconsideration of the controversial question of what normative standards news producers should follow to serve democracy's needs in contemporary societies with increasing opportunities to avoid political content altogether. Our results imply this question cannot be answered by advertising one particular standard while denigrating others, since news styles must diversify in times of fragmented audiences and increasing competition. To stay aware of opportunities and challenges that these trends entail, however, scholars and media producers should critically reflect current trends in terms of desired outcomes. Regarding the vital foundation of democratic societies to keep politically less involved citizens informed about public affairs, the current trends 35 40



examined in the present study appear to be quite well-suited to achieve this aim. But while benefiting this purpose by focusing on “low-cost” users with a certain risk to break away, this achievement may come at the expense of those who are willing to be more than just passive consumers, that is, those who make democracies thrive and prosper. Although these users can and do certainly find a niche in current high-choice media environments that serves their needs, dominant news styles may still have a detrimental impact on their perceptions of politics and their civic identity, with potentially discouraging implications regarding their motivation to keep up with political news.

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### Supplementary material

Supplementary material are available at *Communication Theory* online.

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### Note

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1 Due to the skewness of the dependent exposure variables towards zero, two additional methods of analysis were applied (i.e., censored Tobit regression models and zero-inflated Probit models) to ensure the robustness of the OLS regression findings. These models reproduced the findings of the OLS regressions in that all effects pointed into the expected direction, with only marginal differences occurring with regards to significance values (see Online Appendices 2 and 3).

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