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“The Identity Role in Political Communication”

Information repertoires in algorithmic platforms and political identities in post-partisan scenarios ¹

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The relationship between political identities and information repertoires can be understood as a recursive one. Information repertoires shape, reinforce, and potentially change political perceptions and preferences, while political preferences drive selective media use (Aruguete and Calvo, 2023; Stroud, 2011; Tóth et al., 2022). Although we know these processes are dynamically intertwined, a new set of empirical questions is emerging in the field of political communication because both information repertoires and political identities are rapidly shifting in contemporary societies.

In this piece, we aim to problematize and identify some of the challenges for political communication research that emerge from the study of contemporary information repertoires, particularly when it comes to understanding the formation of political identities. Drawing on recent and ongoing empirical studies conducted in Chile and Brazil that address transformations in news consumption and the impact of influencers as sources of information and affective connection, we take a (quite preliminary) approach to two broad and interrelated questions that must certainly be answered through a collective effort. First, to what extent consuming content primarily through personal, algorithm-driven devices affects people’s information repertoires? And second, what do these shifts mean for the ways individuals shape and negotiate their identities in post-partisan settings?

A couple of clarifications before going any further.

Firstly, we use the term *information repertoires* deliberately to refer to the variety of content that people are exposed to, including professionally produced news from journalistic outlets as well as content generated by other types of creators. Although these formats can be analytically distinguished (and we try to do so here), our empirical findings suggest that this is not how users experience them. Individuals are exposed to high volumes of highly fragmented,

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non-hierarchical information consumed through the same devices and applications. Social media use routines make different types of formats, content, and their sources blur together and are difficult to distinguish. In users' memories, some sources tend to merge as time passes (Vergara et al., 2020).

In our view, the blurring boundaries in daily media usage forces us to rethink information repertoires from the perspective of day-to-day practices. This has potential implications for how information repertoires are theorized and operationalized. This issue is particularly relevant for populations who get their news predominantly through social media — a growing trend in most Latin American countries, including Chile and Brazil. According to the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, more people in both countries get their news from social media than from traditional media outlets, including their online versions. Additionally, 46% of their populations report that they avoid the news often or sometimes (Newman et al., 2025).

Secondly, we locate the discussion about political identities in post-partisan scenarios because traditional partisan identities are proving insufficient to represent relevant social cleavages and to account for how people locate themselves in relation to others in society (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). Chile has seen an upsurge of anti-elite sentiments (Argote & Visconti, 2023), while experiencing a dramatic decline in party identification over the last three decades (de la Cerda, 2022). In turn, Brazil has seen a more significant lack of party affiliation among younger generations (TSE, 2023). In both Chile and Brazil, anti-party sentiment is stronger than adherence to parties (Meléndez, 2022). These transformations — shared with other Latin American countries and beyond — suggest that some of the categories traditionally used to account for political self-placement might also need rethinking. We believe it is essential to recognize that political identities are not limited to the organization of sensitivities across the left-right spectrum or to adherence to traditional party cleavages. People do not generate in-group and out-group distinctions solely by adhering to specific parties or groups, but also by rejecting specific political parties—or all of them—giving rise to negative forms of partisanship and anti-establishment identities often exploited by populist rhetoric (Meléndez, 2022).

Likewise, identities can certainly be studied and explored in a much broader sense as cultural struggles for recognition based, among other factors, on nationality, gender, ethnicity, or race, which are embedded in unequal power relationships within a given society (Fraser, 1995). These multiple and often cross-sectional struggles for recognition also shape political identities and are mobilized by political actors, having the potential to generate dynamics of social inclusion, but also dynamics of exclusion and oppression. Critically addressing these differences is relevant, as it involves examining the power asymmetries that exist between the groups promoting identity-based discourses, as well as their positions in society (Kreiss et al., 2024). In Brazil, race and class were, for example, successfully mobilized by former President Jair Bolsonaro to embolden whiteness as an identity for middle-class Brazilians, who played a pivotal role in his ascension to power (Porto, 2023). In Chile, nativism has been used by the

ascending radical right to construct both indigenous populations and immigrants as out-groups threatening the homogeneity of the nation (Rovira Kaltwasser and Zanotti, 2023).

With these antecedents in mind, how can we move forward to better understand the relationship between information repertoires and political identities?

News use and political identities, some challenges ahead

If political identities are broadly defined, there are many ways of thinking about how they relate to news use. One of them is the extent to which news use is politically motivated. Research in the region has shown that in contexts of increased polarization, a pro-attitudinal pattern tends to prevail: people prefer contents aligned with their beliefs and perceive counter-attitudinal news as biased (García, Brussino and Alonso, 2020). Likewise, in the wake of negative news, partisan individuals avoid stories that question their political camps, while political adversaries increase their consumption of such stories (Aruguete and Calvo, 2023). In this vein, Orchard, Aruguete and Siles (2025) identified the relationship between ideological disputes and news consumption as a line of research that requires further development in Latin America.

However, we argue that the field still has a wider range of questions to explore—questions that extend beyond the cognitive-attitudinal perspective, which mostly frames selective exposure to belief-consistent content as a driver of political and affective polarization. This line of inquiry is important. In fact, there is currently an open, active, and inconclusive debate about the extent to which selective digital consumption leads people to hold one-sided views of public issues and limits their exposure to different perspectives (e.g., Guess et al., 2018; Tornberg, 2022). Nonetheless, there are many other relevant questions to ask in this context. For example, what incentives exist on digital platforms (electoral, commercial, attentional) for political and non-political actors to promote polarizing discourses? Which actors are profiting from the construction of polarization strategies? What modes of representation and mediation have become more or less important in algorithmically curated environments? Another big important question, as Kreiss and McGregor (2024) argue, is about the power asymmetries that underlie how different groups draw on polarizing discourses and attempt to promote them from positions of privilege against marginalized populations. We have recently observed this in Chile and Brazil. In Chile, for example, the exaltation of national traits, and the electoral weaponization of discourses about migration, have led to dehumanizing narratives and support for punitive and exclusive policies. In the Chilean 2025 presidential elections², the right-wing favorite for winning the final ballot José Antonio Kast has declared that he would make illegal immigration a crime. Another of the candidates, Franco Parisi, who finished third place in the first round, said if he was to be president, “no foreigner will be in first place in the line to house, school, health and security”. Johannes Kaiser, aligned with the extreme right, who finished in fourth place, stated that “Chilean politicians have betrayed his own people on maintaining an open border policy”.

² See the debate on immigration here (Spanish): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQE6Ca1kcqI>

In our view, this line of research could also be expanded if a broader definition of political identities is incorporated into our analysis, including negative partisanship, populist worldviews, and anti-establishment predispositions as guiding interpretative frameworks used by people not only to observe and participate in their political environments but also to make decisions about their information repertoires. In recent focus groups and interviews conducted with Chilean audiences regarding their use of news, we have encountered narratives of rejection toward news outlets and specific stories based on political discordance with one's own views, but, more importantly, a suspicion of bias as a default position with respect to a wide variety of informative sources, especially those that professionally produce news. As a result, we observe folk theories about news production that are often driven by skepticism and distrust of the media and the information it provides. This distrust forces people to constantly monitor their environments in search of certainties, combining both professional and non-professional information sources in their news diet. As a result, evaluative discourses about news become based on idiosyncratic relevance criteria that could be translated into the idea of “news that is relevant to me or the people I trust.” Accounting for hybrid and — allegedly deinstitutionalized — forms of information consumption is a theoretical and empirical challenge for political communication researchers.

Beyond news use: identity and content creators

Social media is the main source of news for Chileans (42.3%), followed by online news websites (35.4%), both scoring higher than any traditional media (Mellado & Cruz, 2025). Nevertheless, it is somewhat difficult to dig deeper into the meaning of these scores, since social media feeds are personalized, algorithmically curated, and negotiated by users who try to “game” such curation (Cotter, 2018). Additionally, social media environments are hybrid information sources where day-to-day expressions and concerns mingle with public issues (Milan & Barbosa, 2020) creating alternative influence networks (Lewis, 2018). These hybrid content feeds, where users stumble upon news rather than intentionally consume it, are a central issue in discussing political identity formation when nurtured by such media sources.

Those personalized feeds consumed through individual mobile screens are interconnected thanks to the social affordances of digital platforms. Feats, interviews, mentions, hashtags, collabs, and other platform features connect content and authors motivated by a myriad of reasons, ranging from mutual commercial interests (broadening the network of followers) to political alignment. One way or another, the connections—either enforced by users tagging each other or more overtly triggered by algorithms—create what Pavez and colleagues (2025) call “circuits of meaning”: overlapping networks of connections between content that generate chains of meaning. In other words, independent content niches are repeatedly interconnected, creating patterns of information, values, and worldviews. In the Brazilian case, for instance, in the orbit of *religious discourses* lie other content niches seemingly unrelated, such as *old money* (traditional rich families), *new rich*, and *financial investors*, creating a pattern of navigational flow that repeatedly reinforces the connection

between these topics (Pavez et al., 2025). These connections are not at all obvious or intuitive. Instead, they emerge from sociotechnical interactions between people, content, and algorithms.

Recent studies in Chile and Brazil point to different levels of political alignment among popular content creators on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. While in Brazil, political polarization has created pressure on digital influencers to take a stand in domestic politics (Rocha et al., 2024), in Chile the same phenomenon has not been as pronounced. Instead, content creators have been, thus far, more subtle, leaving ideological stances and worldviews more implicit or veiled under daily life content. As such, a TikTok video in which a Chilean exchange student celebrates the possibility of discussing sexual dissidences as an issue in undergraduate studies abroad (see Marianaback, 2025) could be interpreted as a progressive position, though there is no clear or explicit political alignment voiced by its author (Pavez et al., 2025). Even more subtle is the defense of worldviews or values that are not necessarily political in essence, such as hard work and meritocracy. While in Brazil, meritocracy has been captured by the extreme right, interlacing it with other issues such as faith, self-discipline, and positive thinking (Pavez et al., 2025), it could equally be framed to support left-leaning values and actors, such as issues of structural inequality, the privileges behind elites' social capital, and so on.

In the context of weak party identification and a low level of agreement on trusted shared sources, this sort of *political–non-political* content becomes valuable as an entry point to observe what kind of values, ideology, and worldview are promoted, by whom and for what purposes.

Although the analysis of the relationship between people and news still partly revolves around traditional media, limiting information repertoires to this sphere seems reductionist. This approach is also removed from the realities we have observed in our fieldwork, especially considering growing generational differences in media consumption habits. The increased use of social media platforms demands theoretical and methodological imagination in order to account for the fragmented and individualized feeds that nonetheless crystallize into circuits of meaning. Through these circuits, users connect daily events, ideas, and values.

This apparent informational chaos resulting from accelerated changes in content consumption behaviors is also fertile ground for research in political communication. To this end, we consider it essential, first and foremost, to embrace calls to place concepts of power and struggles for recognition at the center of our research questions. Furthermore, we believe it is essential to recognize the opportunity that social media offers in terms of rich data to explore identity articulations like those we currently observe, which elude traditional classifications.

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