A Friend You Can Trust for News? Investigating the Potential of Social Media Influencers to Connect Information-Poor Instagram Users to Political Information[1]

Personalization mechanisms in social media can potentially stabilize or extend existing gaps in information exposure: Users less interested in current affairs can experience an "information-poor" social media feed. As social media influencers can increase the political interest of their followers when discussing politics, they might be able to distribute current affairs content to individuals not otherwise connected. Building on theories of opinion leadership, in this paper, we investigate whether and which types of influencers can connect Instagram users that don't follow any political or journalistic actor to current affairs information through a content analysis of their posts and profiles and a network analysis of follower relationships.

Method

To explore influencers' potential to distribute relevant political information, we investigate posts made by German-speaking influencers on Instagram and the account-following practices of their audiences employing a combination of computational approaches to examine:

1. Which (types of) German Instagram influencers share political information on Instagram?
2. Which (types of) German Instagram influencers are predominantly followed by individuals with an "information-poor" Instagram repertoire?
3. Which (types of) German Instagram influencers have the highest potential to connect individuals with an "information-poor" Instagram repertoire to political information through their posts?

We scraped 5.5. million public Instagram accounts and ran a network analysis to identify the central influencers in Germany. We calculate the amount of political information they distribute based on a manual content analysis of more than 25,000 posts and stories. By crosschecking their followers with a database of political communicators we can identify those followers that
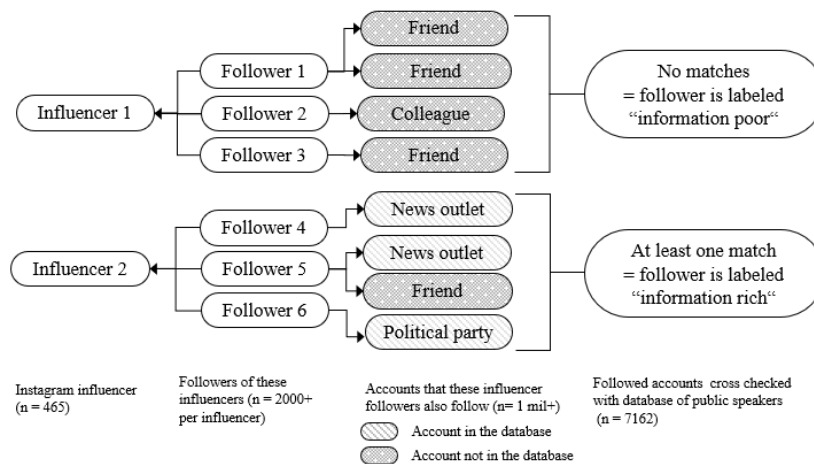
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do not follow any journalistic or political actors on Instagram, who we classify as information poor. Figure 1 summarizes our methodological approach.

Figure 1

*Schematic Model of Our Labeling Approach*

Results

For our analysis, we grouped and categorized the influencers a) in terms of having a connection to established political and journalistic actors according to their self-description or organizational linkage and b) into topical categories based on the content they share such as beauty, sports, or professional journalism. Figures 2 and 3 detail these characteristics for 464 influencers in relation to the mean amount of political information posted and the mean number of information-poor followers per category.

Across all influencers, 65% of their followers did not follow any political or journalistic actor that belongs to the database of public speakers in Germany. Those influencers that have connections to politics or journalism through their organizational affiliations or self-description have a lower number of information-poor followers in their audience (Fig. 2). Similarly, influencers with a topical focus in their posts on professional journalism or politics, diversity/equity/inclusion, and comedy/satire have the least number of information-poor followers (Fig. 3). Those types of influencers that post the least amount of political information (beauty, music, film) are also those with higher levels of information-poor followers (Fig 3).
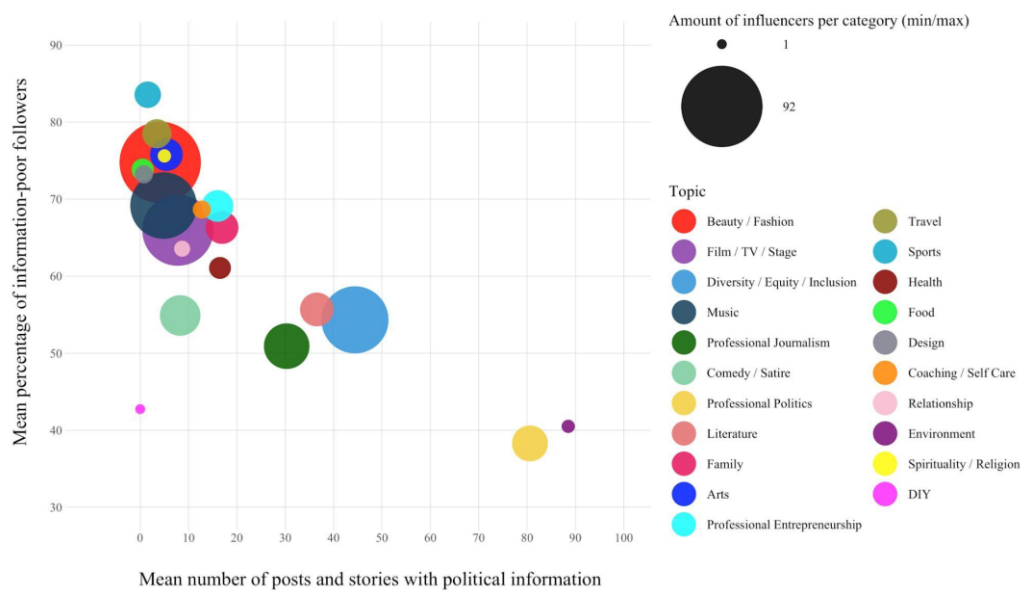
Figure 2

Mean Percentage of Information-Poor Followers and Number of Relevant Content per Influencer Categorized by Connections to Journalism and Politics
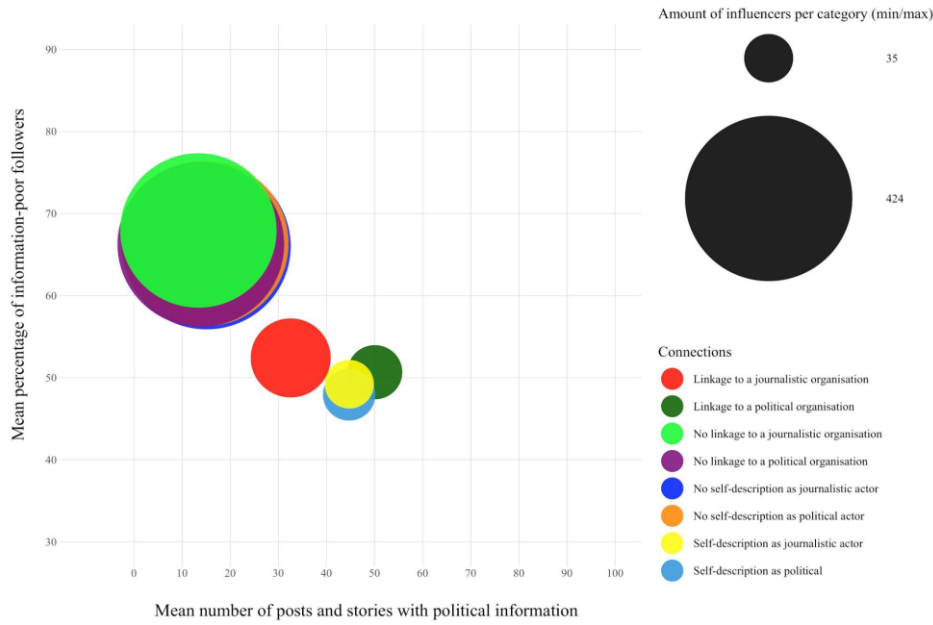
Figure 3

Mean Percentage of Information-Poor Followers and Number of Relevant Content per Influencer Categorized by Topical Classification

These results indicate a stabilization of existing information gaps within the audience composition of influencers in terms of the Matthew Effect: Those who already follow many other political information sources on Instagram and are therefore labeled information-rich, also follow influencers that post a lot of political information and/or have a thematic focus on such issues in their general profile. Those with a more information-poor Instagram repertoire seem to be more prominent among the followers of influencers that post less political information such as sports or beauty bloggers.

However, we also identified those (types of) influencers that share political information but also have a rather information-poor audience on Instagram. Running a logistic regression analysis predicting influencers that posted political information at least once and have an above-average number of information-poor followers, we can see that influencers that post about issues around diversity/equity/inclusion or coaching/self-care are significantly more likely to reach an information-poor population with political information. Actors that have a connection to a journalistic organization are significantly less likely to reach information-poor followers with political information on Instagram. In addition, being a political actor has a negative—albeit insignificant—effect on reaching information-poor followers.

Conclusion

These results confirm our assumption that more professional or traditional distributors of political information on social media might not be the best intermediaries to reach an audience that is not interested in news and similar information. Social media influencers categorized by a topical focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion who, for example, frequently post about socio-political issues such as racism and feminism or self-care influencers that cover healthcare have the potential to broker political information to those audience populations.

Bearing the limitations of this study, such as using the amount of relevant Instagram accounts followed as a proxy for being information-poor on Instagram and the experimental computational design in mind, we believe that our results can serve as a starting point for political and journalistic organizations to identify potential collaborators that can reach audience populations no longer/ not (yet) interest in news and other information relevant for political opinion formation and could help to overcome gaps in information exposure.