

Johanna Dunaway and Kathleen Searles, **News and Democratic Citizens in the Mobile Era**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023, 151 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

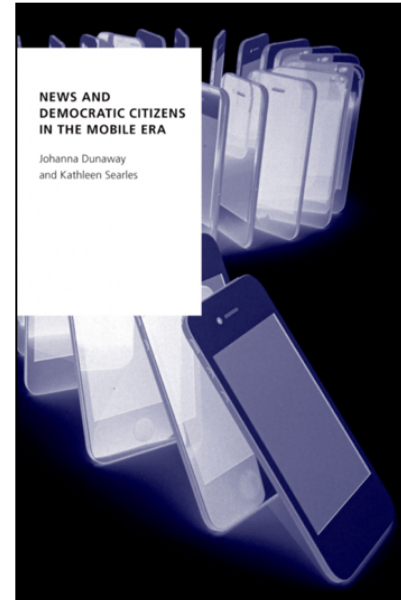
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Mobile phones are not just convenient technological devices but a basic need in the daily lives of citizens today, playing an important role in news access and political participation. Yet, the ubiquitous spread of mobile news and the ease of access to online information do not necessarily mean a more informed citizenry.

Some authors have argued that digital technologies are the culprit of a dumbing down and decline in social capital, especially among youth (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Putnam, 1995). With mobile use being considered more superficial than computers, becoming informed in a mobile and social media environment can become challenging (Napoli & Obar, 2014). However, there are significant nuances. For instance, most people perceive digital connectivity as making them not just more easily manipulated but also more informed (Wike et al., 2022). With such contradictions, in a time where mobile phones are becoming more popular than computers (Perrin, 2021), it is important to understand how mobile information contributes to citizens' information about the world.

In the book **News and Democratic Citizens in the Mobile Era**, Professors Johanna Dunaway and Kathleen Searles from Texas A&M University and Louisiana State University, respectively, explore the cognitive impact of mobile information on democratic citizens, making the distinction between physical access, exposure, attention, and learning. Stemming from a political science background, the authors state two main purposes of this research. First, it seeks to compare the use of political information across different devices and platforms, particularly in how information infrastructures might impact postexposure processing (PEP). Second, and more broadly, the authors want to prove the need for a theoretical framework that explains how technologies structure information in ways that shape information processing. For the latter, Dunaway and Searles drew on existing literature about media effects to propose a framework for physical and cognitive access (PCA) of mobile information. The PCA framework is based on two premises: that technology shapes media effects in terms of information access (physical and cognitive); and that those effects operate in both pre- and postexposure processing.

The hypotheses formulated convey the idea that despite mobile information being easily accessible, mobile-sized screens may require more cognitive effort; therefore, it is likely to decrease user attention, arousal, and recall regarding information. To ascertain the validity of the theoretical framework, the authors conducted seven studies using a combination of psychophysiological methods in a lab



environment, and web-traffic data of news websites retrieved from Comscore, in March 2016. The lab experiments were conducted between 2015 and 2016, and included eye tracking, heart rate variability, and skin conductance levels, with a sample of both university students and adults, to measure attention, cognitive effort, recall, and arousal in response to watching news stories on large and small screens.

Overall, the findings support the PCA framework. The regression models with the Comscore data showed that while more people access news sites through mobiles, the amount of time spent is significantly shorter than accessing on computers. In the eye-tracking experiments, the researchers found that news attention on tablets and smartphones was shorter than on computers. As for the cognitive effort, mobile information revealed a higher cognitive burden than information on computers, which might reflect poorer learning outcomes. PEP effects on mobiles are therefore explained by attenuated attention: "Mobile devices make information available to more people at more times throughout the day, but there are functional limitations for news consumption on mobile devices that dissuade attention to news" (p. 109). Contrary to the thesis of minimal effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), the authors verified that communication technologies effectively produce effects because they shape both physical and cognitive access to information.

Despite the age of the data, this study brings valid insights about the way information is retained in terms of screen size. These contributions mostly benefit tech designers working with user interface and user experience, particularly in the news industry, seeking to improve information adaptability on mobile news sites and capture and retain user attention without compromising information quality and journalistic ethics, given the so-called "economy of attention" (Goldhaber, 1997). For scholars studying communication and political science, this book might bring innovative methodological approaches that can be combined with self-reporting questionnaires and qualitative methods.

Since the data mostly came from students, the role of mobiles and political information in youth cultures is significant to address. For instance, forms of political participation online are now evolving into nuanced types of activism emerging from popular culture on social media (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Briggs, 2017; Dahlgren, 2011; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016). And despite mobile attention being conveyed as addictive (Davazdahemami, Hammer, & Soror, 2016), youth attention on social media is partially unconscious, as they do not fully understand the mechanisms that are produced to gain their attention (Giraldo-Luque & Fernández-Rovira, 2020). Another important reflection is regarding the controversial discussion about the concept of news and news trust, particularly in an algorithmic biased and post-truth era, together with increasingly blurred boundaries between information, entertainment, and marketing, shaping what people believe to be news (Melro & Pereira, 2023; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Robertson, 2023; Vraga & Edgerly, 2023). As news trust matters for democracy, some experts state that the increasing use of machine learning surveillance technologies might compromise the public's ability to engage in civic discussions (Anderson & Rainie, 2020).

Even though communication technologies may change the way people interact with each other and with news information, by delivering information differently across devices, the impact of media messages on people is far from being a unidirectional model since it comprises an understanding of sociocultural backgrounds, news uses and engagement, media and information literacy, and attitudes

toward information. As summarized by McQuail (2010), the power of media messages depends on people's views of social reality and how these are aligned with the symbolic constructions offered by the media. In an algorithmic-driven digital world, however, the power of citizens might need more attention from education and governments.

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