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Participating or Tuning Out? Engagement with Political Content on Social Media

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Drawing on theoretical explanations of political information consumption, political self-expression, and social media affordances, this article examines the engagement of social media users from Latvia with political content in the context of parliamentary elections. According to the results of semi-structured interviews (N = 49), social media can facilitate following politics and expose users to information they have not been actively seeking out. While users are able to curate their newsfeeds, not all of the interviewees did so actively to disengage from political content even though they were not interested in it and displayed signs of information overload. This kind of incidental exposure did not substantially contribute to their willingness to engage with politics. Although many interviewees were politically active in some way, their hesitation to express their opinions about political matters persisted. This is explained by a perception of political participation as activities that should be undertaken in private, rather than publicly communicated. Furthermore, social media affordances that allow users to be visible and identifiable are shown to exacerbate the obstacles to expressing political views.

Keywords: political participation, political expression, political content, social media for news, social media affordances

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Social media platforms have become important venues where users access and interact with various kinds of information, and this has implications for citizen engagement with politics. On the one hand, social media platforms facilitate following diverse and up-to-date news sources (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018) and allow sharing and discussing information among heterogeneous groups of people (Vitak, 2012). On the other hand, users may create personalized information environments that exclude topics and viewpoints they are not interested in (Cinelli et al., 2020; Parmelee & Roman, 2020). Moreover, only a minority of users create content (Kittur, Suh, Pendleton, & Chi, 2007; Poell & Borra, 2011); thus the majority inhabit an information environment that is disproportionately shaped by a few.

Considering the diversity of social media use and its outcomes, this article contributes to the understanding of engagement with political content that users encounter on their newsfeeds and political self-expression. These issues are explored through the experiences of Latvian social media users before the parliamentary election.

Exposure to Political Information on Social Media

The information environment experienced by social media users is shaped by many factors, but users' preferences and actions are crucial among them.

Despite the potential of social media to promote political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014), politics is among the topics that people may try to avoid (Bode, Vraga, & Troller-Renfree, 2017; Stroud, 2007; Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016). Some instances of political content, such as recommendations by connections valued by a user (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015) or inflammatory posts about a political position or party, attract more attention.

Individual's interest in politics is particularly impactful in high-choice information environments, including social media. According to Prior (2005), in a high-choice media environment, people who are interested in politics use access to such information and become more politically knowledgeable and active, while people less interested in politics are more likely to avoid politics-related information. As a result, the political knowledge gap between those two groups increases (Prior, 2005).

However, even those who do not have a specific interest in political developments may encounter such topics in the media. Incidental exposure is a key mechanism through which a considerable segment of the online audience learns about current events (Yadamsuren & Erdelez, 2010). This applies to social media, too (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018). Since heavy users of social media are less likely to consume other information sources apart from social media (Bucholtz, 2015) and a large proportion of news encountered on social media originates from mass media organizations (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018), incidental exposure may promote political knowledge among a broad audience. However, in this mode of news consumption, attention paid to information tends to be fragmentary and brief, and news is just one type of the diverse information that users encounter on their newsfeeds (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Moreover, social media users who think that they will encounter important news without actively seeking it out are less knowledgeable about politics than those who do not have such a perception (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017).

A considerable body of research has examined the outcomes of news consumption on social media, but less attention has been paid to the dynamics of the process (Boczkowski et al., 2018). In addition, much of the previous research examines news consumption in general, although various types of news (politics, economics, sports, entertainment, etc.) are likely perceived and consumed differently. For example, in Fletcher and Nielsen's (2019) study, the interviewees tended to perceive social media as a place for "soft" news. Given the importance of the political knowledge of citizens in a democratic society, this article aims to contribute to the study of the consumption of political information on social media. However, since news does not have a privileged status on social media newsfeeds and is consumed alongside other types of content (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018), this article does not distinguish between mass media reports on political affairs and other types of political content. Based on these considerations, the article poses the first research question:

RQ1: How do social media users access and consume political information on their social media newsfeeds?

Paying attention to politics is considered one of the citizens' duties. Engaging in political debates, as well as formulating and voicing one's opinions, is also important in civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013; Zhu, Chan, & Chou, 2019), and expressing political views online amplifies the impact of online and traditional media use on offline political participation (Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). The next section analyzes research on expressing opinions about politics and engaging in debates on social media.

Political Self-Expression on Social Media

Although political discussions play an important role in the political process of democratic societies, politics is considered a sensitive topic by many, and expressing one's opinion about political matters, including on social media, can lead to potentially adverse interpersonal consequences (Liu, Rui, & Cui, 2017). According to the survey results by the Pew Research Center (McClain, 2021), few users from the United States frequently post about political matters on social media. The most frequently mentioned reasons for abstaining from political expression were the perceived possibility of their posts being used against them; the fear of being attacked by other users for the posts; and having nothing to contribute to such topics. The respondents in other studies have additionally expressed a belief that discussions on social media are of low quality (Gustafsson, 2012; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021; Sipos, 2018).

In light of the obstacles to expressing one's opinion, it is crucial to consider what encourages people to speak out. Social media users tend to express their views if they feel strongly about a particular issue (Fox & Holt, 2018; Hong & Kim, 2021). If a person has firm partisan beliefs, incidental exposure to disagreeable content promotes sharing of agreeable information (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017). Gaming platforms in which users collectively express their political opinions and react to opposing views can also provide insight into the factors promoting political discussions. The playful environment in which such interaction occurs, combined with a topical political issue in a polarized society, encourages users to express their opinions, but the resulting dialogue is agonistic and unproductive (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

Political participation and interest in political affairs are among the possible sources of political opinion strength. Online political activity is linked to political expression on social media (Ferrucci, Hopp, & Vargo, 2019; Hong & Kim, 2021). In Gustafsson's (2012) study, the interviewees who were members of civic or political organizations appreciated social media as tools for participation, but those who were not active in this way avoided sharing their political views.

Furthermore, political self-expression is linked to the perception of citizenship norms. The traditional, duty-based, citizenship model centers on voting in elections, obeying the law, and being informed about politics (Dalton, 2008). Alternative citizenship models, in turn, may put more emphasis on digital activism and political expression (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). As these citizenship models take hold, the activities characteristic to them are expected to become more popular. However, at least the American youth, who could be expected to embrace such citizenship models, do not perceive self-expression as a highly important citizenship norm (Lane, 2020).

This highlights that while engagement with politics may facilitate sharing of one's political views on social media, the civic context of the society adds complexity to this process. To explore the experiences of social media users with social media as an environment for political expression and its relation to political participation, the article poses the second research question:

RQ2: How do social media users' political participation and exposure to political information contribute to their willingness to share their political views?

This article interprets political participation as activities through which citizens influence those in power and that have political consequences. Following Ekman and Amnå's (2012) conceptualization, this includes such activities as voting in elections; expression of one's opinion through petitions, protests, strikes, and boycotts; participation in political parties, movements, or voluntary organizations—but also "latent" forms of participation, including engagement in lifestyle politics, following political news, and discussing politics or other matters of societal importance.

When studying users' activities in an information environment, the structural aspects of this environment that shape the available behaviors also should be considered. The next section describes the perspective of affordances, through which this article will analyze the engagement with political information on social media.

Social Media Affordances

Affordances are properties of an object that enable its available uses (Norman, 2002). Each technology has affordances, and social media, too, provide particular communication possibilities and enable communication practices, thus influencing the dynamics of information sharing and user interaction on the platform (boyd, 2010). Affordances are associated with the features of the particular technology, but they are neither features themselves, such as a mobile phone camera, nor outcomes of use, such as a photo shoot of an incident (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017). Affordances shape the possible outcomes of

technology use by limiting or facilitating certain actions, but they do not determine the outcomes or effects of the technology use (Davis & Chouinard, 2017).

Drawing on previous conceptualizations, Tran (2022) has described affordances that relate to reposting (sharing) of information on social media. These include the visibility of one's actions to the audience, scalability (potential to reach large audiences), the persistence of the published material, the association (establishing a link between the sharer of information and its source), meta-voicing (implicitly expressing commentary on the shared piece), interactivity, and immediacy (the ability to react swiftly and republish without a delay). Tran (2022) interprets these affordances as collectively enabling effective self-presentation by a user, which is an important usage motivation on platforms that are characterized by asynchronicity and which enable the aggregation of multiple audiences as well as audience feedback (Schlosser, 2019). Asynchronicity allows individuals to react at their own pace, thus enabling a more elaborate and reflexive response to the content in question (Shah, 2016).

Halpern and Gibbs (2013) have additionally highlighted the affordances of identifiability and networked information access (similar to the visibility affordance above) that shape online deliberation and suggested that discussions on social media platforms with a higher level of user anonymity are less polite. Platforms that inform users' friends about their comments elsewhere on the site are characterized by a larger circle of people who leave comments in public discussion threads because the increased flow of information fosters participation in the discussion among users' online friends (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). In other words, the visibility of one's identity and actions may influence the online behavior of the user and his or her online friends. However, the visibility can also limit the willingness of a user to engage in political discussions altogether (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021). As one's friend list grows, the likelihood of discussing politics either decreases (Jang, Lee, & Park, 2014) or these discussions tend to take place among more homogeneous subgroups by using privacy settings (Miller, Bobkowski, Maliniak, & Rapoport, 2015) or through direct messages (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021).

The affordance of connectivity (Treem & Leonardi, 2013) that enables interpersonal connections on social media shapes information consumption. Following an information source or becoming "friends" with someone increases one's exposure to information this source or person provides (Merten, 2020). A key role in bringing other social media users' attention to news and providing interpretation is played by opinion leaders (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018) or other active creators and redistributors of content. Their activity likely contributes to the visibility of the posts created or shared, especially among those who curate their newsfeeds to a lesser extent.

Social media users can make use of disconnection affordances (Skoric, Zhu, Koc-Michalska, Boulianne, & Bimber, 2021), which enable unfollowing, unfriending, muting other users, or hiding content to avoid certain information. However, the extent to which different users employ these affordances varies. On the one hand, people who use social media for news are known to engage in uncivil discussions, unfriend users, or hide content due to political differences (Goyanes, Borah, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). On the other hand, a key motivation for social media use is to maintain interpersonal ties, and the importance of keeping in touch with others may be greater than the willingness to avoid disagreeable information they may post. For example, Krämer, Hoffmann, and Eimler (2015) have shown that Facebook users abstain from

eliminating contacts they do not consider useful because it would limit their ability to reconnect with these people in the future, should such a need arise. Bode (2015) states that although social media are commonly thought of as high-control media environments, they should rather be understood as *partial* control environments because of the social constraints that prevent users from being as selective in their exposure to information as they technically could be. Furthermore, Thorson, Vraga, and Klinger-Vilenchik (2014) note that it is easy to skip the content one is not interested in without the need for such radical and explicit forms of disagreement as the dissolution of ties with the source.

Since the affordances approach understands the technology relationally and the technical and social aspects can play out differently in different situations, it is important to consider affordances in specific contexts. Therefore, the final research question is formulated as follows:

RQ3: How did social media affordances shape the consumption of political content and political expression by social media users in Latvia before parliamentary elections?

Election campaign periods typically involve a high volume of politics-related news and discussions about political issues. This creates an atypical informational experience, but at the same time, the phenomena this article explores are more pronounced. The next section gives a brief overview of the Latvian civic society context and the 2018 parliamentary election.

The Study Setting and Context

Many of the previous studies on this topic have relied on data from some of the Western or East Asian countries. This article examines social media use for political participation through the experiences of Latvian users, thus offering insight into the Eastern European context. Latvia provides a suitable case study because it exemplifies both the remarkable transition of the region's countries from the communist rule to democracy and the weaknesses of their civic society observable today. Latvia's past under communism may (Uhlin, 2010) or may not (Mierina, 2011) explain the low self-efficacy, distrust in public institutions and politics, and low levels of engagement in traditional forms of civic engagement, such as participation in voluntary organizations that characterize the region (Bernhard & Karakoç, 2007; Howard, 2002). By other accounts, this region has seen the emergence of complex, vibrant civic societies with sub-regional differences in trajectories of the development of democratic governance (Foa & Ekiert, 2016).

Few Latvians participate in non-government organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and professional organizations; rallies and protests are rare. Manifestations of interpersonal solidarity, such as donations to charity, are more pronounced. In 2013, more than 58% of the population indicated having done so (Ijabs, 2015). However, only 22% of Latvians volunteer regularly or occasionally—this indicator is slightly below the EU average (24%) (Eurobarometer, 2011).

Yet online activism is on the rise in Latvia (Drews, 2013). More than half of Latvia's 1.9 million inhabitants are social media users (Kemp, 2020). Social media have become a major venue for the exchange of information, including civic and political matters, and a source of lively discussions. This has shaped

political communication, too. The 2018 parliamentary election campaign saw increasing activity of political parties and individual politicians on social media (Ikstens, 2019).

Another notable aspect was the prominence of the populist party KPV LV, which was founded a couple of years before the election. In their livestreams and frequent social media posts, which amassed considerable audience, the party leaders attacked the incumbent parties and journalists and promised a new, pro-people approach to politics (Rožukalne, 2020). With 14.3% of the votes, KPV LV achieved the second-best result in these elections, but their aggressive rhetoric and the high level of support received on social media also were both ridiculed and seen as concerning by many. Moreover, the three political parties that had worked in the governing coalition before the election suffered considerable losses. The new parliament was more fragmented than the previous one (Ijabs, 2018). Around 54.6% of the eligible citizens cast their vote (Central Election Commission, 2018); thus voter turnout continued to decline.

Methodology

The empirical basis of the study is data from semi-structured interviews with 49 social media users from Latvia. The interviews were conducted in late 2018, shortly after the election. The diversity of the sample was ensured through demographic criteria—gender (23 male, 26 female respondents), age (the youngest respondent was 21; the oldest was 41, SD = 6.67), education level (high school, vocational school, higher education—M = 15.04 years of education, SD = 2.15), income relative to the Latvian context (28.5% earned around minimum wage, 53% average, 10% above, and four interviewees declined to disclose this information), and place of residence (4% were from the capital city; 55% from other cities or towns; and 41% resided in the countryside).

The data-gathering process focused on the experiences of social media users regarding the information flows in their newsfeeds, encountering political information, and discussions around it. The topics covered during the interviews included their political participation, habits of social media use, experiences with politics-related content on social media, engagement in discussions and sharing of opinions, and their perceptions of the role of social media in promoting civic and political activities. To preserve the confidentiality of the interviewees, they are identified by pseudonyms.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to discover patterns in data. By reading and re-reading interview transcripts, codes (summative descriptions) of relevant phenomena that may reveal both similarities and differences in individuals' experiences were determined. The interpretive process used a deductive approach. Coding was informed by the concepts discussed in the literature review, thus seeking to examine their explanatory power. For example, some of the codes that describe political expression were "sharing links to political sources," "publishing posts about politics," "withholding one's opinion," "having disagreeable opinion," "having hostile reaction," "having confidence to express an opinion," "showing dismissive attitude toward political expression," and "catering to the sensibilities of online friends." The interviewees' news habits, interest in and exposure to politics, as well as their approaches to managing information flows they encounter on their newsfeeds were also described through codes.

The codes were grouped into themes, which formed the structure of the results section below.

The Consumption of Political Information

Facebook was the dominant social media platform used by the interviewees. Other frequently mentioned sites were Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. The majority of the interviewees said they had encountered election-related content on social media during the election campaign, but their levels of interest and appreciation for such content varied substantially.

Many of the politically interested interviewees accessed political content both from mass media, particularly mainstream online news sites, and on social media, including accounts of political parties. Some said they used social media to consciously follow information about specific parties, thus actively filtering the information they were interested in and managing information flows to better fit their interests. Such behavior does not necessarily mean limiting one's information diet to viewpoints one agrees with. A person may be interested in a particular topic (in this case—a political party), rather than a particular opinion or position, and purposefully attempt to learn about it from different angles:

> I somehow got focused on one particular party and became very interested in everything that happened with it. I was interested in other people's opinions [about the party] and the comments to them—some people supported it and others didn't. I read those. (Aija, 33, female)

Most of the interviewees consumed political content less purposefully, though, and were less active in seeking out such content. They noted the vast amount of politics-related content that could be overwhelming, but at the same time, they considered social media an important channel through which they could follow politics. For example, Artis (25, male) said that social media were "the only place where I could learn about the parties that run for election." This indicates that the interviewee did not frequently visit mainstream media but was willing to consume political information if it does not take much effort to do so.

Some interviewees pointed to a widely shared video that was posted on Facebook before the election by a well-known Latvian theater and film director. In his dramatic speech, the director warned that failure to turn out on the election day would lead to a governing coalition that would endanger the statehood and independence of Latvia. It is impossible to assess the impact of this message on voters, but the example shows that the opinions of widely regarded public figures, delivered in an easily accessible format, manage to cut through the noise and attract attention.

While social media generally were seen as making following politics easier, the data also show the limitations of the reliance on the information that reaches users incidentally. On social media, a high volume of posts may center on a narrow set of issues that have attracted the attention of many other users, and this attention further reinforces these topics and promotes discussions about them. This was particularly evident regarding the party KPV LV and its leaders, whose inflammatory rhetoric and idiosyncrasies were widely reported by mass media and discussed online. Eduards (22, male) recalled his impression that much of the political information he saw on his newsfeed was about this party at the expense of a more diverse coverage:

> It was nearly impossible to avoid it; the discussion was profusely about [KPV LV]. Not about other political forces, but only them. [. . .] I ended up being fed up with it. I wanted

> to know about the rest of the parties, stop talking about Kaimiņš [one of the leaders of KPV LV]! (*Laughs*).

During pre-election time, when the information environment is highly saturated with politics, posting about such topics may cause annoyance or exasperation among a part of the audience because such content can be perceived as obtrusive. Vizma (20, female) was one of the interviewees who expressed disapproval of what she perceived as objectionable promotion: "I didn't like how, right before the election, some people were so eager to support one or another political party that it looked like they required that others vote for it."

Moreover, even though information that users have not been actively seeking may appear on their newsfeed, it does not mean that they pay attention to it. Some interviewees indicated that they had been ignoring political content on their newsfeeds to such an extent that their exposure to it was limited. Lidija (30, female), who said that she was not interested in the election, summarized her attitude toward political information as follows: "I didn't read it, didn't delve into it, I simply scrolled over it."

Dislike or indifference toward politics is not the only motivation for not paying attention to political content. For some interviewees, willingness to avoid it stemmed from their perception of social media. They claimed that social media information, including information about politics, cannot be trusted, and social media, especially Facebook, is not an appropriate venue for politics. The experience that political content is being distributed alongside untrustworthy statements and entertainment did not promote a sense of credibility in this information environment. Uldis (40, male) expressed this perception bluntly: "For me, Facebook is basically an entertainment site. I don't read news on Facebook, because I think that 90% of the content there is fabricated and fake."

However, the interviewees who did not like encountering political information on social media did not necessarily employ disconnection affordances. Although some interviewees complained that they received too much information and indicated being consumed by its breadth, few mentioned hiding, blocking, or muting items they deemed irrelevant or annoying. Marika's (36, female) response illustrates the sense of information overload and failure to overcome it:

> Once you log into Facebook, you see that this information space is overstuffed with speeches of election candidates and everything else. Occasionally, I miss out on information I'm interested in because Facebook is chock-full of so many needless things. Not only about our election, but elsewhere, too, for example, in the U.S. Ultimately, you don't even understand anymore what is good and what is bad.

Such experiences suggest trouble navigating the information flow on social media, which prevents users from assuming a more active role in the selection and consumption of information. Instead, these users appeared to accept their newsfeed the way it is or skipped over and ignored much of the seen content. While not reading certain posts may not be that much different from blocking their source, this approach to content curation means that the newsfeed continues to be populated by unwanted content. In addition, the experiences of those interviewees who were not interested in politics and were unhappy with political content

on their newsfeeds indicate that such content will unlikely contribute substantially to learning about politics because of their avoidant behaviors, which for these users tend to be sweeping and indiscriminate.

Political Participation and Self-Expression

Since this article suggested earlier that individuals who hold strong political opinions are more likely to express their political opinions, this section focuses on political expression among those users who were politically active in some way.

Voting in elections was the dominant political activity in which the majority of interviewees participated. Compared to the 54.6% turnout in the 2018 election (Central Election Commission, 2018), the voting activity of the sample was considerably higher than in the general population. Other forms of participation were practicing zero waste lifestyle and other environmentally friendly activities, donating to charities, taking part in a protest campaign against a local authority's decision, organizing events for youth, and volunteering for an NGO. Some activities that can be interpreted as political participation were driven not only by civic-mindedness but also by practical considerations, such as the health and economic benefits of environmentally conscious behaviors. Many of the interviewees engaged in political activities only occasionally or rarely, such as participating in a single protest event.

The interview results show that participating in a political activity and having a personal political conviction do not necessarily translate to a willingness to share it online. In many cases, such a reluctance stemmed from an expectation that one's audience will react in a hostile and unconstructive manner. For example, Laima (27, female), who supports a pro-environmental lifestyle, said that her hesitation to promote it on social media stems from an expectation that her actions will be compared with her statements and any inconsistencies or imperfections will be noticed and called out:

> I'd like to [popularize my beliefs on social media] but I haven't built up my courage yet. I still have to work very hard on my behaviors, because I try to avoid situations where on Instagram I preach one thing, but in real life do something else. For instance, I am for using cloth shopping bags, but while shopping, I may put stuff in a plastic bag. [. . .] Some things exist I am categorically against and maybe I can state it, but currently . . . Well, I don't want conflicts.

Such responses indicate that political participation is viewed as a private matter, rather than something to be communicated to the public. Although political participation aims to address issues of societal concern and communication about the issue is a key element to achieving changes, some citizens believe that promoting certain views or actions is inappropriate even if they personally support them. The experiences with audience aggression and willingness to avoid being questioned are not the only reasons behind such a position. Some interviewees exhibited discomfort toward the idea of persuading other people and conflated stating one's opinion with exerting pressure on other people:

> I have very strict views about certain issues. As can be seen from the behavior of many people, that's all it takes to express one's views actively on social media and sometimes

> in other places, too. But that doesn't quite fit my personality, and that's why I don't do it. It's not in my character to force my opinion onto others. (Raimonds, 30, male)

The interviewees also were suspicious or critical toward attempts by others to influence their views. Consequently, it was common to be dismissive of political self-expression and discussions on social media, and the interviewees tended to perceive other users' expressions of opinion as self-serving and inconsequential. Leonards (27, male) put it this way:

> I think that other people also can evaluate information critically and perhaps they are not influenced by the fact that under a post by a party everyone writes in all caps the name of the party and says: yes, we will win! Well, maybe someone is influenced by that, but not me. I also don't believe that others are influenced by what I write. I don't see myself as an opinion leader of that sort.

Thus, a skeptical attitude toward political expression discouraged interviewees from speaking out, even if they held opinions about political matters.

Social Media Affordances and Expression of Opinion

According to the results, a number of affordances, such as identifiability, scalability, persistence, and networked information access, also contributed to the unwillingness of interviewees to share their views.

The use of real names, which is common on many social media platforms, was not seen as a powerful inhibitor of uncivil behavior, as many interviewees unfavorably characterized the behavior of users they encountered on social media. For example, Baiba (26, female) said that she shares her opinion about various topicalities and likes to engage in online discussions. At the same time, she stated that "it's better if these take place in real life because then no one is hiding and talking trash."

A user's activities on social media can reach a potentially large audience, but given the perceived sensitivity of political themes, many interviewees did not see it as a desirable outcome. Instead, they preferred to talk among narrower groups of more familiar people, such as family members, due to the perceived sensitivity of these topics. Similarly, the visibility of one's expressions to online friends can make some users reconsider stating their political opinions online because of the potential damage they could cause to interpersonal relationships. In light of these considerations, presenting oneself as politically engaged and having an opinion was not seen as something that would raise a user's status among his or her friends or bring other benefits:

> I'm not sure how important it would be for my Facebook friends to know whom I'll vote for and why. Maybe, in the end, I'll get into an argument with one of my friends, because she might say that this party is stupid [..]. That's why, I think, opinions about societal activities should never be published. (Anita, 21, female)

The awareness of the persistence of social media communication can make users wary of publicly saying anything that could be used against them, and this applies to voicing political opinions, too. Such concerns were raised by a small minority of interviewees, but they highlight the fact that one's online utterances may be accessed later in a different context. This, as noted by Lauris (39, male), can lead to undesirable consequences: "I think that if I say something wrong, this could cause me trouble. What has been written somewhere is hard to change afterwards."

In this regard, the asynchronicity of online media, which allows users to take their time and craft a message that more precisely communicates their views and thus partly safeguards against possible misunderstandings or gaffes, might not compensate for the risks caused by the persistence of communications.

Interactivity affordances that enable less prominent and more ambiguous ways of self-expression, in turn, encouraged some interviewees to express their opinion. For example, Anna (39, female) said that she does not frequently publish political opinions but reads discussions and posts by others and upon encountering a statement she agrees with, expresses her support by reposting it. Some interviewees had attached a visual element to their profile picture that communicates a certain belief or behavior. The "like" button was also being used to express and communicate one's approval of certain ideas or events. Leonards (27, male) employed an even subtler approach to political expression: "Perhaps I show my opinion by following [certain institutions or organizations]." Thus, the ability to express one's position in ways other than openly stating arguments and defending them in discussions encouraged some interviewees to become more politically active on social media.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined the interaction with political content among Latvian social media users in the context of a parliamentary election campaign. It contributes to the understanding of exposure to political information and the expression of political opinions in this environment.

First, the present article provides insights into incidental exposure to information. Previous studies have demonstrated that incidental exposure is an important mechanism through which social media users learn about current events (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Lu & Lee, 2018). Evidence exists that individuals who expect to come across important news without actively seeking it tend to have lower levels of political knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Nevertheless, social media users, especially the youth, have been shown to rely on their social media newsfeeds as a source of incidental information on important events (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Gustafsson, 2012; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021).

This study, too, shows how social media are being used to follow the news with less effort, including the purposeful use of social media to select the information that is meaningful to a user. At the same time, the article has documented a sense of discomfort that incidental encounters with political content may create for social media users. The interviewees who were not interested in political content paid little attention to it and exposure to such content did not appear to make them more inclined to learn about politics. This suggests that for people who do not actively follow current affairs and do not want to consume the news,

incidental exposure to such content may not make a big difference in terms of political knowledge and political interest. This observation is in line with Prior's (2005) argument that in a high-choice information environment, the political knowledge gap widens between those interested in politics and those who are indifferent to it. Moreover, the results show that incidental political information may be perceived as unwanted and, when encountered extensively, it contributes to the sense of information overload. Evidence exists that information overload negatively mediates the relationship between news consumption, including on social media, and political information efficacy, or an individual's belief that he or she has the necessary information to engage in the political process (Oh, Lor, & Choi, 2021). Even though information overload is frequently understood as an excess of *relevant* information, which for this reason is not ignored (Bawden & Robinson, 2009), the results of this study suggest that irrelevant information also may significantly contribute to a sense of information overload. This reduces the possibility of meaningful engagement with politics on social media.

Even though users can curate the content they receive on social media, many interviewees did not indicate purposeful shaping their newsfeeds to their liking. This corresponds to Fletcher and Nielsen's (2019) observation about a group of social media users who showed little sense of control over their newsfeeds and were not aware of Facebook functions that allow personalizing their newsfeeds. However, in Fletcher and Nielsen's (2019) paper, these were older users, but in the present study, similar attitudes were also expressed by people in their thirties. By not blocking the unwanted information but also by not engaging with it during intense political events, these social media users appeared to be stuck with the worst of both worlds: they did not only receive information they like but also did not learn much about politics. This confirms the manifestation of social media as partial control, rather than high-control environments. However, this user behavior can be caused not only by unwillingness to terminate online ties, as explained by Bode (2015), but also by a perceived lack of agency.

The second contribution of this paper relates to political expression on social media. This study employed the affordances approach to explore the willingness of users to speak out. Affordances are not deterministic (Davis & Chouinard, 2017), and the actions enabled by technology can play out differently in various social contexts. It has previously been shown that such affordances as identifiability and networked information access contribute to the emergence of less hierarchical and more polite discussions that involve more people (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). However, the results of the present study emphasize that, in the particular context, the same affordances may contribute to the hesitation of social media users to participate in discussions. The perception of politics as a sensitive topic that leads to interpersonal conflicts made posting an opinion under one's real name and in a way that is visible to one's social media friends even less attractive. Similarly, affordances such as scalability and audience interactivity invited caution toward self-expression. To a lesser extent, this also applies to persistence in online communication, which, as noted in previous studies (Gustafsson, 2012; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Srinivasan, 2021; Sipos, 2018) is perceived by users as a source of liability. The results of this study show that the ability to express one's views and interests more subtly, such as through liking posts and following sources, in turn, can encourage political expression, but other features could encourage such expressions even more. Anonymity, geo-boundedness, and ephemerality of communication have the potential to do so by enabling experimentation (Lane, Das, & Hiaeshutter-Rice, 2018). Of course, without additional safeguards, an environment built on such principles would likely enable uncivil behaviors by other users, thus making the perceived general social climate of a platform even harsher than it currently is.

In addition to affordances, online political expression is shaped by other aspects, such as one's participation in civic or political organizations (Gustafsson, 2012) or online political activity (Ferrucci et al., 2019; Hong & Kim, 2021). Based on this consideration, this study examined the political expression of users who were politically engaged. Even though most of the interviewees voted in elections and many were at least somewhat politically active in other ways, they mostly were not comfortable expressing and defending their opinions on social media. The perception of a hostile audience, unwillingness to cause conflicts with friends, and general skepticism toward social media as a suitable environment for politics were the main obstacles to doing so.

The results also illustrate the perceived value of opinion expression. Citizenship models that have been proposed as an alternative to dutiful citizenship (Dalton, 2008) put an emphasis on self-expression (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017), but even the youth, who are more likely to adopt emerging political lifestyles, do not necessarily value self-expression as a citizenship norm (Lane, 2020). The results of the present study, too, indicate that political self-expression, at least on social media, is not widely regarded as a valuable activity. Many interviewees were dismissive toward those who post their opinions. The fact that voting in elections was considered as the most important act of citizenship suggests that the dominant model among the interviewees is dutiful citizenship. It was common for interviewees to see political activities as private matters, which are not to be communicated publicly, and attempts to influence other people's opinions as questionable or inappropriate.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need to examine the use of social media for politics in the context of civic society. Much of the weakness of civic society that has been observed in Central and Eastern European countries, including Latvia, stems from such societal aspects as low political trust and low self-efficacy (Mierina, 2011), rather than insufficient opportunities to follow political information and discuss it. Social media do not alleviate the structural deficiencies of civic society, especially for users who perceive social media as a tool for entertainment and maintaining connections with friends or are not interested in politics.

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