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**Incidentality on a continuum:**

**A comparative conceptualization of incidental news consumption**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to contribute to theorizing the dynamics of incidental news consumption. Through an analysis of 200 semi-structured interviews with people in Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the United States we show that intentionality in news consumption can be viewed on a continuum, which goes from deliberately setting apart time to access the news on specific outlets to skimming through unsought-for news on social and broadcast media, with intermediate practices such as respondents setting up an environment where they are more or less likely to encounter news. Drawing on structuration theory, this paper conceptualizes incidental news in the context of the wider media environment and across multiple levels of analysis and explores how individual agency and social structure interact to shape information acquisition practices.

*Keywords:* Audience studies, broadcast news, incidental news consumption, online journalism, social Media, transnational media studies

**Incidentality on a continuum:****A comparative conceptualization of incidental news consumption**

Media scholarship has examined incidental news consumption, i.e., audiences' encounters with news content which they were not purposively seeking—on print, broadcast, and digital media—for over six decades (Baum, 2002; Downs, 1957; Tewksbury, Weaver and Maddex, 2001). This phenomenon has received renewed attention in recent times, as research shows that incidental news consumption has risen in the context of social media, particularly among young people (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). The scholarship on this topic, which in past years mostly has focused on the role of social media for incidental consumption, has made important contributions by comparing patterns of incidental news consumption to those that characterize purposeful information acquisition, thus generally categorizing news audiences into a dichotomous classification between those who engage in, and do not engage in, incidental news consumption. In doing so, the majority of the existing scholarship has: a) relied upon quantitative methods, in particular surveys; b) tended to treat either intentional or incidental modes of news consumption as respondents' primary or sole way of learning about current events; and c) been conducted in one country at a time—for notable exceptions see Fletcher and Nielsen (2017), and Valeriani and Vaccari (2016).

In this paper we build upon this body of work, but also complement it in four ways. First, to capture the lived experience of incidental news consumption, we draw upon qualitative methods that complement the insights yielded by the use of quantitative techniques in most prior scholarship. Second, we analyze data from 200 semi-structured interviews conducted in five different countries—Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the United States—to add a comparative perspective to the dominant single-country focus in the literature. Third, our

findings reveal that purely incidental news acquisition should be seen as one extreme on a *continuum* of intentionality in information consumption. Fourth, this applies not only to news on social media, but across multiple media, both traditional and digital.

Through this analysis, we unpack the social dynamics of intentionality in news consumption, and show how it goes from deliberately setting apart time to access the news on specific outlets to skimming through unsought-for news on social and broadcast media, with intermediate practices such as respondents setting up an environment where they are more or less likely to encounter news. We also account for the factors shaping incidental access to news at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The micro level consists of individual actions and decisions, the meso level includes the immediate social environment, and the macro level refers to the larger societal context. We find that individuals experience different degrees of control over the factors that condition access to news, and generally report higher levels of agency at the micro level than at either the meso or the macro levels. Building on structuration theory to illuminate the interplay of agency and structure in shaping this process, our account suggests that members of the audience draw on the rules and resources available to them, including the media environment, familial and social milieu, and national context, to engage in several modes of news consumption along the intentionality continuum. In doing so, they alternately reproduce and transform these norms and resources, creating and re-creating the structure within which they act.

### **Incidental news access**

Scholarship on information acquisition has variously studied incidental access to news for decades (Downs, 1954; Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Zukin and Snyder, 1984). In his seminal study, Downs conceptualizes information as “sought for” or “accidental,” and defines the latter as “accruing to [the citizen] without any special effort on his part to find [it]”

(1954:223), including information provided by interpersonal communications, the consumption of entertainment content, or knowledge acquired in the course of making production or consumption decisions. In their two-step flow model, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) have also examined the interplay between media use and interpersonal communication in the acquisition of political information.

Later research has examined incidental information acquisition on television (Blumler, 1970; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). For instance, Baum concluded that “soft news consumers gain information (about foreign crisis) as an incidental by-product of seeking entertainment (...) without necessarily tuning in with the intention of doing so.” (2002: 105) Research on broadcast news has highlighted its ambient (McCarthy, 2001; Morris & Forgette, 2007) and ritual (Rubin, 1984) nature, which underscores the potential for a continuum of intentionality in information acquisition. However, when it comes to research on specifically incidental news consumption online, scholarship has for the most part conceptualized news consumption as primarily incidental *or* intentional, and tended to focus exclusively on digital media (de Waal and Schoenbach, 2008; Lupia and Philpot, 2005; Lin et al., 2005; Tewksbury et al., 2001). Reflecting this approach, a 2016 Pew survey showed that 62% of Facebook users in the United States “mostly get news (...) when they are doing other things online”, compared to 38% who got news “because they are looking for it” (Pew Research Center, 2016:6). Along with this dichotomous conceptualization, the growing body of research about incidental news consumption during the past decade has mostly focused on the role of social media.

Drawing mostly on surveys or quantitative methods (with few exceptions, e.g. Authors, 2017, 2018; Yamsduren and Erdelez, 2010, 2017), empirical research on incidental news acquisition has provided valuable insights into two related aspects of this phenomenon. First,

studies have looked into the *antecedents* of incidental news acquisition online, such as age, gender, access to technology, use of other media, and offline social relationships (Ahmadi and Wohn, 2018; Edgerly et al., 2018; Kümpel, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017; Nee and Dozier, 2015). Second, scholarship has examined the *consequences* of this type of news exposure on matters such as political learning, participation, efficacy, agenda-setting, and news use (Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Feezell, 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Kim et al., 2013; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013; Weeks et al., 2017).

Findings from survey-based research are not conclusive. For instance, Gil De Zúñiga and his colleagues conducted a survey in the United States and concluded that citizens that do not seek for news intentionally “are less knowledgeable about civic and political affairs than are those who do not believe the news will find them [because] actively seeking the news continues to be critical for citizens to learn about politics” (2017: 118). However, Valeriani and Vaccari conducted a survey in four European countries before the 2014 European elections and found that “accidental encounters with political content on social media can result in a reduction in the online engagement gap between citizens with high and low interest in politics” (2016: 1871). We complement this survey-based scholarship by adopting an emic perspective to inquire into how audiences experience incidental news consumption during the course of their daily lives.

Moreover, research on incidental news consumption has been carried out in one country at a time, mostly in the United States (Ahmadi and Wohn, 2018; Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Edgerly et al., 2018; Feezell, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Nee and Dozier, 2015), and Europe (Kümpel, 2018). Even multi-country studies have focused on North America and Europe (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016). While they have provided valuable insights, these studies could not establish how varying

national contexts interact with media use to shape incidentality in news consumption. We aim to address this question by comparatively examining incidental news consumption in five countries from four continents: Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan and the United States.

### **Media and Structuration**

Incidental and intentional encounters with news are particular enactments of human agency that both reproduce and transform social structures. According to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), agents draw upon a set of rules and resources that both enable and constrain their actions—structuring properties—that are in turn “both reaction and outcomes of the practices” performed by the agents (25). Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we view agency as:

A concrete synthesis, shaped and conditioned, on the one hand, by the temporal-relational contexts of action (the structures) and, on the other, by the dynamic element of agency itself (which) guarantees that empirical social action will never be completely determined or structured (1,004).

Research on media and communication has drawn on structuration theory to examine a wide array of topics, such as organizational communication (Orlikowski, 1992), audience behavior (Webster, 2011), transmedia patterns (Jansson and Lindell, 2015), and meme dynamics (Wiggins and Bowers, 2015). Scholars have characterized structure as the social and political context within which agents operate, including “the media resources that agents use to enact their preferences” (Webster, 2011: 47). Structure, at the macro level, includes national legislation, information infrastructures, services and content provided by the media industries, and cultural norms; and, at the meso level, workplace and family configurations. Agency, at the micro level, refers to people’s abilities to act. It “concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in



the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently”(Giddens, 1984: 9).

The structuration processes (Webster, 2011) by which audiences interact with media content, online platforms, national context, and each other, reproducing and/or transforming the rules and resources which enable their actions in the first place, provide a fertile ground for the examination of incidental news consumption. In this paper we draw upon structuration theory to build theory about the reception dynamics of incidental news, in particular the interplay of agentic and structural factors shaping people’s encounters with the news in their daily lives.

## **Methods**

Our conceptualization of incidental news consumption is empirically based on 200 semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2016 and February 2019 in five countries: Argentina, Finland, Israel, Japan, and the United States.<sup>1</sup> These countries have been selected to maximize geographic, linguistic, and cultural variation, while maintaining two features constant: they are all democracies (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers, 2014) and the penetration of internet access is relatively high, ranging from 80% in Argentina (SInCA, 2017) to 95% in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2018).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by a team of local interviewers in each country. They took place in locations selected by the interviewees, and lasted an average of 45 minutes. All countries used a common interview guide—translated into each language and lightly adapted to local contexts—which began with asking respondents about the last time they consumed news, and continued with a variety of open-ended questions aimed at getting at the respondent’s general media consumption patterns, and the role played by incidental news consumption within those patterns. The interview guide did not define “news” a-priori, since our goal was to

understand incidentality from an emic perspective. Therefore, interviewers were instructed to reply to questions such as “what do you mean by news?” with a general statement “whatever is news to you,” and to avoid leading the interviewees towards any particular conception of what news is or should be. In the interviews, issues mentioned as news were as diverse as sports results, major climate events, crimes, plane crashes, and political events.

In each of the countries, 40 respondents were selected, roughly distributed according to gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Respondents were recruited using snowball sampling technique. Typically, a research assistant invited a distant contact to be interviewed. At the end of the interview, each interviewee was requested names of three to five of their acquaintances, and permission to contact one or more of them for the purposes of this study. Some of these acquaintances were approached and the others were placed on a waiting list. This procedure was repeated with each person who was subsequently interviewed. The selection process purposively did not seek heavy news consumers, to maintain the sample of interviewees broad in terms of media use and interest in news. Overall, the sample consisted of 56% women, and the average age was 43.2 years. It included a broad spectrum of occupations, from tax attorneys to manga writers, and from students to jobseekers and pensioners. Interviewees were granted anonymity, and pseudonyms are used when reporting their responses. All interviews were fully transcribed in their original language, and selected quotes were translated into English.

Data analysis was conducted with open categories at first, in which researchers from each of the countries inductively looked for patterns in the transcripts during a first round of open coding in a grounded theory fashion (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Next, more granular coding categories for incidental news consumption were developed as a result of multiple team conversations. These coding categories were based on both previous research (Fletcher and

Nielsen, 2017; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Valenzuela, 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016) and the authors' inductive analysis of the interview transcripts. A joint coding scheme was then developed and tested by all the authors on sample interviews using MAXQDA software. It was subsequently further refined by comparing results across coders. The final coding scheme was then implemented on interview transcripts from each country by the authors and/or research assistants proficient in the language of each country. The validity of the findings was ascertained by triangulation of data sources from five different countries (Denzin, 1978).

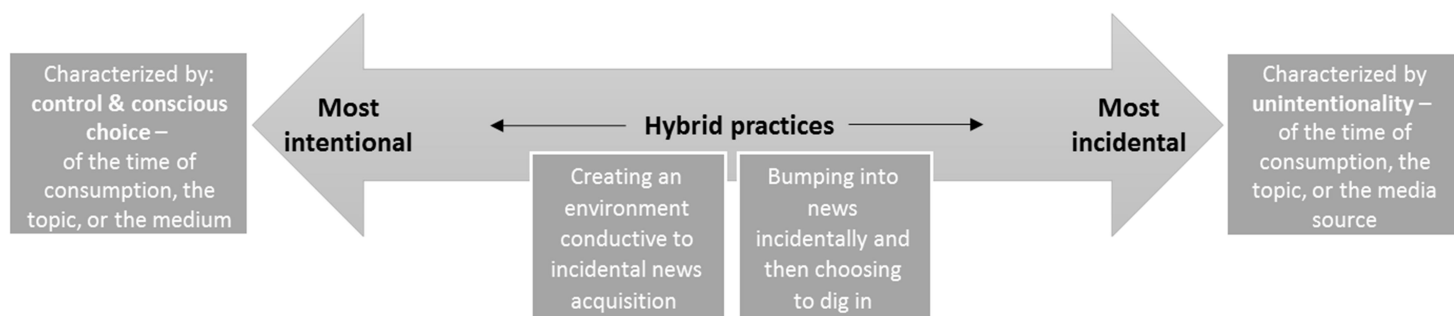
### **Findings – Understanding incidentality on a continuum**

The analysis of the interviews shows that incidental news consumption does not occur as an either/or phenomenon, but that most respondents combine intentional and incidental news consumption to different degrees, for various purposes, in a wide range of settings. Thus, our analysis indicates that incidentality in news consumption is better understood on a continuum that ranges from most intentional to most incidental. Furthermore, the factors shaping incidental access to news operate, broadly, at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. Across these levels, individuals have different degrees of actual and perceived control over the factors that condition access to news.

#### ***The micro level***

The micro level consists of the individual actions undertaken by media consumers. Within the structural resources and constraints of daily life, it is at this level where we find participants perceiving greater agency. Analysis of the interview data indicates that agents enact diverse modes of news consumption on a continuum that goes from most intentional to most incidental, with intermediate news acquisition practices lying in between these two extremes. The continuum on which their news consumption practices are placed is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Incidentalness on a continuum: Placement of different media use practices at the micro level**



The most intentional news consumption practices are characterized by a sense of control and a conscious choice. Isaac, a seventy-nine-year-old retired pension-fund director in Jerusalem, describes his news consumption patterns: “I watch the news in the morning. Every morning I watch Channel 2 at five pm, at seven pm, then on Channel 10 (...) and then at eight pm Channel 2” (11-15-2017). Purposive tuning-in to broadcast news is most often reported by older respondents, such as Annikki, a seventy-three-year-old retired librarian in a small town in Western Finland: “So in the morning I switch on the radio at around seven, the first television news broadcast is at eight, then the radio is on at ten o’clock (...). Then I read the newspaper between eight and nine while the morning television is on” (4-1-2018).

Although most of the research portrays online media as the locus of incidental news consumption, younger respondents across countries often report *intentional* news consumption practices on digital and social media platforms. Clara, a twenty-one-year old undergraduate in Buenos Aires says, “every time I wake up I read [news site] *La Nación* online from my cellphone” (1-3-2016). Justin, a thirty-two-year-old American tax attorney in Chicago, explains he follows certain outlets he trusts on Facebook to get the news: “there are still some very

reputable news outlets out there like BBC and most of the established newspapers. And I follow all of them, so you know I'm always looking to see what they post" (3-4-2017). Thus, purposeful news consumption meant, for some interviewees, attending to legacy offline media, and to others, to online and social media.

On the other end of the spectrum lies purely incidental news consumption, which can occur both through broadcast media and through social media. Pihla, a fifty-two-year old unemployed woman in Finland says: "News, well, it mainly happens when I check the weather report [on television] and I end up following news [that air before the weather report]" (4-11-2018). Florencia, a thirty-year-old accountant in Buenos Aires, explains: "I don't go [on Facebook] with the goal of getting the news (...) but if I see a headline on Facebook that catches my attention I click on it and I read it" (1-5-2017). Naor, a thirty-two-year-old public sector employee in Jerusalem, goes on Facebook "to take a break from what I'm doing" and states: "Without meaning to I [may bump into] something that gets me riled up" (11-21-17). April, a thirty-two-year-old project manager living in Chicago, highlights the connection between incidental news acquisition on social, digital, and broadcast media. She encounters news "if it comes up in the feed, like on the Facebook feed or the Yahoo! feed, or like if I'm watching television and there's like a news break" (4-4-2017). Due to the incidental nature of these encounters with news, most respondents do not recall the names of news organizations when describing bumping into information, and thus, tend not to distinguish between "source" and "message" of the news (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). As both Florencia and April saw it, the source for the news they saw was "on Facebook".

Between the poles of deliberate and incidental news consumption are a host of intermediate practices. Two such practices appear as particularly salient in the data. In the first

one, interviewees purposefully create an environment that is conducive to incidental news acquisition, echoing Thorson and Wells' (2016) work on curated news flows. Meital, a twenty-one-year-old student in Jerusalem explains how important it is for her to stay up-to-date: "I can stop, I just don't want to. It's fun to be up-to-date on what's going on." To do so, she creates an environment that helps her stay on top of the quick-paced Israeli news-cycle by liking and following news channels, news-oriented groups, as well as people who often share the news: "My whole phone is news... I don't have a news app or something, it's just most of my feed is news" (8-21-2017).

A curated news environment does not have to be based exclusively on social media platforms, but can also include news applications. Federico, a thirty-five-year-old lawyer in Buenos Aires, described his continuous encounter with news on his phone through applications he had subscribed to: "I get the news constantly on my phone (...) I have [newspaper] *La Nación* [on my phone] but I am also a subscriber of several news services on Facebook and Instagram, such as magazines" (1-6-2017). To Yuko, a twenty-seven-year-old researcher living in Yokohama, Japan, "News pops up. So, I open it whenever that interests me" (02-09-2018).

On the other hand, some respondents curate their preferred environment by reducing incidental access to news, such as by actively disabling push notifications. Junya, a twenty-five-year-old IT entrepreneur living in Tokyo, explained: "I hate push notifications because I am a person who would get information by myself. I basically do not like push notifications (...) I do not sign up for any such corporate accounts." (1-17-2018). Thus, agents' past decisions to follow news accounts on social media, to activate or disable push notifications, or to follow certain individuals, led them to different degrees of incidental news consumption in the present.

A second type of intermediate practice consists of bumping into news incidentally, but choosing to dig deeper beyond the incidental encounter. For instance, Alejandra, an eighteen-year-old student in Miami, explains: “Well, earlier today I was having my manicure done and on TV they were talking about a certain ‘Chelsea Manning,’ and I didn’t know what they were talking about, so I googled her” (1-1-2017). Asaf, a 27-year-old software engineer in Tel Aviv, shares: “Last week when the Indian prime-minister visited I watched it... It was on Facebook, there was the video of him coming off the plane and the speeches and stuff, so I watched it. I invested the fifteen minutes of watching” (7-12-2017). In these cases, incidental exposure leads to purposeful engagement with news content.

### ***The meso level***

The meso level includes respondents’ most proximate social environment, from close family members and living companions to personal friends and work acquaintances.

Many respondents mention that they sometimes learn about news because one of their family members turns on the TV or the radio, often as part of relational routine. Some interviewees pay further attention to the news after such encounters, especially if they are particularly curious about certain issues and topics, but mostly they describe themselves as passive recipients of background news. Hiroka, a twenty-year old student who lives with her parents and sister in Tokyo notes that in her household:

The TV is always on, namely in the living room. So, while TV contents jump out at me, I have to sit down and read the newspapers. So, it [the newspaper] seems a bit distant to me. If I make up my mind to read a newspaper at a certain time of the day, maybe I come to read it. But comparing with TV, which is always on, I think there is a certain hurdle [to reading the newspaper] (02-18-2018).

Respondents have less control over their family media choices than over their own, and family members' routines do not always match respondents' preferred media environments. For instance, some tolerated their spouses' decisions to turn on the television, even if they would have preferred otherwise. Andrea, an Argentine photographer in her thirties, says: "I have a situation, which is that I am married, and thus it's him, actually, that turns on the television. I'd rather forget to turn it on, every time"(1-6-2017). In Finland, fifty-five-year-old Onerva mentions that her husband is an avid consumer of news. He watches the TV news every evening, and Onerva can hear it, even if she is in another room: "Maybe once a year I come to sit next to my husband and watch the news. Otherwise I'm just exposed to the news. Can't escape the news [laughing]" (7-12-2018).

In social groups where access to television is restricted due to religious grounds, radio serves as a connection to incidental news consumption. Gender roles in marriage reappear in this quote from a younger Ultra-Orthodox Israeli, thirty-four-year-old Ayala: "Television, of course not. Radio, if my husband turns it on when I'm in the car with him I'll listen with partial attention" (11-5-2017). Mazzi, a sixty-five-year-old Ultra-Orthodox woman in Israel, says: "The radio is on all day, but I don't turn it on. My daughter turns it on and it's on all the time" (11-26-2017).

Workplace activities can also contribute to shape incidental encounters with news. An office worker from Chicago states: "So I watch the local news, the Chicago news in the morning when I'm at work, just because it's on at work, but I wouldn't necessarily say that I actively watch the news on TV" (3-2-2017). In Finland, fifty-seven-year-old Sirpa comments that "The radio is on always when I am at work, and there I hear news. (...) The radio is in the background, it's just there" (5-2-2018). Online platforms used for work purposes can also influence incidental



news consumption. Martín, a media producer in his late twenties in Buenos Aires says: “I arrive at work at 10, 10:30, and while I have breakfast, while I am still not doing any work, I go on Facebook, I sometimes connect with people from work through Facebook (...) someone who’s in an office on another floor, instead of calling my extension talks to me on Facebook” (1-3-2016).

Friends, family and co-workers also share news on social media platforms. Here, respondents have a larger degree of control over whom they follow and what they choose to read, and thus, this form of news acquisition is not purely incidental. Ruvi, a sixty-year-old retired industrial engineer who lives in a small town in Southern Israel, states: “I have a friend, a good friend, where what he shares, I usually read. I guess we have the same vibe in terms of ideology, so if he shares something, I understand I need to read it too” (3-15-2018). Norie, a 57-year-old manga writer from Japan explains: “[on Facebook] I check news that happens to be there, and react to those posted by people I know” (1-22-2018). Cristal, a Peruvian immigrant in the Chicago area, states: “The way I actually consume most of my Peruvian media is through Facebook, with all my cousins. They share all the articles that I need to read (...) anything that my cousins share about Peru I kind of peek at” (6-4-2017). Giving more weight to some social media contacts than others is related to a sense of choice, as Fiona, a fifty-year old from Chicago, describes: “When I’m on Facebook I’m not necessarily looking for news and I’m not necessarily looking for a particular topic so my choice is determined more by the things that the people whose opinion I respect [post]” (2-2-2017).

Interpersonal communication, either face-to face or mediated, can also include news content. Several interviewees mention they have a friend or family member they rely on for information. Luna, a twenty-nine-year-old in Finland, explains: “My friends link me stories on Facebook Messenger that they think that I would want to read. Or then they mention [news

stories] in conversations” (11-21-2018). Rikako is a thirty-four-year old single mother living in Yokohama, Japan. She dropped out of high school and has been raising her three children. She is currently unemployed. For her, her father is her main source of political news: “My dad enthusiastically listens to podcasts for political news. So, he recommends me to check certain news. So, I check and learn what’s going on.” (06-29-2017). Similarly, Dalal, a thirty-five-year-old Arab-Israeli teacher, who actively chooses to avoid the news, says: “I have a friend who knows everything that’s going on in the world and she starts to tell me about every little thing on the news, she’s a proper radio station and is always drilling about what’s going on here and there. Beyond that I don’t look [for news]” (11-17-2017).

Factors related to incidental news consumption at the meso level appear to follow Eastin and LaRose’s (2010) definition of habitual media attendance, which proposes that subjects engage “in media consumption behavior in direct response to environmental stimuli, without engaging in—or at least without replicating—the active analytic thought processes assumed by uses and gratifications” (355). Guided by environmental stimuli—the actions, habits and routines of family members, co-workers and wider social groups—the meso-level is thus perceived as less agentic to participants.

### ***The macro level***

At the macro level, the national and international political situation exerts an influence on different modes of news consumption: for instance, in countries with higher levels of political or economic conflict, respondents reported that news was more difficult to avoid.

In Israel, people reported feeling compelled to pay attention to the news—a perception that is bolstered by the high frequency with which news bulletins are aired on broadcast radio. Nava, an eighty-two-year-old woman in Beer Sheva, Israel, says:

I try to listen to the news every hour or half an hour. It's a sort of need, sometimes it's annoying because they repeat themselves and sometimes it's not pleasant to hear, but I'm inundated. All the time in the news. It's very hard for me to believe that someone could disconnect from it. People say, 'don't listen, it's depressing,' but there is no such thing. You live in a place, you have to know what's going on (11-16-17).

In the Israeli context, news consumption on the one hand is perceived as a national obligation or duty, but on the other hand can be perceived as very burdensome. The resulting tension is heightened by incidental encounters with news. This phenomenon is particularly salient during periods of heightened national conflict. While the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014 was unfolding, thirty-year-old Lihi turned on push notifications from a news app on her phone, which she quickly disabled because it felt:

Very invasive. I felt I had no control over my life (...) I really like to control information (...) but when it comes from outside, it's like I have no control over it. It feels like they're coercing me to know information I don't want to know! You know, it doesn't interest me. I don't want to know (8-9-2017).

Respondents conveyed that staying informed in the turbulent context of Israel may be a burden. Yael, a 31-year old book publisher from Ramat-Gan, decided to opt out of being continuously informed and relies on social media to inform her if something major happens.

News in and of itself is not so interesting to me, I feel it is repetitive and depressing (...) I always assume that if something very big [happens], if there was a terror attack, I'll probably find out about it. Because someone will put a sad song on Facebook, someone will write something to commemorate them [the victims], someone will change their

profile picture to the Israeli flag... If something is big enough, I'll find out about it (4-9-2018).

In Argentina, a country with a history of recurrent political and economic crises, some respondents feel pressured to access the news to make political decisions, particularly during electoral campaigns or during times of social and economic unrest. Romina, a nineteen-year college student living in a small town near Buenos Aires describes this pattern as follows: "I read the newspaper, very superficially. I should read more, I never watch the news on TV... in the car I listen to music... so, obviously, I pay attention to the news when something important is happening" (1-3-2016). Several interviewees in Argentina also mentioned paying more attention to news during elections. Luciana, a thirty-year-old accountant from Buenos Aires explains: "during elections is perhaps when I get involved to see what the candidates are but... but if not in general, I do not follow news so much." (1-5-2017).

All the interviews in the United States were conducted during the early months of the Trump administration. During this time period, some respondents reported feeling angry, frustrated or overwhelmed by the news. Kendra, a social worker in her thirties, said she was: "feeling really sad, but also very angry. There are a lot of personal stories of people who have been separated from their families [and] who've gone through these lengthy processes to be here already, so there's no reason for them to be prevented from coming back into the country. I'm frustrated right now" (1-30-2017). Despite the emotional tonality being fairly negative, respondents also mentioned a high level of attachment to the news during this time period. Fiona, a nonprofit volunteer in her fifties, noted that "now you feel like every day there's a new decision and a new statement and a new issue that you need to know about." Later in the interview Fiona added that she had recently gone to the movie theatre, and "it was such a relief to watch

something about human emotion and human struggles on a human level that wasn't about strategy and it wasn't about hatred or at least hatred on a political level” (2-10-2017).

Respondents from Finland—while attributing importance to staying up-to-date—were at the same time reluctant to discuss politics, which could be related to how Finland traditionally sees itself as a society that prioritizes consensus and cooperation. Inkeri, a fifty-six-year-old woman, considers voting and keeping oneself aware of what is going on in the society important, but she is not used to talking about these things because of how she was brought up: “Our home culture wasn’t the kind where you discuss politics or religion” (2-27-2019). Nevertheless, people who proclaim their interest in politics are usually keen on keeping up with the news, and thus, tend to enact more intentional rather than incidental news consumption practices. Jarno, a twenty-four-year-old man, describes: “I use social media remarkably less than I read news, so I don’t browse Facebook or such. The time I spend online is mainly used reading the news. It can be tiring to follow” (10-29-2018). However, when elections approach, even non-politicized respondents believe they will come across more political information. Kerttu, a twenty-four-year-old woman, reflects that “now that the elections are approaching I will encounter more political news that are shared and commented on” (1-16-2019).

Respondents in Japan did not report pressure to access news in relation to political issues. However, the country is prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons. In 2011, more than 15,000 people lost their lives due to the major earthquake that hit the northeastern part of Japan. As such, people are highly alert for disaster-related information. Narumi, a twenty-year old vocational school student from Japan mentioned looking up information about earthquakes and solar flares: “I fear that an earthquake may occur because I heard that a large solar flare

reached [the earth] before the Great East Japan Earthquake broke out or Kumamoto Earthquake broke out.” (09-10-2017).

A number of specialized disaster information services are available in order to mitigate or prevent possible damages and fatalities. Rikako, the young single mother, sets her iPhone so that she can learn of the latest earthquake information immediately. “If an earthquake occurs, my phone gives me the notifications such as ‘it has just happened’, or ‘it will happen in ten seconds’.” Ryuta, a twenty-year-old college student, also admits his incidental news encounter at emergencies: “Either from the internet or TV set in my workplace. I was sort of made to see it when breaking news comes out, such as an earthquake.” (12-22-2017)

Although respondents in the studied countries have lower degrees of perceived and actual control over the macro level, they respond to occurrences such as political crises, elections, or natural hazards by purposively accessing news. The variations by country suggest that not only national differences, but also temporal rhythms, shape the degrees of incidentality of news acquisition.

## **Discussion**

This research examines incidental news consumption by individuals located in five countries. The analysis of 200 interviews indicates that incidentality in news consumption is better understood on a continuum, rather than as an either/or phenomenon. This enables the study to propose a characterization of news consumption that goes from completely intentional to completely incidental, with intermediate practices in the middle: creating an environment conducive to incidental news consumption, and encountering news incidentally but purposively seeking further information.

At the micro level, respondents may deliberately seek news on a certain topic across selected outlets. Conversely, they may come across news incidentally as a by-product of other media use, such as browsing through their social media feeds or listening to music radio. There are also intermediate practices, such as following or liking news accounts on social media in order to increase the probability of encountering relevant news. At the meso level, the interviewees' most proximate social context such as family members either turning on the television or sharing news on social media, and colleagues selecting a social media platform as the main form of communication, shapes incidental access to information. Respondents could exercise agency to change these conditions, but for the most part refrain from doing so, and thus reinforce the structuration of these practices.

At the macro level, the level of conflict or politicization of each country, threats of natural disasters, as well as telecommunication regulations mandating radio news bulletins every hour, make incidental news consumption more or less likely. These factors are generally perceived as beyond respondents' control—though respondents can opt in to consume news more around specific national occurrences.

By comparing participants' experiences across five very different countries from four continents, this research can contribute to both sketch the range of various degrees of incidentality in news consumption, and examine the similarities and differences across national contexts. The analysis of the interviews enabled us to explore how different dynamics of structuration shape these patterns. We found greater similarities across countries at the micro and meso levels, due to the pervasiveness of broadcast and social media and the relative malleability of local socio-material conditions, although the ways in which access to news is instantiated on the continuum from intentional to incidental does vary by country. At the macro level, interviews

show that, in three of the countries—Argentina, Israel, and the United States—issues such as the level of political and economic conflict increase the likelihood of incidental encounters with news. Absence of regular conflict of this kind appears to be tied to a lesser intensity of macro level influences on incidentality in countries such as Finland and Japan.

The qualitative nature of this research allowed us to complement previous scholarship on incidental news consumption. As discussed above, most quantitative work on incidental news acquisition focused primarily on digital/social media platforms, with a binary conceptualization of incidental news consumption. By drawing upon a large and diverse body of semi-structured interviews, we were able to analyze the information repertoires of the respondents, which combined broadcast, digital and social media platforms to different degrees. Moreover, by allowing interviewees to describe their news consumption practices in their own words and in the context of their lived experiences, we could show that incidentality in information acquisition is better understood as a continuum rather than as an either/or distinction.

According to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), individuals are neither completely passive regarding social structures nor totally free agents, thus making up their living circumstances at every turn. Our research suggests that, within the structures of national political context, workplace organization, family and gender roles, as well as media and technological affordances, individuals enact their agency in various ways that both reinforce and resist those structures. Reinforcement of social structures was evident, for instance, when wives in Argentina, Finland, and Israel decided not to challenge their husbands' decision to turn on broadcast news, when a grown-up daughter in Japan turned to her father for what she should know about the latest politics (although they do not live together), and when employees in Finland and the United States accepted their co-workers' decision to turn on a particular



broadcast news channel. However, there were some instances of resistance in our data set as well. For instance, in Israel, despite the national pressure to keep up with the news, Yael, the book publisher, decided to opt out of being informed, and in Japan, Junya, the young IT entrepreneur living in Tokyo, disabled push notifications to avoid news from corporate accounts.

As previous research on the various degrees of television audience activity suggests (Levy and Windahl, 1984), agents' use of media is better understood diachronically rather than synchronically. This is also true for today's complex media environment. *Prior to* news exposure, agents either purposively select news media, or create an environment that is more or less conducive to incidental news encounters—such as using radio or television as ambient sound around the home, and following news organizations' accounts on social media. *During* encounters with news, agents can either ignore content, skim through posts, or engage with the news to acquire more information. *After* incidental news consumption, agents may seek further information or even modify their media environment to continue receiving information on a selected issue—for instance, by setting up push notifications or following certain social media accounts. The enactment of agency through setting up push notifications and following news accounts underscores the iterative nature of structuration: certain practices that mark willingness for further involvement with news content at the present time reinforce the probability of encountering news at a future time, thus endowing the structuration process with a cyclical, iterative character.

While the combination of a comparative approach and qualitative methods is valuable for allowing us to understand varieties of news consumption, it does not enable us to determine the prevalence of the phenomenon of incidental news consumption in any of its multiple manifestations across countries in a generalizable fashion. Future work combining surveys,

analysis of social media feeds, and in-depth interviews in different countries would allow us to both understand and quantify the many facets of the phenomenon.

Incidental news consumption has been alternatively characterized as either a panacea for disenfranchised citizens (Baum, 2002; Prior, 2007; Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016) or as detrimental to the careful consideration of news content and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2013). For most of our respondents, the answer lies somewhere in between. We have often seen the coexistence of both mindless scrolling through social media feeds, and careful attention to the morning newscast, sometimes even in the course of a single, multi-screen information session. We hope our research consists of a fruitful step in a more robust and nuanced conceptualization of the practices of news consumption in the contemporary media landscape, and its various individual, interpersonal, and societal implications.

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<sup>i</sup> Interviews were conducted between March 2016 and December 2017 in Argentina, January and October 2017 in the United States, July 2017 and January 2019 in Israel, March 2018 and February 2019 in Finland, and June 2017 and July 2018 in Japan. During the period in which the interviews were conducted there were no major transformations in the media structures of any of the five countries examined, and we found no important differences between interviews conducted early in the process and those conducted later on.