Essay:
Is Topic Fatigue an International Problem?
Four Theses

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Abstract: Topic fatigue is a potential reaction to news topics that the media covers intensively. Recipients experiencing topic fatigue are annoyed and state that they do not want to hear or see anything about such topics anymore. As potential outcome, they strive to avoid such topics during their future news exposure. In this essay, we discuss the question of whether topic fatigue is an international problem. Based on initial empirical insights obtained via qualitative interviews, we establish four theses that underline the international meaning of the phenomenon. First, we argue that the level of press freedom can shape the intensity of topic fatigue and that fatigue experiences can be extreme in countries with low press freedom. Second, we discuss topic fatigue as a potential threat to political transitions and democratization processes. Third, we propose that topic fatigue may reinforce resentments against western societies. Regarding this point, the role of the international media in particular for English-speaking, non-western countries is addressed. Finally, we introduce the argument that topic fatigue may erode the deliberative potential of social media, which can be particularly problematic for countries in which the traditional news media is (politically) dependent. Ultimately, the key elements of these theses are used to propose a comparative research design for an international study on topic fatigue.

Keywords: Topic fatigue, news avoidance, news coverage perception, press freedom, international media, hostile media, political alienation, social media, echo chamber

Introduction

Currently, many countries face political problems that remain on the political and media agenda for long periods of time, such as migration flows, trade wars, terrorism, right-wing-populism, and global warming. Agenda-setting research generally points to positive effects on the part of intensive news coverage because recipients perceive such topics to be more important (e.g. McCombs, 2005), spend more time paying attention to them (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), process the information provided more deeply (Ciuk & Yost, 2016), and engage in topic-related political behavior such as signing petitions more often (Weaver, 1991).

However, with the concept of *topic fatigue* being an emerging approach in media reception and effects research, communication scholars recently introduced a somewhat contrasting perspective. A high level of long-lasting news coverage about certain issues may provoke feelings of annoyance among recipients, and they often do not want to hear or see anything about these topics anymore (Kuhlmann, Schumann & Wolling, 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016; Arlt & Wolling, 2017). The potential outcomes of topic fatigue underscore the relevance of the phenomenon: recipients experiencing topic fatigue tend to avoid the topic in their future news exposure and withdraw from interpersonal discussions about it (Kuhlmann, Schumann, & Wolling, 2014). This can be problematic for democratic considerations because such avoidance reactions may ultimately lead to an inactive and uninformed citizenry. However, as stated by the majority of democratic theories (e.g., Schmidt, 2010; Bozdag & van den Hoven, 2015), a politically informed and actively participating citizenry is crucial for the functioning of a democracy.

In particular, with regard to these outcomes, we consider topic fatigue a relevant phenomenon that requires further scientific consideration. Moreover, we argue for the necessity of establishing first thoughts about the international meaning of topic fatigue: firstly and as shown in the next section, topic fatigue takes root via a certain kind of news coverage. As such, differences in media systems may form differently sized breeding grounds for topic fatigue. Secondly, the outcomes of topic fatigue, such as an uninformed and passive citizenry, may have different meanings for different political systems and for international cohesion as well.

In the following, we will first turn to the concept itself and propose a framework to clarify the concept theoretically. Afterwards, we will discuss the international meaning of the phenomenon and establish four theses on potential reasons and outcomes that should be considered in international comparative studies.

Topic fatigue – theoretical considerations

To our knowledge, topic fatigue was first introduced by Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling (2014: 20) as "the cognition that recipients do not longer want to hear nor see anything about a topic anymore." Moreover, they state that "topic fatigue develops over time and is the result of a negative evaluation of a topic and/or the news coverage. [...] Topic fatigue can lead to an active avoidance of that topic that might follow a period of (even intensive) exposure" (ibid.).

As such, topic fatigue shows clear parallels to other fatigue phenomena, namely human-interest fatigue (Beyer & Figenschou, 2014), compassion fatigue regarding social problems (Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996), and climate-change fatigue (Capstick & Pidgeon, 2014). One clear advantage of topic fatigue with regard to these existing concepts is its generalizability because it takes into account that recipients may be annoyed by various topics. However, in its original definition, pre-

sented by Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling (2014), it remains vague on several points. In the following, we will establish a clearer picture of what topic fatigue is.

Our first point of criticism centers on the lack of clarity concerning the core of the concept. In their original publication, Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling (2014) mix up expressions pointing to emotions (e.g., annoyed recipients) and cognitions (a wish not to hear or see anything about that topic anymore) as manifestations of topic fatigue. To overcome this lack of clarity, we argue for defining topic fatigue as a dual-process phenomenon comprised of emotional and cognitive components. Psychologists show that cognitions and emotions are highly interwoven because cognitions give rise to emotions and emotions may affect cognitive considerations (Silvia, 2006; Silvia & Warburton, 2006). Linking that to the arguments of Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling, we propose defining "annoyance" as the primary emotion and the "wish not to hear or see anything about the topic anymore" as the primary cognition related to topic fatigue. Furthermore, it seems highly probable that this primary emotion and cognition may be but must not necessarily be accompanied by further cognitions and emotions, depending on the specific topic at hand. With regard to the circumplex model of affect (Russell, 1980), we argue that those secondary emotions may either be characterized as an increase in negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, or boredom, or as a decrease in positive emotions, such as interest (see also Kinnick et al., 1996; for a classification of interest as emotion, see Silvia, 2006). Concerning secondary cognitions, we assume that in particular, the perceptions of the news coverage – presented as potential reasons for topic fatigue by Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling – may give rise to further cognitive considerations. Because, to our knowledge, theoretical evidence about this is rare, we do not deepen this argument at this point. However, in Thesis 2, we will further develop the idea of secondary cognitions based on our initial empirical insights.

Our second point of criticism addresses the lack of clarity regarding the underlying mechanisms that shape the development or process of topic fatigue. In other words, when does topic fatigue develop and under which conditions does it lead to certain behaviors, such as avoiding a topic in the news? Several scholars argue that media avoidance or information avoidance is rooted in the characteristics of the information itself. Using the concept of "information utility," Atkin (1973, 1985) shows that information that either lacks informational value or provokes so-called psychological liabilities triggers media avoidance. In the first case, the information does not contain enough new value, which may reduce interest and ultimately cause recipients to avoid a certain topic (Silvia, 2006). This may be the case for news coverage perceived as having a "lack of variety," which has been proposed as one potential reason for topic fatigue (Kuhlmann, Schumann, & Wolling, 2014). Psychological liabilities are negatively experienced emotions that are triggered by information perceived as irritating or threatening (Brashers, 2001). This is probably in line with the factors "overwhelming information-flood" and "manipulative news coverage," introduced by Kuhlmann, Schumann and Wolling. Interestingly,

Brashers (2001) argues that these liabilities may change over time and that for example, fear may become resignation. Kuhlmann, Schumann & Wolling (2014) also underscore the long-term nature of topic fatigue and state that topic fatigue is not an immediate reaction but occurs after a period of intensive news coverage about a topic.

To sum up, we argue that topic fatigue is a dual-process-phenomenon comprised of a primary cognition (the wish not to hear or see anything about a topic anymore) and a primary emotion (annoyance), paired with further secondary emotions and cognitions. Topic fatigue is rooted in the perception of a certain type of news coverage that ultimately triggers these emotions and cognitions and may lead to avoidance behavior.

We argue that the starting point of topic fatigue – the perception of certain news coverage – requires to explore topic fatigue in an international context. Differences in media systems, such as the level of press freedom, likely trigger certain news coverage patterns or particularities, which will lead to variations in topic fatigue and its outcomes. In the following, we will further explore this argument.

Topic fatigue as international problem – four theses

In this section, we will present four theses that underline the necessity of studying topic fatigue in an international context. These theses are rooted in an initial empirical exploration based on 15 written interviews with non-German students from 13 countries.[1] The students were enrolled in an English-language Master's program at a German university and had recently (maximum of 1 month ago) arrived in Germany. In the interviews, participants were first asked whether they remember a recent news topic that they did not want to see or hear anymore about and that made them feel annoyed. If so, they were asked to reflect on why this topic annoyed them and how they reacted on it when confronted with it via the news. In the following, we will focus on the interviewees from Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey, and Zimbabwe because they shed light on several variations of topic fatigue that clearly extend the existing (US and European) perspective on the phenomenon. As annoying topics, participants mentioned corruption in politics (Brazil), the peace agreement with the FARC (Colombia), Donald Trump (Mexico), the Arab Spring (Morocco), Islamic terrorism and the role of Pakistan (Pakistan), the military coup attempt (Turkey, two interviewees), and the Islamic terrorist attacks in Paris, better known via the keyword "Charlie Hebdo" (Zimbabwe). In this sample, the topics mentioned are predominantly national ones or at least affect the interviewees' home countries directly. For instance, Mexico is directly affected by Trump's politics in various ways (e.g., the building of a wall). This could be a hint that national topics are the most vulnerable to the develop-

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[1] Countries of origin (in alphabetical order) are Brazil, China, Colombia, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Portugal, Romania, South Korea, Turkey, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

ment of topic fatigue. On the one hand, this may be because national topics receive a higher level of news coverage in the affected countries, which is one potential cause of topic fatigue. On the other hand, several topics address situations in which the existing political situation is changing or threatened. These topics likely relate to the cultural and/or political value systems of the citizens, whether they support or reject the developments. As such, we can assume that cultural and political values can shape the development of topic fatigue as well.

Thesis 1: Topic fatigue can be extreme in countries with low press freedom

Existing research indicates that the mere quantity of news coverage about a certain topic leads to topic fatigue (overwhelming information flood, e.g., Kuhlmann, Schumann & Wolling, 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016). However, the interviewees from Turkey and Morocco shed light on an extreme aspect of information quantity that is hard to imagine from a German or western perspective. While the information flood about the annoying topic is usually criticized *in comparison with other topics,* these interviewees explained that the annoying topic was indeed perceived as the *only* topic covered, as shown in this Turkish statement:

> "Turkey has been under exposure of one single topic [the military coup attempt] for months [...] every single media source focused on this singular issue. Day and night, turning on the television, turning to a radio channel in your car, checking out some social media, newspapers, and whatever media and medium one could think of, there was no news on how the market was affected, what happened to terrorism in the Middle East, the relationship between Russia and Turkey, [...] what happened to refugees and minorities, what was going on with the unemployment crisis, and so on. Before the coup attempt, these topics were everywhere, and all of a sudden, it was the coup attempt and the coup attempt only."

A similar condition was described in Morocco regarding the Arab Spring:

> "The media was on that 24/7. Once I opened any television channel, I heard about it. It was in the newspaper, on talk shows, in social media, Facebook, Twitter, and of course in the public discussions on the streets. It was everywhere; no one could think or talk about anything but this subject."

With regard to such an extreme description of a news landscape saturated with one topic, we could ask about potential reasons. In other words, how is it possible that citizens are "tortured" with one single topic for months and, in consequence, end up annoyed regarding even "seismic" topics, such as the military coup attempt and the Arab Spring? We assume that the *level of press freedom* in a country could be a crucial factor affecting such conditions. According to the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (2018), the situation in both countries is described as "difficult" (the second worst category out of five), pointing to a high dependency of the press on political and/or economic actors. As such and without having the variety of voices of an independent press landscape, interest groups may keep a topic artificially in the media and suppress other news. We assume that particularly in the case of Turkey, the government exploited the news coverage of

the above-mentioned incident. Of course, this does not go unnoticed by the citizens, what brings us to the next thesis.

Thesis 2: Topic fatigue is a threat to political transitions and democratization processes

With regard to the extreme conditions as explained above, the primary cognition of topic fatigue (the wish not to hear or see anything about a topic anymore) seems to be paired with two secondary cognitions. The first centres on the *suspicion* that either the media and/or the actors who are involved in the topic may have a strategic purpose in creating the massive news coverage: "Some would go to the extent that television networks have their own hidden agendas that serve other international purposes at the strategic level" (Moroccan interview). Alternately, as stated with regard to Turkey, "Government and media overused it so well that it was almost like there was nothing else happening." In Mexico, a country having massive problems with corruption for a long time, topic fatigue may 'activate' a pre-existing and strongly negative attitude toward political actors and the media: "In Latin American countries, there have been several cases in which the government pays the media to depict certain topics and to hide others, provoking a smokescreen."

The second secondary cognition is *resignation* or *apathy*, as indicated in the following statement: "In the end, I didn't even care" (Turkish interviewee). Hence, it is not surprising that such cognitions can lead to rather harsh behavioural outcomes. From existing research, we know that topic fatigue, or related concepts, cause people to avoid news about the annoying topic (Kinnick et al., 1996; Kuhlmann, Schumann & Wolling, 2014). Interviewees from Turkey report reactions that are even more drastic: "The irritation was so great that I was *staying away from everything that had any meaning of news*" (Turkish Interviewee 1). The other interviewee from Turkey said that he even "convinced [his] family not to follow the news and parrot discussions on TV." This led to the following: "My social circle and I felt like *staying away from any media*." We assume that under these conditions, in which the news media reports on predominantly a single issue, avoiding news in general may be the *only* perceived choice for handling topic fatigue.

Taken together, this brings us to the question of what meaning topic fatigue has in the case in which citizens become suspicious and apathetic and – in the most extreme cases – avoid not only the topic but news in general.

In an experiment, Koch and Zerback (2013) showed that the repetition of a certain statement ultimately reduced recipients' *trust* in the source. Moreover, the results of a survey-study by Beyer and Figenschou (2018) indicate that recipients perceive overwhelming news coverage as biased. We can assume that topic fatigue is part of a broader theoretical "bundle" of dissatisfaction or withdrawal phenomena. For instance, topic fatigue may increase mistrust in journalism and the media system

(e.g., Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and also lead to feelings of political alienation towards politicians, political institutions, and political processes (e.g., Wolling, 1999). This can occur independently of countries and nations. However, the potential problems resulting from those associations could differ according to the level of democratization in a given country. While an annoyed, alienated, and non-participating citizenry threatens the bases of established democracies, a potential association between topic fatigue and political alienation in countries undergoing political transitions could be one factor in eroding trust in democratization processes. Additionally, citizens may lose interest in exercising potential democratic rights if they feel resigned to crucial problems in their countries. If this occurs regarding 'seismic' topics, such as the Arab Spring or the military coup attempt, an indifferent citizenry, withdrawn from any kind of political participation, might allow interest groups to push through their own interests and agendas.

Thesis 3: Topic fatigue may reinforce resentment against western societies

Existing research has already shown that annoyed recipients may perceive news coverage about certain topics to be manipulative (Kuhlmann, Schumann & Wolling, 2014; Metag & Arlt, 2016), which may go hand in hand with 'suspicion' cognition described above. We argue that such accusations of manipulation will be particularly problematic for international cohesion if they point to the *international media*, such as CNN. To this end, we first present the statement of a Pakistani interviewee and his complaint about the portrayal of Islamic terrorism:

> "International media, rather than support Pakistan by appreciating efforts to curb Pakistan's terrorism, just show one angle of the story: Pakistan is the safe haven for terrorists. It is pertinent to mention here that Pakistan has managed to kill thousands of terrorists' organization camps across the country [...], but usually international media rarely gives coverage to such things. We think such absurdness and biasedness by the international media should end."

Secondly, another aspect of this problem may emerge when citizens of non-western countries come to have the impression that the international press ignores certain world regions and their problems. A participant from Zimbabwe explained her annoyance with coverage of the terrorist attacks in Paris (Charlie Hebdo), mentioning the fact that the international media ignored xenophobic attacks that occurred at the same time in South Africa:

> "I understood due to gatekeeping and newsworthiness purposes, some stories are not viewed as being as interesting in western societies as others. [...] But when I compare the extent of coverage placed on the Paris attacks and the almost non-existent coverage of the South Africa attacks, the discrepancy is quite grand. It seemed to highlight the degree of importance regions have in terms of [a certain story] being considered a newsworthy story."

It is likely no coincidence that participants from Pakistan and Zimbabwe mentioned the international press. In both countries, one of the official languages is English, and the international media is, probably, a component of individual news consumption. Thus, beyond press freedom, we assume that the importance of the international media in a national news landscape should be considered a factor in the emergence of topic fatigue.

Moreover, we must determine what consequences topic fatigue can have under such circumstances. The major points of critique in the interviews presented above centered on western-biased reporting. As is known from hostile media research (Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985), such perceptions of bias may cause people to establish clear ingroup/outgroup distinctions (Perloff, 2015), particularly regarding political (Reid, 2012) and religious (Ariyanto, Hornsey & Gallois, 2016) topics. As such, we worry that topic fatigue – via hostile media perceptions – may increase resentment against western societies (the outgroup) on the part of members of non-western societies (the ingroup).

Thesis 4: Topic fatigue may destroy the deliberative potential of social media, particularly for countries with dependent (traditional) news media

Currently, in addition to the traditional news media, social media plays a crucial role in the daily news cocktail of many. In particular, in countries with medium or low levels of press freedom and highly dependent media systems, social media can provide a valuable alternative information source. If social media is not regulated or censored by the respective government (as in China or Vietnam), it should positively influence political discussion and participation (e.g., Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Skoric, Zhu & Pang, 2016). In this context, political communication scholars often highlight the deliberative potential of social media discussions. However, as indicated by Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, and Ladwig (2014), the reality of social media discussions is more often characterized by an uncivil discussion style. We can interpret the following statements expressed by interviewees from Latin American countries in light of this argument: A Colombian interviewee rooted her annoyance with the FARC peace agreement predominantly in the associated social media discussions, which she referred to as "the social media fight." The social media fight may provoke topic fatigue due to a discussion style perceived as "intolerant and ignorant when dealing with other people's opinions" (Brazilian interviewee about a corruption scandal). This fight may even end in harsh conflicts: "There were neither respectful nor constructive discussions but excessive anger followed by the end of friendships in many cases" (Brazilian interviewee, continued). What is described here may be less a manifestation of a deliberative discussion style but instead refer to the agonistic model of democratic communication (Mouffe, 1999), which is characterized by conflict and dissent.

What does this mean for the international study of topic fatigue? First, it is probably no coincidence that critiques of social media were predominantly mentioned by interviewees from Latin American countries because social media is generally of high importance there (Massmann & Schneider, 2013) and provides a valuable alternative to the traditional (politically dependent) mass media. In consequence, a negative perception of social media discourses may go hand in hand with a feeling of disappointment if this source is unreliable as well, which may trigger topic fatigue more strongly than in other countries.

Second, because the interviewees indicated that they deleted annoyance-inducing sources from their news stream, we can surmise that annoyed social media users may end up in so-called echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001; Flaxman, Goel & Rao, 2016). In consequence, they become trapped in a homogenous bubble, in which they predominantly receive information that is in line with their own beliefs and attitudes and discuss it with like-minded people. This may be particularly problematic in countries in which the traditional news media does not offer balanced news coverage that can function as a "corrective" for homogenous bubbles.

Closing remarks: Toward an empirical framework for the international study of topic fatigue

This article proposed several assumptions regarding the international meaning of topic fatigue and differences in its causes and consequences. In these four theses, we propose that an international exploration of topic fatigue should consider differing levels of press freedom, the importance of the international media (particularly in non-western societies), and the role of social media as a political information source as factors influencing topic fatigue. Furthermore, we highlighted potential outcomes of topic fatigue that go beyond the mere avoidance of a topic in the news or political discussions. We assumed that topic fatigue could foster political alienation, mistrust in media system and journalists, resentment against western societies, and the generation of echo chambers.

For an empirical exploration of topic fatigue on the international level, we argue for using these assumptions as a framework with which to develop a comparative research design. For this purpose, we propose a two-step procedure. First, countries of interest should be selected purposefully, following a theoretical sampling approach. Here, countries with different levels of press freedom (e.g., based on the categories proposed by Reporters Without Borders), differences in the importance of the international media (high and low), as well as differences in the importance of social media in the news landscape (high, middle, and low) should be considered.

Among the countries selected by theoretical sampling, we first propose to conduct a quantitative content analysis in order to study news coverage of potentially

annoying topics in traditional media, as well as the characteristics of social media discussions. Secondly, a quantitative survey of citizens of various countries should explore the reasons for topic fatigue, combinations of primary and secondary emotions and cognitions, as well as the outcomes of topic fatigue. In particular with regard to the outcomes of topic fatigue, we argue for extending existing knowledge and – in addition to avoidance reactions – scrutinizing potential associations with political alienation, mistrust in the media system, resentment against other societies, and the perceived emergence of echo chambers. Because topic fatigue develops over time and likely follows certain cycles, we propose using a panel-design for this survey. Moreover, this will also allow us to study causality among the concepts of interest via cross-lagged correlations.

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