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News usage on Instagram: Frequency, motives, evaluation, and the role of political interest

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Abstract

Instagram is an increasingly important platform for news consumption. While initial research has examined the characteristics and types of news content on Instagram, little is known about its usage and evaluation. This study explores how adults in Switzerland who frequently use Instagram consume news on the platform; how often they encounter news and whether this is intentional or incidental, their motives for (not) following news accounts; their evaluations of Swiss news accounts; and the role of political interest. Findings show that Instagram is mainly used for entertainment; news consumption is mostly incidental. Higher political interest is associated with more news consumption on Instagram, both intentional and incidental. Respondents with moderate political interest prefer entertainment-oriented outlets. Overall, the findings suggest that adapting to Instagram's entertaining nature could help media companies to reach larger audiences and inform them on hard news topics such as politics.

Keywords

Instagram news usage, political interest, incidental news exposure, digital journalism, social media news, usage motives, survey data

1 Introduction

Political news can nowadays be consumed in a variety of formats, from traditional print newspapers or TV programs to digital formats such as podcasts or social media posts. In this multimedia environment, Instagram has become one of the most relevant platforms for news consumption. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, the number of people who use Instagram for news has been steadily growing and is now at 15% for the general population across a consistent sample of countries (UK, USA, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Ireland) Among young adults (18–24 years, all markets), 18% report that Instagram is their primary source for news (Reuters, 2024).

This growing popularity has sparked scholarly interest; researchers have started to investigate the nature and content of news on Instagram (e.g., Hase, Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023; Hendrickx, 2023; Saks & Hopkins, 2024; Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, & López-García, 2019), journalistic practices (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024), and norms (Sehl, Eder, & Kretzschmar, 2022). In comparison, less is known about how news content is used and evaluated on the platform. Initial studies suggest that Instagram users perceive a wide range of content as "news" on Instagram (Hendrickx, 2024; Swart & Broersma, 2024) and that content of journalistic sources is not perceived as more credible than content of influencers (Zimmermann, Klee, & Kaspar, 2023). Generally, social media users tend to incidentally encounter news on the platforms (Kümpel, 2022). We build on these findings by focusing specifically on Instagram, using data from frequent adult users in Switzerland. Our first research aim is to investigate how often Instagram users are exposed to news content. Second, we examine whether this exposure is primarily intentional or incidental. Third, we seek to understand the motivations behind following—or choosing not to follow—news accounts on Instagram. Finally, we aim to ex-

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plore how users evaluate the Instagram content of different news outlets.

Switzerland's media landscape is shaped by its multilingualism, with a few large companies operating across regions and strong, but politically and financially challenged, public service media (Udris & Eisenegger, 2024). A majority of media that are active online (61%, in addition to print or broadcast as well as online pure) are also present on Instagram (Udris, Ryffel, & Vogler, 2023). The largest online news outlet, *20 Minuten*, has even shifted to a social media-first strategy, meaning that news content is first produced for their social media channels and later adapted for the website (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023). However, this strategy could currently be reevaluated in the context of a broader digital transformation following the announced discontinuation of the print edition by the end of 2025 (20 Minuten, 2025). In light of such developments in media production and an increasing focus on digital and social media news content, it is highly relevant to study how media users encounter news on social media platforms.

2 Instagram: Affordances, usage motives, and news content

Hase et al. (2023) provide a comparative overview of different social media platforms and their affordances. In their typology, Instagram is characterized by moderate algorithmic curation (chronological feed is available), moderate hypertextuality (links to third party content are possible in stories and bios, but not in posts), moderate interactivity (interaction is limited to liking and commenting, and some interaction features, such as polls, in stories), and high visuality (focus on audio-visual content). Due to restricted linking to third-party content, news content on Instagram is usually not just a preview of a news article on a news medium's website but specifically produced and adapted to the platform logic (Saks & Hopkins, 2024; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Hase et al. (2023, p. 1503) refer to this as "brand-building news" logic, which is most prevalent on Instagram and leads to a more passive consumption of visually centered news content.

As users are an integral part of platform logic (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), their usage behavior and motives should also be considered. According to the uses and gratification approach, audiences turn to certain media types and content to fulfill specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 1983). General uses and gratifications for social media use are social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Similar motives have been found to drive Instagram usage specifically (Kocak, Nasir, & Turker, 2020; Romero Saletti, van den Broucke, & Van Beggelaer, 2022; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Little is, however, known about what motivates news consumption on Instagram. Qualitative insights from young Swiss social media users (20–25-year-olds) illustrate that they mostly use platforms like Instagram for entertainment, and only incidentally encounter news while using the platform (Schwaiger, Vogler, & Eisenegger, 2022). However, the study also shows that social media news content can serve as a starting point to search for additional news on other platforms. And despite the primary use for entertainment, Instagram is the most popular social media platform for news consumption for young adults in Switzerland; among 18–34-year-olds, around a third indicate using it as a news source (Siegen & Schneider, 2024). This may be related to the characteristics of news content on Instagram. A content analysis of Swiss news media shows that their Instagram stories, compared to the news on the website, focus more on soft-news topics and are more emotionalized (Wirz, Zai, Vogler, Urman, & Eisenegger, 2023). Further, they sometimes contain entertaining elements such as narration or interactive features (Wirz & Zai, 2024). News content on Instagram can therefore be considered as infotainment, which has the potential to attract entertainment-oriented users (Jebril, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2013; Prior, 2003).

Still, little is known about how users consume and evaluate journalistic news of specific outlets on Instagram, and whether the entertaining nature successfully attracts new audiences. We therefore pose the following three research questions:

› RQ1: How do adult Swiss Instagram users consume news content on Instagram?

› RQ2: What are their motives to (not) follow news accounts on the platform?
› RQ3: How do they evaluate the news content of different news outlets?

3 Incidental news exposure and political interest

The tendency that news content on social media is consumed incidentally does not only apply to young audiences. In general, media users stumble over news content while scrolling through their social media feeds (Kümpel, 2022). Intentional exposure stands in contrast to incidental exposure (Lee & Kim, 2017). As Matthes, Nanz, Stubenvoll, and Heiss (2020, p. 1033) note: "exposure to content is considered intentional if the recipient had the goal to encounter that content". A stricter perspective only considers news consumption to be intentional if users intentionally search for news content (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). However, given that social media feeds are to some extent shaped by "personal curation" (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 315), following certain accounts (e.g., news media accounts) can be considered as part of an intentional exposure mode (Heiss, Knoll, & Matthes, 2020). By intentionally following news accounts, users can therefore ensure, to a certain extent, that they also see news posts alongside other content.

With the emergence of social media platforms, incidental news exposure has been considered as having the potential to bring people with little political interest into contact with news (e.g., Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). However, it has been shown that on algorithmically curated platforms, it is still mainly people interested in politics who encounter news (Barnidge, 2023; Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, & Pak, 2021). Moreover, incidental exposure alone is not sufficient to be informed about current affairs (Kümpel, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2017), as intentional news seeking plays a critical role in knowledge gain (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Since news items on social media often contain little information, knowledge gain depends on further engagement with a news topic. Interest in the news topic has been identified as the strongest predictor for further engagement with a news item (and thus potential knowledge gain) on Facebook (Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017; Kümpel, 2019).

Political interest is not only a stable predictor of news consumption (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) but also influences the diversity and richness of individuals' news repertoires. Dvir-Gvirsman (2022) found that individuals with higher political interest are more likely to consume news across multiple platforms and actively participate in sharing news on social media. Conversely, those with lower political interest tend to consume less news overall, regardless of the platform. Additionally, individuals with higher levels of political interest are more likely to develop richer political information repertoires that combine both digital and traditional methods of searching for political information (Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran, 2016). Therefore, understanding the role of political interest is crucial for examining news consumption on social media. Given that this is understudied in the specific case of Instagram and each platform has distinct affordances, we formulate the fourth research question as follows:

RQ4: How does political interest influence news usage on Instagram?[1]

4 Method

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to gain insights about adult Swiss Instagram users' news consumption on the platform. The participants were recruited by the market research institute LINK, and the survey took place from June 20 to 23, 2023, via an online questionnaire. Soft quotas for age and gender were aimed for; Men between the ages of 18 and 24 are underrepresented in the sample compared to the basic population of Instagram users in Switzerland at that time (NapoleonCat, 2024). The survey was part of a larger study; after participating in the survey, participants could opt-in to follow a (manipulated) news account for one week and evaluate it thereafter. Results of this field experiment will

1 The current state of research would suggest a positive correlation and it would therefore also have been possible to formulate a hypothesis. However, the present study is descriptive and does not aim to test hypotheses, which is why we refrained from doing so.

be reported in a different publication. The study was approved by the IRB of the University of Fribourg, Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences; all participants gave informed consent before completing the questionnaire.

4.1 Sample

A total of $N = 511$ people living in the German-speaking part of Switzerland who use Instagram several times a week were surveyed. Seventeen respondents were excluded from the final analysis due to indicators of low response quality (e.g., Meade & Craig, 2012). Thirteen respondents exhibited a high Relative Speed Index (RSI, > 2), suggesting that they may not have attentively completed the questionnaire (Leiner, 2019). Additionally, four more cases showed both a high RSI and low response variance (straightlining). Finally, the sample comprised $n = 494$ participants. The age range in the sample reaches from 18 to 78 years with a mean age of 38 years ($SD = 12.61$), and a median age of 36 years. Overall, 222 of the participants are men (44.9%) and 272 are women (55.1%). Educational attainment varies: 1 person (0.2%) has no degree, 18 (3.6%) have vocational education, 176 (35.6%) have completed an apprenticeship, 68 (13.8%) have finished high school, 107 (21.7%) have attended college or a higher professional education institution, and 124 (25.1%) have attained a university degree.

4.2 Measures

4.2.1 General Instagram use

We followed the recommendations by De Vreese & Nijens (2016) to capture different dimensions of media use and to include aids such as smartphone metrics for more reliable measurements.

Frequency of Instagram use was measured at the beginning of the survey with an ordinal scale ranging from "never" to "several times a day". The market research company only recruited individuals from their panel who use Instagram at least weekly; this was confirmed with a screening question that measured Instagram use on a scale from "never" to "multiple times a day". Participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria were automatically screened out via the initial filter question.

Time spent on Instagram was measured in minutes per day. Participants were instructed to look this up in the screen time tracking metrics on their smartphone.

Engagement with Instagram content was measured in terms of *likes*, *shares*, *comments*, and *posting*. Each behavior was measured with one item of a 5-point Likert scale from "very seldom" to "very often" with an alternative response option "I never do this".

Motivations for Instagram use were measured based on Rubin (1983), adapted to the Instagram context. Each motivation was measured with one item on a 5-point Likert scale from "does not apply at all" to "fully applies". The following motivations were considered: relaxation, entertainment, pass time, companionship, social interaction, information, learning, arousal, and escape.

4.2.2 Instagram use for news

We used an adapted version of the list-frequency approach (Andersen et al., 2016) to identify which news sources participants encounter and how they evaluate them. Since we could not find suitable scales to measure evaluations of news accounts on Instagram and motivations for their (non-)use, own items were developed for these constructs.

Exposure to news on Instagram was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "every time" [when I use Instagram]. Three indicators were considered, each measured with one item: News content from news media I know, news content from news media I don't know, and news content from bloggers or influencers.

Exposure to Swiss news accounts was measured for the 20 most used Swiss news media with an Instagram account. This list was created based on online traffic data from Mediapulse; only news media that publish in German and with a general news focus (i.e., no special interest outlets such as Cash) were considered. These are: *20 Minuten, Basler Zeitung, Berner Zeitung, Blick, Blue News, Bote der Urschweiz, Bz Basel, Der Bund, Luzerner Zeitung, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Solothurner Zeitung, SRF News, St. Galler Tagblatt, Südostschweiz, Tages-Anzeiger, Watson.* For each of these accounts, participants were asked to indicate if 1) they have seen it on Instagram but don't follow it, 2) they follow it, or 3) they have never seen it on Instagram. A "don't know"

option was available. Further, participants could type the names of other news accounts they see on Instagram in a text box.

Evaluation of Swiss news accounts was measured for all accounts that a participant had indicated to see on Instagram (whether they follow them or not). For each selected account, participants rated four items on a 5-point Likert scale from "do not agree at all" to "fully agree". The items were: informative, comprehensible, entertaining, and motivating to seek further information on a topic.

Motivations to follow a news account were measured for all participants who follow at least one news account on Instagram, whether it was in the list or not. Five motivations were considered: out of habit, because of a positive evaluation of the account/content, to obtain incidental information, to intentionally find information, and because of the entertaining presentation of news. Each motivation was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "does not apply at all" to "fully applies".

Motivations to not follow a news account were measured in a similar way for those who indicated not to follow any news account on Instagram. Four motivations were considered: using Instagram only for entertainment/socialization, a lack of awareness of news accounts on Instagram, a dislike of news accounts/content on Instagram, and no interest in news. Each motivation was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "does not apply at all" to "fully applies".

4.2.3 Individual differences

Political interest was measured with a single item ("How much are you generally interested in politics?"), with a five-point Likert scale reaching from "very little" to "very much". A comparison of different measurements showed that political interest can reliably be measured as a one-dimensional concept (Prior, 2018). For further analysis, respondents were grouped into "low political interest" (1–2), "moderate political interest" (3), and "high political interest" (4–5). This allowed us to compare different levels of political interest accurately using ordinal data.

Sociodemographic information was measured to obtain a sample that matches the user base of Instagram in Switzerland as closely as possible. Age was measured in years; gender as male, female, or diverse/other; and education with six categories (no completed school, vocational school, apprenticeship, high school, higher professional education, University degree).

5 Results

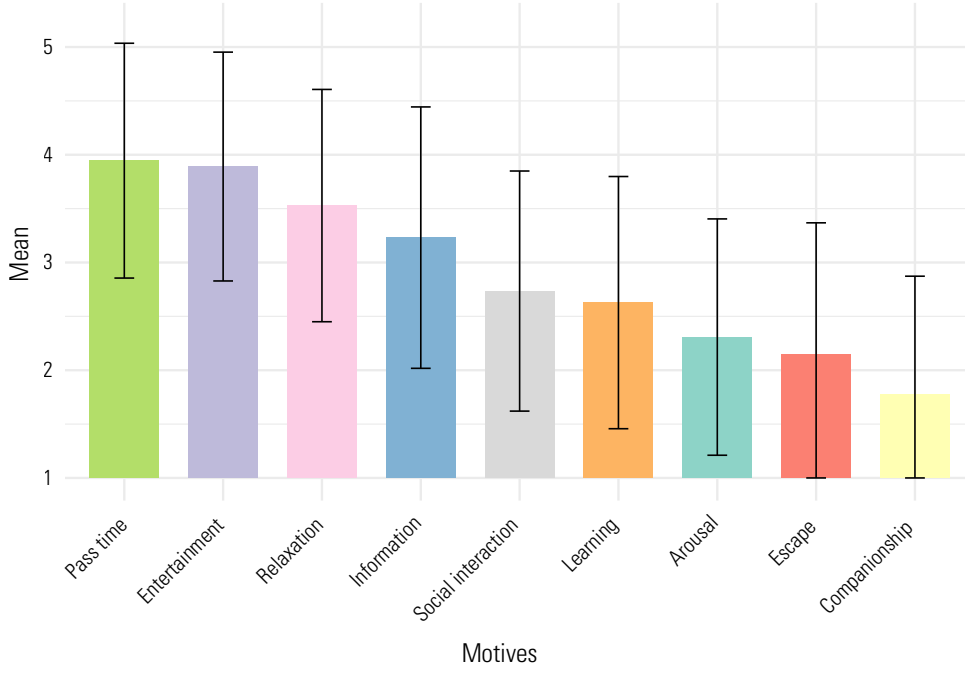
The sample consists of adult frequent Instagram users. Nevertheless, a first analysis of general Instagram use was conducted to get an overview of usage habits. Participants report an average Instagram usage time of $M = 41.41$ minutes per day ($SD = 40.48$). Most respondents are generally rather passive Instagram users, with mostly liking ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.25$) and sharing ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.32$), and less frequently creating posts ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.09$) or commenting ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.00$).

Regarding motives, participants mostly indicated using Instagram in the context of enjoyment and stress relief; pastime, entertainment, and relaxation are the most important usage motives. Information is the fourth most important usage motive, which indicates that users are also turning to the platform to stay updated. Interpersonal aspects are less important. *Figure 1* provides an overview of the extent of all usage motives.

5.1 News use on Instagram and (non-)use motives

The first research question aims at understanding Swiss Instagram users' news consumption on the platform. A large majority of respondents (91.3%) indicated that they at least occasionally encounter news content on Instagram. However, 43 participants (8.7%) reported not encountering any news on the platform, which suggests that they (intentionally or unintentionally) avoided news content. Instagram users see more news content from familiar news media brands ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.13$) than from unknown organizations ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.00$). Among the respondents, 52 (11.1%) never encounter news from media they are familiar with on Instagram, 101 (21.5%) rarely, 143 (30.4%) sometimes, 156 (33.2%) often, and 42 (8.9%) always. For exposure to content from unfamiliar media, 120 (29.2%) reported to never encounter such news, 193 (46.9%) to rarely do so, 128 (31.1%) sometimes, 39 (9.5%) often, and 14 (3.4%)

Figure 1: Instagram usage motives



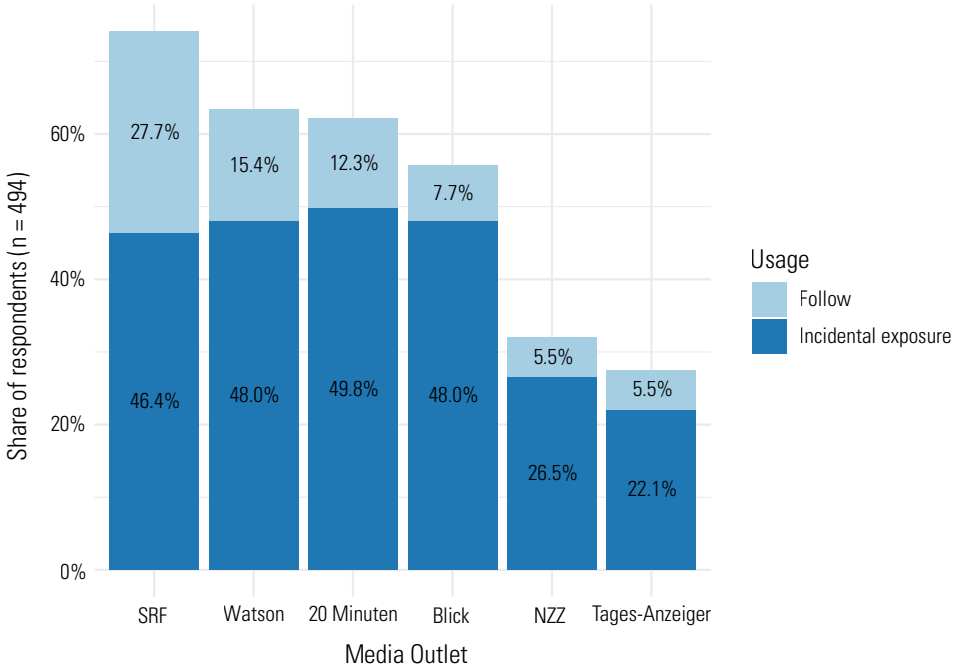
Note: Motives were measured using a 5-point Likert scale reaching from 1 (not agreeing at all to use Instagram for the indicated reason) to 5 (fully agreeing). The error bars represent standard deviations and were trimmed at the x-axis if they extended below the minimum possible value of 1 due to many low values.

always. Thus, most Instagram users at least occasionally encounter content by news organizations they know, while they only seldomly encounter news content from unknown media organizations.

News media contact on Instagram can be intentional (i.e., following a news account) or incidental (encountering news content without following an account). Looking at intentional exposure, our data shows that respondents follow between 0 and 16 of the media accounts included in the survey ($M = 0.95$, $SD = 1.75$), with users following about one account on average. Most Instagram users in the sample (260 respondents; 52.6%) do not follow any of the outlets. 86 people (17.4%) reported to follow one account, 45 (9.1%) to follow two, 29 (5.9%) to follow three, 14 (2.8%) to follow four, and 7 (1.4%) to follow five. Only 7 respondents (1.4%) indicated to follow more than five news outlets. When it comes to incidental exposure, the picture looks different. Here, only 81 respondents (16.4%) indicated to not have encountered any of the media outlets from the list ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 3.22$). 52 (10.5%) reported to incidentally have seen news content by one of them, 67 (13.6%) by two, 59 (11.9%) by three, 69 (14.0%) by four, 42 (8.5%) by five, 25 (5.1%) by six, 12 (2.4%) by seven, and 13 (2.6%) by eight. 28 participants (5.6%) have seen news content by more than eight accounts. Thus, while about every second Swiss Instagram user follows a news account on Instagram, more than 80% of users occasionally encounter news content by one of the news organizations included in the survey.

But which specific news content do Swiss Instagram users get in contact with on the platform? The six most frequently used media accounts are (in descending order) *SRF News* (*Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen*, public broadcaster), *Watson* (tabloid), *20 Minuten* (tabloid), *Blick* (tabloid), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ; quality newspaper), and *Tages-Anzeiger* (quality newspaper). For the other media accounts, more than 76% of respondents stated that they had never encountered them on Instagram, which is why these media

Figure 2: Follows and incidental exposure of the top six news outlets on Instagram



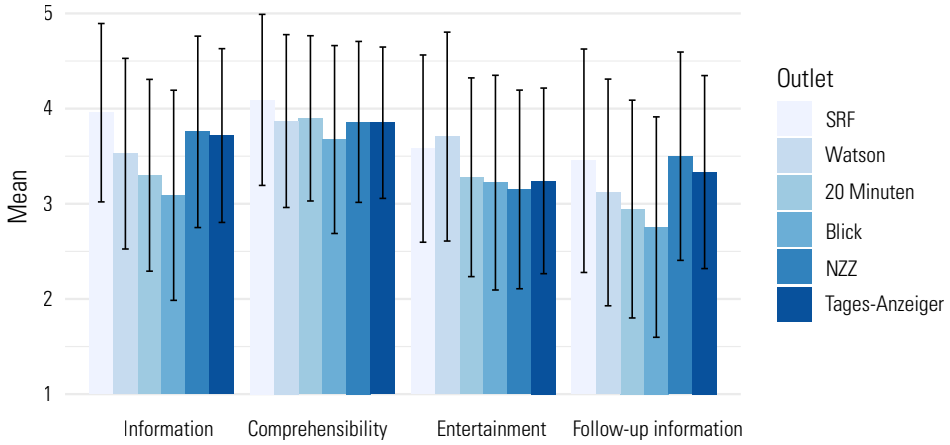
were not included for the subsequent analyses. Overall, most respondents get into contact with *SRF News*. This is because this account has the highest number of followers (27.7%). Incidental exposure is slightly higher for all three tabloids *20 Minuten* (49.8%), *Watson* (48.0%), and Blick (48.0%), compared to *SRF News* (46.4%). Of note, there is a clear exposure gap between the four most used outlets and the two quality newspapers *NZZ,* and *Tages-Anzeiger. Figure 2* presents the details on the incidental and intentional use of news content of the six most popular media outlets.

The second research question aims at understanding why Instagram users follow, or respectively do not follow, news accounts on Instagram. Participants' strongest motive to follow at least one news account is incidental information ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.04$). The second strongest motive is because they like the content of the respective account(s) ($M = 3.73$, SD = 0.91). Moreover, Instagram users follow accounts out of habit ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.23$) and because the content is entertaining ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.98$). The least prevalent motive is to find specific information on certain topics ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.21$), but with a mean value above the scale's midpoint, this motive is also relevant. The strongest reason to not follow any news accounts is that users want to use Instagram for entertainment and not to get informed ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.02$). The second most important reason, although with noticeably less support, is to not like the news content on Instagram ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.31$). This is followed by general disinterest in news content ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.35$), and not knowing about the existence of news content on Instagram ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.37$). Overall, there are many reasons why Instagram users choose to follow a news account, while non-following is primarily motivated by the desire to keep Instagram an entertainment environment.

5.2 News evaluation

The third research question revolves around the evaluation of Swiss news accounts on Instagram. Outlets were evaluated based on how informative, how comprehensive, and how entertaining their content is, and to what extent it encourages users to find more information about a given topic. Only the six most frequently used outlets are considered for analysis. The data was restructured to long-for-

Figure 3: Evaluation of the top six news outlets on Instagram



Note: Each evaluation variable was measured using a 5-point Likert scale reaching from 1 (not agreeing at all that the outlet fulfills the given aspect) to 5 (fully agreeing). Error bars represent standard deviations.

mat to compare the outlets. *Figure 3* provides an overview of all variables and outlets.

A one-way ANOVA showed that there are significant differences regarding the evaluation of information, $F(5, 1319) = 25.81$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Overall, *SRF News* ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.94$) is rated as most informative. A post hoc test (Tukey HSD) showed that it is perceived to be significantly more informative ($p < .001$) than all three tabloids; *Watson* (M = 3.53, SD = 1.00), *20 Minuten* ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.01$), and *Blick* ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.10$). *SRF News* is not seen significantly more informative than quality newspapers *NZZ* ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.01$), and *Tages-Anzeiger* ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.91$), though. Both quality newspapers, however, are significantly better evaluated ($p < .01$) than *20 Minuten* and *Blick*. *Watson,* being considered the most informative of all tabloids, differs significantly ($p < .001$) from *Blick*, which overall has the lowest score.

Regarding comprehensibility of the content, a one-way ANOVA also showed significant differences between the media outlets, $F(5, 1319) = 6.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .02$. With means reaching from 3.68 (*Blick*; $SD = 0.99$) to 4.09 (*SRF News*; $SD = 0.94$) all outlets reach a decent level of comprehensibility. Nevertheless, a post hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that *SRF News* is perceived as more comprehensible than *Blick* ($p < .001$) and *Watson* ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.91$, $p < .05$). There were no significant differences regarding comprehensibility between the other outlets.

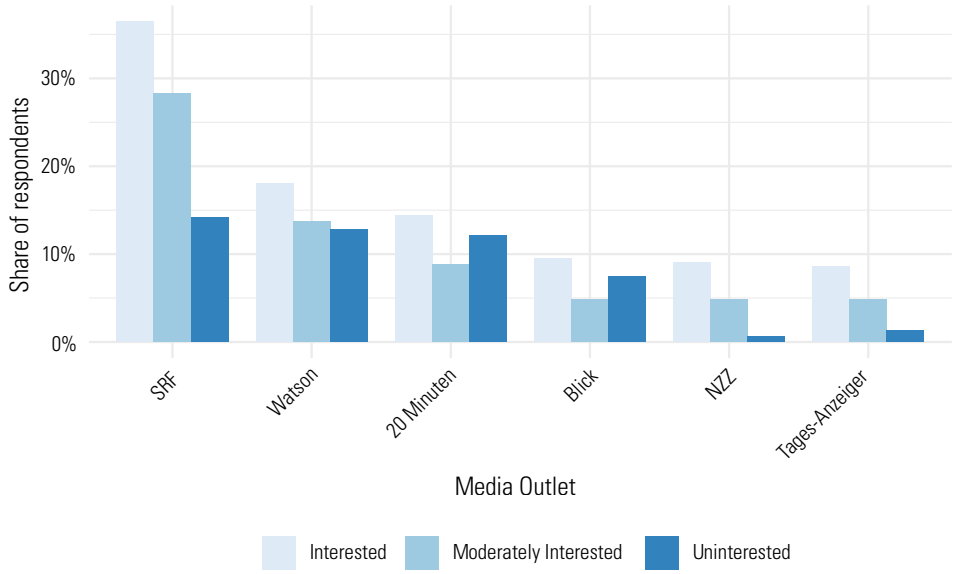
There are also differences regarding entertainment, as a one-way ANOVA showed, $F(5, 1312) = 10.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. *Watson* is evaluated as the most entertaining ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.10$), followed by *SRF News* ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.98$). A post hoc test (Tukey HSD) showed that there is no significant difference between the two, but both are rated as significantly more entertaining than *20 Minuten* ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.04$), *Blick* ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.13$), *Tages-Anzeiger* ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.98$), and *NZZ* ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.04$)[2].

Finally, a one-way ANOVA revealed differences regarding the encouragement to find further information, $F(5, 1320) = 14.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. *NZZ* ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.01$), having the highest score, differs significantly from *Blick* ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.16$, $p < .001$), *Watson* ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.19$, $p < .05$), and *20 Minuten* ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.14$). *SRF News* ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.17$) encourages participants significantly more to get further information than Blick ($p < .001$), *Watson* ($p < .01$), and *20 Minuten* ($p < .001$). *Tages-Anzeiger* ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.01$) differs significantly from *Blick* ($p < .001$), and *20 Minuten* ($p < .05$). Again, *Watson* is the only tabloid that is evaluated better than another tabloid media, i. e., *Blick* ($p < .01$).

Overall, the different approaches that Swiss news media have at presenting news

2 All p values are $< .001$, except for the difference between *SRF News* and *Tages-Anzeiger* ($p < .05$), and *SRF News* and *20 Minuten* ($p < .01$).

Figure 4: Follows of the six most frequently used news outlets grouped by political interest



Note: Percentages refer to the relative number of respondents within each political interest group: Interested (n=222), Moderately Interested (n=124), and Uninterested (n=148). For example, 36.5% of those interested in politics indicated that they follow SRF News on Instagram.

content on Instagram (see Wirz et al., 2023) are reflected in the differential evaluations of the news accounts. Quality news media are generally perceived as more informative and generate a higher interest to follow up on a news topic. Among them, *SRF News* stands out because the content is rated as most comprehensible and highly entertaining.

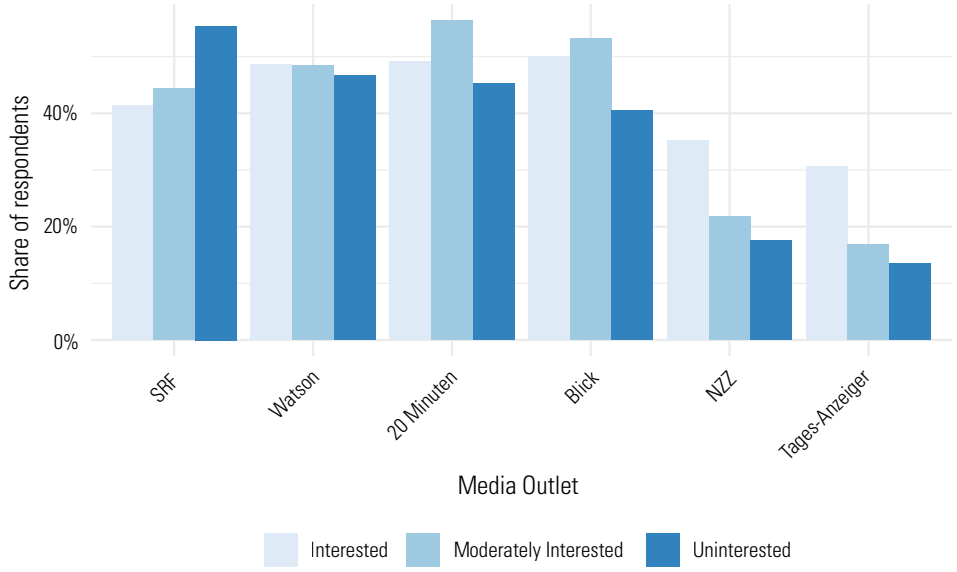
5.3 The role of political interest

The final research question aims at understanding the role of political interest in Instagram news usage. Different levels of political interest (low, moderate, high) were compared. The group of respondents with little political interest consists of 148 individuals (30.0% of the full sample), with 40 men (27.0%) and 108 women (73.0%), and a mean age of 35.98 (SD = 11.56). 124 respondents (25.1%) are moderately interested in politics. In this group there are 50 men (40.3%), and 74 women (59.7%) with a mean age of 37.49 (SD = 12.29). With 222 respondents (44.9%) the group of those who are highly interested in politics is the largest. It consists of 132 men (59.5%) and 90 women (40.5%) with a mean age of 39.64 (SD = 13.27). There are no significant differences between the groups regarding general Instagram usage and usage motives. This indicates that general platform usage does not depend on political interest.

However, differences were found regarding news consumption on the platform. One-way ANOVAs showed significant differences both for the number of followed accounts, $F(2, 445) = 4.48$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, and incidental exposure, $F(2, 445) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) revealed that those highly interested in politics follow more accounts (M = 1.19, SD = 1.73) than those with low political interest (M = 0.61, SD = 1.59, $p < .01$). Further, those highly interested in politics also have more incidental contact to news accounts (M = 3.77, SD = 3.31) than respondents with little political interest (M = 2.79, SD = 2.47, p < .05). Those moderately interested in politics do not significantly differ from the other groups regarding deliberate or incidental news exposure.

A detailed look at news exposure to the most frequently used media outlets gives more insights into the news consumption of respondents with different levels of political interest. Regardless of the outlet's overall reach, the proportion of followers who indicate high political interest is higher than that of those with moderate or low interest throughout all media. (see *Figure 4* for a full overview). This indicates that the tendency

Figure 5: Incidental exposure to the six most frequently used news outlets grouped by political interest



Note: Percentages refer to the relative number of respondents within each political interest group: Interested (n=222), Moderately Interested (n=124), and Uninterested (n=148). For example, 55.4% of those uninterested in politics indicated that they incidentally see news content by SRF News on Instagram, even though they do not follow.

of users with higher levels of political interest to follow news outlets on Instagram does not depend on the news organization. The proportional share of followers further shows that respondents with moderate political interest follow *SRF News* remarkably more compared to other accounts. Follows for *Watson* are at a similar level for those moderately interested and uninterested in politics. However, uninterested respondents would rather follow the tabloids *20 Minuten* and *Blick* than those who are moderately interested. At the same time, almost none of those uninterested in politics follow quality newspapers *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*, whereas some of the moderately interested do. Overall, while *SRF News* reaches the largest number of politically uninterested users, the ratio of uninterested users to the total number of users is remarkably higher for the three tabloid media (*Watson, 20 Minuten*, and *Blick*).

A different picture emerges for incidental exposure. Within each level of political interest, more than 40% indicate having incidentally encountered news content by *SRF News*, *Watson*, *20 Minuten*, and *Blick* (see *Figure 5*). For *SRF News*, incidental exposure is proportionally the highest for those uninterested in politics. On the other hand, those moderately interested in politics are most frequently incidentally exposed to news content by *20 Minuten* and *Blick*. For quality newspapers *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*, incidental exposure is still the highest for those with high levels of political interest. Overall, it becomes evident that *SRF News* and all three tabloid media reach users throughout all levels of political interest. Those who are interested in politics tend to follow these outlets, whereas the other groups are reached incidentally. However, respondents with high political interest follow and incidentally encounter quality media more frequently than the other groups.

Motives to follow news accounts on Instagram do not differ significantly across levels of political interest. However, a one-way ANOVA showed significant differences regarding the general disinterest in news, $F(2, 215) = 14.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$. As a post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed, respondents with a low level of political interest ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.33$) agree more to not follow any news accounts because of general disinterest in news than moderately interested ($M = 2.48$,

Table 1: Means of the evaluation of news content on the Instagram accounts by NZZ and SRF News for different levels of political interest

	Uninterested		Moderately Interested		Highly Interested	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)	*n*=20		*n*=26		*n*=84	
Information	3.06[a, b]	1.21	3.85[a]	0.97	3.88[b]	0.92
Comprehensibility	3.47	0.90	3.92	0.84	3.93	0.82
Entertainment	2.56[c]	1.15	3.27	1.04	3.24[c]	0.99
Encouragement for follow-up information	3.00[d]	1.12	3.31	1.12	3.68[d]	1.04
SRF News	*n*=88		*n*=80		*n*=160	
Information	3.69[e, f]	1.01	4.15[e]	0.80	4.01[f]	0.93
Comprehensibility	3.82[g]	1.03	4.09	0.82	4.24[g]	0.82
Entertainment	3.39[h]	1.09	3.80[h]	0.81	3.57	0.99
Encouragement for follow-up information	2.98[i, j]	1.26	3.67[i]	0.90	3.60[j]	1.18

Note: Group differences on a level of [a, c, d, f, h] $p<.05$, [b, e] $p<.01$, [g, i, j] $p<.001$ based on a post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD).

$SD=1.26$, $p<.05$), and highly interested individuals ($M=1.99$, $SD=1.23$, $p<.001$).

Finally, there are also differences regarding the evaluation of the different outlets, as a one-way ANOVA of the mean scores of all evaluation variables showed, $F(2, 330)=5.99$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.06$. A post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) found those uninterested in politics to have significantly lower evaluation scores of *SRF News* ($M=3.40$, $SD=0.99$), and *NZZ* ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.88$) than those moderately ($M_{SRF\ News}=3.92$, $SD=0.68$, $p<.001$; $M_{NZZ}=3.59$, $SD=0.83$, $p<.05$), and those highly interested in politics ($M_{SRF\ News}=3.86$, $SD=0.82$, $p<.001$; $M_{NZZ}=3.69$, $SD=0.75$, $p<.01$). There were no significant differences for the other media.

Detailed differences become apparent when looking at the individual evaluation variables. A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that those with a moderate interest in politics evaluate the content of *20 Minuten* ($M=3.54$, $SD=0.68$) as more informative than those with a strong interest ($M=3.10$, $SD=1.08$; $F(2, 264)=4.75$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.04$). One-way ANOVAS showed that for *SRF News* there are differences regarding information, $F(2, 323)=5.55$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.03$; comprehensibility, $F(2, 324)=6.59$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.04$; entertainment, $F(2,316)=3.61$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.02$; and encouragement to seek follow-up information, $F(2,322)=10.25$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.06$.

For *NZZ*, there are differences regarding information, $F(2, 124)=5.46$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.08$; entertainment, $F(2,123)=3.56$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.06$; and encouragement to seek follow-up information, $F(2, 127)=3.76$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.06$. *Table 1* provides an overview of the exact differences between the groups for *SRF News* and *NZZ*. Of note, while most differences occur between those with low and with high interest in politics, those moderately interested in politics find *SRF News* the most entertaining, and more entertaining than those uninterested in politics. This is not the case for the highly interested group. There are no significant differences for *Blick*, *Tages-Anzeiger,* and *Watson*.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This study sheds light on how adults in Switzerland who frequently use Instagram consume news on the platform and what role political interest plays in this. The first aim of this study was to understand how and how often Instagram users consume news on the platform (RQ1). 91.3% of respondents indicated that they at least occasionally see news content by familiar or unfamiliar news organizations on Instagram. Thereby, encountering news by familiar news outlets is more likely than by unfamiliar ones. Nearly half of the re-

spondents (47,4%) follow at least one news account. Moreover, 83,6% of respondents reported incidentally encountering at least one of the news accounts included in the survey. Although almost all heavy Instagram users encounter some news content on the platform, exposure to news is therefore rather incidental than intentional. This goes in line with the assumption that online platforms and social media specifically encourage incidental news exposure (Kümpel, 2022; Tewksbury et al., 2001). The high level of news contact underscores the importance that Instagram has gained as a platform for news; while it might still be a niche for news access in the general population (Reuters, 2024), only a very small number of frequent Instagram users do not get in contact with news content on the platform. Compared to other findings on social media news use in Switzerland (e.g., Siegen & Schneider, 2024), our results indicate a rather high exposure rate. One possible explanation for this could be our focus on frequent Instagram users. While this limits the generalizability to the entire population, this approach provides valuable insights to understand the platform audience. Among the most encountered news outlets, *SRF News* stands out due to its high followership (27.7%), while the tabloids *20 Minuten*, *Watson*, and *Blick* have high incidental exposure rates. This might be a result of algorithmic curation; these outlets provide more non- and soft news, i.e., rather entertaining than informative content (Wirz & Zai, 2025). Previous research has shown that human interest is the most important news value on Instagram (Al-Rawi, Al-Musalli, & Fakida, 2021). Future research could investigate in more detail how features of news content on Instagram are related to its popularity on the platform.

Motives to follow at least one news outlet on Instagram, as well as reasons to not follow any (RQ2), give more insight regarding incidental and intentional news exposure. The most important motive to follow a news account is to get incidentally informed. This means that even those who deliberately follow news media mostly do so to occasionally see news content in their feed. This is in line with previous findings on social media news usage motives (Schwaiger et al., 2022). Conversely, the platform seems to be less suitable for seeking specific information. In that sense, news use on Instagram seems to follow the "news finds me" logic (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Users who decide to follow a news account can trust that they stay up to date when scrolling through their feed. Hence, following a news account is a form of incidental use (Kümpel, 2021), even if following implies a certain intention to curate one's own feed (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Future research could differ between merely incidental news exposure (i.e., stumbling upon news content even though one does not follow), situational incidental exposure (Kümpel, 2021; i.e., incidentally seeing news content as a result of following a news account), and intentional exposure modes (Heiss et al., 2020; e.g., intentionally visiting a news company's profile or looking for social media news content on certain topics).

The most important reason not to follow any media accounts is that users do not use Instagram to encounter information, but to be entertained. This goes in line with the general motives to use the platform in the first place and general gratifications for social media use (Schwaiger et al., 2022; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Most respondents indicated that they mainly use Instagram for leisure activities, enjoyment, and stress relief, and less so to stay up to date. This indicates that Instagram is first and foremost an entertainment platform. Although these users know that there is news content on Instagram, they do not want to use it. It is also evident that not following news accounts has less to do with not liking the content or a general disinterest in news. Therefore, it can rather be explained with general platform affordances. This finding has important implications considering the discussion about news avoidance and mental health (e.g., Villi et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2024). That the avoidance of news content to keep Instagram a mere entertainment environment does not differ across levels of political interest suggests that some users might deliberately curate Instagram as a news-free space, while following news on other platforms.

According to our data, *SRF News* and *Watson* reach the largest audience on Instagram. The evaluation of the news accounts (RQ3) might provide some explanations for this. Both accounts are perceived as more enter-

taining than the other news outlets. *SRF News* is further perceived as the most informative and comprehensible. This combination of comprehensible information and entertainment, which is also confirmed by a content analysis (Wirz & Zai, 2025), seems to be a success factor. On the one hand, it reflects a good adaptation to the platform logic, and on the other hand, infotainment content is generally considered to be appealing, especially for those with lower interest in politics (Mothes, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Pearson, 2019). Combining information and entertainment thus seems a promising strategy for news outlets that want to reach new audiences on Instagram; *SRF News* demonstrates that this approach is also feasible for quality media.

Political interest (RQ4) plays a significant role in news consumption patterns on Instagram. Those with high political interest follow more news accounts and have greater incidental exposure to news content than those with low political interest. This finding is in line with previous research focusing on more traditional social media platforms (Kümpel, 2020) and news consumption in general (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). The findings of this study show that on Instagram, most users are exposed to some news content. Nevertheless, almost only those with a strong interest in politics have contact with the quality media *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*. These outlets have a low incidental reach and are evaluated better by those with high political interest. It seems that these media mainly cater to their loyal readership rather than trying to expand their audience on Instagram. This indicates that those interested in politics further expand their news repertoire through Instagram, as has already been shown for other platforms (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2022; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Understanding the role of Instagram news consumption in the overall news repertoire should be considered in future research.

The study has some limitations that need to be addressed. First, news consumption is measured using self-reported data. Relying on self-reported survey data for digital news usage can bring problems with validity, as respondents generally tend to overestimate their digital media use (Parry et al., 2021). Therefore, the results regarding news contact should be interpreted with caution. Future research should use actual usage data (e.g., logged data) to measure news exposure. However, survey data also allows for assessing motives and the evaluation of specific news outlets, which were important research goals of this study. Additionally, respondents were not asked to indicate exact usage frequencies and media exposure, but whether they followed an outlet, and if not, whether they still had encountered its news content on Instagram. Even though this may reduce bias regarding the validity of news usage, this is a further limitation. The fact that a respondent indicates having encountered some news content by an outlet does not yet allow any conclusions to be drawn about the frequency of use and the type of content they encounter. While some of the incidental exposure might consist of a regular display of highly informative political news, other forms might consist of occasional contact with mere entertainment or soft news topics. This could be specified in future surveys or, again, be clarified using logged data. To assess in detail how different types of news content are perceived and processed, and how political interest interferes with this process, future research should also use experimental methods.

Further, political interest was measured using a single item, indicating the interest in political topics on a five-point Likert scale. While general political interest proves to be reliably measurable as a one-dimensional, self-reported construct (Prior, 2018), the classification into three different levels of political interest (low, moderate, high) and the group comparisons using ANOVAs could be criticized. However, the ordinal data is not ideal for regression analysis; this could lead to type 1 errors due to a model overfit and violations of regression criteria. ANOVAs with group comparisons based on the item scale, on the other hand, are more accurate, interpretable, and transparent.

Finally, the sample consisted of adult, frequent Instagram users and is not fully representative of the general population of Instagram users in Switzerland. The selection of frequent users reduces memory bias; someone who uses Instagram once a month might not well remember what content they encounter there, and Instagram has less rel-

evance for their overall media diet and informedness.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of news consumption on Instagram. It shows that the vast majority of adult, frequent Instagram users in Switzerland encounter news content on the platform. The extent of both intentional and incidental exposure goes in line with the level of political interest. However, adapting to the platform logic by integrating infotainment proves effective in reaching broader audiences, including those less interested in politics. This approach holds potential for media companies to make hard news topics such as politics more appealing to entertainment-oriented users, thereby expanding their reach and impact. This is relevant for general opinion formation in democratic systems. Our study also demonstrates that the main reason not to follow any news account on Instagram is the intention to keep Instagram as a space for entertainment. While it is desirable from a normative point of view to use Instagram as a means to convey information to less politically interested citizens, it is also important to consider that media users should have the possibility to keep certain media environments news-free to foster relaxation and well-being.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

Data and materials described in the article are available at https://osf.io/3j7d8/?view_only=230ff6ad38e44d6b93815e1b9a2cd4ec.

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