

Between Individual and Collective Social Effort: Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship in Different Information Environments

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Information disorder and digital media affordances challenge informed citizenship as an ideal and in practice. While scholars have attempted to adapt the normative ideal to contemporary changes and challenges by introducing new metaphors and normative benchmarks, this study investigates citizens' ideals and practices of informed citizenship by deploying the concept of citizenship vocabularies. Drawing on interviews with citizens from different information environments—Germany and Serbia—we offer a conceptual outline of informed citizenship as an individual and collective social effort. Our findings illustrate the role of the information environment in shaping citizenship vocabularies. We advance the idea of informed citizenship as a relational practice, arguing for a social ontological approach to theorizing informed citizenship today.

Keywords: informed citizenship, information disorder, news consumption, comparative research, good citizenship, misinformation

For more than a century, the ideal of informed citizenship, which posits that citizens should keep abreast of current issues and political parties to participate in democracy and make informed decisions (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001; Schudson, 1998), has stood its ground as a normative basis for modern democracies (Schudson, 1998). To practice informed citizenship, individuals must have access to factual information that facilitates the evaluation of policy debates and be able to use these facts to inform their political preferences (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Currently, this ideal is challenged on multiple fronts. For one, digital media, where most citizens engage in political communication (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020), not only afford diverse possibilities to produce, consume, and share political information,

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but also to avoid it. At the same time, the ubiquity and fast diffusion of junk content (Bradshaw, Howard, Kollanyi, & Neudert, 2020) contribute to the information disorder (Wardle, 2018), challenging individuals' information practices and political communication as a whole (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Although scholars have attempted to adapt the normative ideal of informed citizenship to keep up with developments in the media landscape (e.g., Moe, 2020; Schudson, 1998; Zaller, 2003), ordinary citizens usually do not reach for democratic theory to inform their actions—instead, they draw from personal experiences in their immediate information environments (Dahlgren, 2006; Stoycheff, 2020). Our study sought to understand how ordinary citizens in the contemporary information environment make sense of informed citizenship as ideal and in practice.

On a theoretical level, our study is informed by the idea that socialization in a specific civic culture—including experiences with their respective information environments—shapes people's understandings of their roles as citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963; Pasitselska, 2022). These understandings manifest in shared vocabularies of citizenship (Thorson, 2012), dictating what is necessary, desirable, legitimate, and feasible in a particular context. Because information environments differ structurally (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and vary in their degree of resilience to disinformation (Humprecht, Esser, & Van Aelst, 2020), people's perceptions of, experiences with, and responses to information disorder may differ as well. We adopted a comparative approach to account for the contextual factors of informed citizenship and based our study on semistructured interviews with social media users from Germany and Serbia.

The results reveal that citizens in the two countries experience information disorder and digital media's role in it differently, which manifests in distinct yet overlapping vocabularies of informed citizenship. In addition to the typical focus on *individual efforts* to become an informed member of the electorate and participant in public life, this study underscores the social dimension of informed citizenship, where the emphasis is on a *collective social effort* as a shared responsibility to enable informed citizenship on a societal level by preventing and counteracting facets of the information disorder. The study outlines the relevance of expanding our inquiry to informed citizenship as a relational practice and horizontal civic norm, arguing for a social ontological view in theorizing about informed citizenship.

Informed Citizenship as an Ideal and Practice

In a nutshell, the informed citizenship framework demands that citizens continuously update their knowledge about political issues by following news to exercise their roles as citizens (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001; Schudson, 1998), such as to legitimize institutions by voting and holding them accountable when necessary (e.g., Zaller, 2003). This view on citizenship is strongly framed by political science's vertical approach toward citizenship, which focuses on individual citizens' relationships with the state (cf. Schnaudt, van Deth, Zorell, & Theocharis, 2021) and understands informed citizenship in terms of a civic duty toward the polity (Dalton, 2008). However, this approach has been criticized for its ontological view of citizens as atomized rational individuals "devoid of civic bonds, out of some sociocultural black box, ready to play their role in democracy" and citizenship as "an activity where 'no experience is necessary'" (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 269; Frega, 2019; Moe, 2020). Furthermore, despite recognizing the differences in individual capacities to practice informed citizenship (e.g., Moe, 2020;

Schudson, 1998), studies that employed the vertical approach tended to resort to a tone of shaking a “finger at ordinary people for not shouldering their civic obligations sufficiently” (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 270).

In contrast, the cultural approach to citizenship offers a way to avoid imposed normativity: It stresses the importance of *social* ontology. Social ontology underscores looking beyond institutional processes and dynamics and aiming for a “realistic” inquiry into citizenship as a process that unfolds in the interactions with other members of the society (Dahlgren, 2006; Frega, 2019; Moe, 2020). The rapid increase in the complexity of the media landscape—particularly, the proliferation of new communication technologies—warrants engaging with the cultural approach. First, the digital affordances of online environments have resulted in the diversification of information practices, enabling citizens to consume both professional journalistic and user-generated content (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Feezell, Conroy, & Guerrero, 2016). Second, research has demonstrated that informed citizenship goes beyond civic duty. It also entails self-actualizing elements, such as creating, editing, distributing, and discussing content (Feezell et al., 2016; Kim, Jones-Jang, & Kenski, 2021). Third, much of contemporary political communication takes place in social media environments (Newman et al., 2020), where communication depends on users’ interactions (Moe, 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2022), their ability and willingness to actively shape information flows (e.g., Swart, 2021), and on the prevailing social norms (Ekström, 2016; Lindell, 2020; Palmer & Toff, 2020; Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2014). Finally, depending on the sociality options a medium offers, informed citizenship can be both an individual and a social practice (Kim et al., 2021; Wagner, Boczkowski, & Mitchelstein, 2021). Online platforms such as Facebook and messengers such as WhatsApp intermediate between the private and public spheres, offering citizens increased opportunities to engage in socially engaged, informed citizenship and construct common knowledge (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020).

Apparently, there exists a mismatch between the normative ideas underlying informed citizenship as a vertical practice and the actual practices of informed citizenship that underscore its *horizontal* character. To learn how people might understand their roles as informed citizens in today’s age of increasing media complexity and (mis)information flows, we can turn to the cultural approach, which can expand our understanding of informed citizenship by offering a horizontal perspective on it.

Information Disorder as a Feature of Information Environments

The means to support informed citizenship practices are found in individuals’ information environments. On the macrolevel, information environments entail a supply side—the quantity and quality of political information offered by the media system—and the demand side, which reflects the civic use of political information (van Aelst et al., 2017), that is, the practices of informed citizenship. Next to the information opportunity structures offered by their immediate mass media system, a good share of citizens uses social media to gain political information (Newman et al., 2020). There, citizens engage in many forms of content curation by following news media, politicians, trusted opinion leaders, and other communicators, or do so passively by liking or sharing content (e.g., Thorson, Xu, & Edgerly, 2018).

In recent years, information environments worldwide have witnessed an upsurge in politically and economically motivated disruptive communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Disruptive

communication endangers the quantity and quality of political information most prominently by relativizing factual information (van Aelst et al., 2017). Typically, communication scholarship has differentiated between disinformation—information that is false and distributed deliberately—and misinformation—information that is false and distributed because people believe it is true (Wardle, 2018). However, we find the concept of junk news to be more inclusive of various content that can contribute to the manipulation of public opinion. Junk news refers to content that is “an amalgam of a manipulative style, counterfeit activity, bias, a lack of professionalism, and enough credibility to deceive, and it free-rides on social media algorithms to generate attention” (Bradshaw et al., 2020, p. 189). The ubiquity of junk content and its distribution by various actors have become a feature of information environments worldwide, generating information disorder (Wardle, 2018).

Although citizens all over the world face junk news to some extent (Newman et al., 2020), the quality of political information differs significantly across political and social contexts (Miller & Vaccari, 2020) and is related to particular features of information environments (Humprecht et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020). Applying the media systems framework by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Humprecht and colleagues (2020) found that two media system indicators are particularly predictive of exposure to junk news: social media use and low trust in mass media. Although social media environments afford easy dissemination of all kinds of content, including junk news (Humprecht et al., 2020), social media use alone does not lead to junk news use. For example, countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom, which belong to the European mainstream model, demonstrate more resilience to junk news than countries such as Greece or Spain, which have been categorized as part of the Mediterranean model, notwithstanding a high level of social media use in both media systems (Humprecht et al., 2020; Peruško, 2016; Peruško, Vozab, & Čuvalo, 2013). This suggests that while junk news is out there, different information environments may shape people’s perceptions of the information disorder and their resources to address it. To address the context in which informed citizenship takes place, we asked the following research question:

RQ1: How do people experience information disorder in different information environments?

Informed Citizenship and Cultures of News Consumption

People’s conceptions of their roles as citizens—their civic ideals and practices—are scripted by their dialectical and historically grounded relationships with media and political institutions (Swidler, 2001) and differ across civic cultures (Almond & Verba, 1963; Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Dalton & Welzel, 2014). These scripts are part of broader vocabularies that function as resources for action at the individual level (Swidler, 2001). Specifically, *citizenship vocabularies* can be understood as the cultural resources people draw on to think about their roles as citizens (Thorson, 2012). For instance, a trusting relationship with media is an ongoing process grounded in the appreciation of independent journalism and democratic institutions that recognize and support journalism’s independence. In contrast, a mistrusting relationship with media may shape the way citizens inform themselves (e.g., Humprecht, 2019; Pasitselska, 2022) or what they think about the value of being informed (e.g., Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Different information environments thus result in different civic cultures of news consumption (Pasitselska, 2022). These cultures, in turn, are reflected in the vocabularies of informed citizenship through the meanings that people attach to norms and ideals and how they translate these meanings into information practices.

A disorderly information environment may not only erode the common perception of reality necessary for democracy (Miller & Vaccari, 2020) but also alter the norms of informed citizenship themselves (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O'Loughlin, 2018). Consequently, citizens develop heuristics and norms to deal with the perceived information disorder, such as generalized skepticism (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019), norms and practices of information care (Gagrčin, Porten-Cheé, Leibner, Emmer, & Jørring, 2022; Swart & Broersma, 2022), and information correction (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Penney, 2019). Since the vocabularies of informed citizenship are contingent upon information environments, distinct information disorders as features of information environments may shape such vocabularies. For example, scholars have argued that low trust in mass media compels people to look for alternative sources (Humprecht, 2019) or to rely on close social ties for information verification (Pasitselska, 2022). Although we have seen quantitative comparative work on information disorder (Humprecht, 2019; Humprecht et al., 2020; Nielsen & Graves, 2017), more qualitative insights from a comparative perspective are necessary. To uncover the relationships between citizens' experiences in their respective information environments and the meaning they give to informed citizenship as a cultural practice, we asked the following question:

RQ2: What vocabularies of informed citizenship do people employ to navigate their information environments?

Method

Country Selection

We have argued that contextual experiences shape citizenship vocabularies and citizens' perceptions of information disorder. In line with this, we compared two countries with media systems whose structural features suggest different levels of permeability to junk news and possibly different cultures of news consumption: Germany and Serbia. Germany, belonging to the European mainstream model, is an established democracy with a robust public broadcasting service, high social media use, and widespread public trust in the media (Newman et al., 2020). Part of the Southeastern European model, Serbia is a relatively young democracy with moderate social media use, a government-dependent media system, presumably low media quality, and low trust in the media (Peruško, Vozab, & Čuvalo, 2020). We assumed that Serbia would provide a more fertile ground for junk news because of the questionable quality of its mass media (Peruško, 2016; Peruško et al., 2013). Accordingly, we assumed that the vocabularies of informed citizenship would differ to some extent between the two contexts.

Data Collection

Because this study is primarily aimed to illustrate people's situated understanding of informed citizenship and how they translate it into practice, we have opted for an inductive approach. We have employed semistructured interviews, a method that allows vocabularies to emerge from people's narratives, drawing from a convenience sample of 40 interviews with German and Serbian citizens aged 18–35.

Table 1. Study Participants.

Serbian participants			German participants		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Natalija	19	Student	Noah	18	Taking a gap year
Tatjana	22	Student	Laura	21	Student
Maja	22	Volunteer	Natascha	25	Student
Petar	22	Plaster worker	Sarah	26	Consultant
Luka	23	Graphic designer	Lisa	26	Cleaning assistant
Stanko	23	Fitness trainer	Stefan	28	Student
Una	25	Painter	Marlene	29	Student
Lea	26	Translator	Jennifer	29	Teacher
Valerija	26	Actress	Mia	29	Works in HR
Živko	27	Lawyer	Moritz	29	Engineer
Ivan	27	Software engineer	Magnus	29	Programmer
Ema	27	Student	Georg	30	Graphic designer
Valentina	27	Dancer	Sebastian	31	Engineer
Klara	27	Public servant	Helene	31	Kindergarten teacher
Marko	27	Baker	Markus	31	Carpenter
Milan	27	Manager	Farid	31	Social worker
Nevena	27	Unemployed	Franziska	32	Public servant
Milutin	29	Lawyer	Patrick	33	Pharmacist
Nemanja	29	Chef	Melanie	34	Works in marketing
Jovica	33	Web designer	Sabrina	34	Social worker

The data were collected in 2018 and 2020 within a larger project about online political participation and citizenship norms. In this study, we focused on the parts of the conversations that centered on the participants' information habits and experiences with junk news. The participants were sampled via local social media groups (e.g., university and neighborhood groups, typically nonpolitical, serving the purpose of informing one another about events, selling or giving away furniture), through acquaintances, and via snowballing. Initially, the criteria for participation included daily use of at least one social media platform and being 18–35 years of age. At first, we did not include the question about participants' political interest in the prescreening process and talked about it only during the interview. However, along the way, we decided to include this question in the selection criteria to balance the level of political interest in the sample. The German sample's average age was 29, which was slightly older than the Serbian sample, whose average age was 26. In both samples, we ensured gender balance. The German sample was more academic, with two-thirds of the participants either having pursued or were currently pursuing university degrees. In the Serbian sample, the educational background was more balanced, with 11 of 20 participants having academic backgrounds. All interviews, lasting 70–100 minutes, were conducted in German and Serbian using roughly the same interview guide (some of the aspects were tailored to each national context).

Data Analysis

We ascertained the vocabularies by looking for “common ground” in the data, such as shared examples, causal inferences, emotions, and the relationships among the examples. We conducted the analysis according to the methodology outlined by Saldaña (2016). Initially, we exploratively coded and used a combination of process, causation, values, emotion, and in vivo coding, which yielded first-order categories close to the original text. After all the interviews were coded and first-order categories consolidated, a second coding cycle took place in which we merged the first-order codes into theoretically informed second-order themes. In the last step, we aggregated the second-order themes into broader dimensions to compare the two samples. The country samples were analyzed separately, which meant that separate sets of codes emerged from the samples. The samples were compared only after the individual sample analysis was completed, and we had a robust understanding of each sample (Harrison & Parker, 2010). As a result, when we speak of vocabularies, we do not merely speak of the logic that connects different codes into categories; instead, we refer to the shared narratives that permeate these categories as capillaries, so to speak, informing an internal logic of shared experience and signaling fidelity to a certain cultural strategy (Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015).

Findings

Perceptions of the Information Environment

Because the German participants generally expressed high trust in legacy media—particularly in the public broadcasting service and press—their experiences with media were characterized by the ease of access to quality information and a recognition of the role media play in a democracy. The German participants’ relationships with media and politics were quite contrary to the Serbian sample. Regardless of their political alignment, the Serbian participants criticized the mainstream media, including the public broadcasting service, for being highly politically biased, for not acting in the public’s interest, and for helping the ruling class advance its goals. For example, Milutin’s (28, male) description of what consuming news is like resonated with many respondents: “when someone . . . is beating you on the head with a brick.”

We did not offer the participants any definition of “disinformation” or “junk news.” Instead, we framed our questions around “falsehoods” and “suspicious content” so the participants used their own words, including *fake news* (“lažne vesti”), *lies* (“laži,” “Lügen”), *fabrications* (“izmišljotine”), *propaganda*, and *disinformation* (“dezinformacije,” “Desinformation”). For the German participants, falsehoods were related to right-wing opinions (mostly associated with the right-wing party Alternative for Germany), purposely false information distributed by dubious sources, and comments made by fake accounts and trolls. This finding resonates with recent scholarship that shows disinformation in Germany has mainly appeared in the context of problems allegedly caused by immigration from Islamic countries (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). While information disorder was confined to the online sphere for the German participants, the entire information environment was in a state of disorder for the Serbian participants. This difference supports our assumption and previous research that citizens in media systems with different levels of permeability for junk news have distinct perceptions of information disorder.

According to most Serbian participants, the government is spreading disinformation to cultivate hostilities against the political opposition and divert attention from its corruption, and the government agenda is advanced by tabloids and mainstream TV channels. Živko (27, male) explained his understanding of how state propaganda operates:

It goes like this: They . . . literally make up the news and put it on the cover page of *Informer* [the most read progovernment tabloid]. Say Đilas [last name of a prominent oppositional politician and a businessman] ate a child. In the news at 18:30 on TV, there is a five-minute story about how he ate a child . . . The SNS [ruling party] politicians . . . come on TV and say, "We will fight to protect all children from Đilas." . . . And you watch it all day, you see it on TV, people share it online. And you're convinced because, you know, if everyone's talking about it, it's impossible that all these people are lying. But it is possible . . . And that is literally taken for a fact after two or three days.

In both samples, two groups of citizens were found to contribute to the proliferation of falsehoods: *citizen perpetrators* and *citizen victims*. The former refers to those who disseminate disinformation, for example, because they sympathize with or support the right-wing ideology and consciously disregard the truth because "it doesn't matter to them" (Natascha, 25, female). Citizen victims, on the other hand, are victims *and* perpetrators of misinformation, not out of evil intent but because of their lack of news media competence. For example, the Serbian participants generally believed that most of their fellow citizens had little education or understanding of politics beyond scandalization, making them the "perfect victims" (Maja, female, 22). The notion of citizen victims resonates with the term "infodemically vulnerable," a term coined in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to describe citizens who make little use of news and do not trust the media, which makes them more prone to believing falsehoods (Nielsen, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Simon, 2020).

Interestingly, the Serbian participants also believed that anyone could become a victim. It was common to express a mixture of compassion for and annoyance at citizens who lacked the capability to navigate the Serbian information environment. The German participants, in contrast, were far less forgiving of citizen victims, often expressing anger and dismay at the thought of populist actors gaining power because of citizens' inability to resist propaganda.

Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship in Serbia and Germany

During the analysis, it quickly became apparent that participants' thinking about informed citizenship was deeply ingrained in a context in which the disorder persisted, particularly in connection to social media use. Notwithstanding the differences in the respondents' perceptions of their information environments, we could conceptualize the vocabularies of informed citizenship around certain shared dimensions, which are shown in Table 2 and elaborated on in the following sections.

Informed Citizenship as an Individual Effort

Most of the German participants considered informing oneself to be one of the primary duties of citizens and did not see much leeway here. It was common to recognize how specific topics on the political agenda and in the media related to one's own life, which was then a "good enough" reason to invest time in informing oneself—at least from time to time. Only one participant refused to follow the news, repeatedly explaining that causes important to her were not represented in the media: "Everything I need to know, I see at work every day . . . No one writes about that" (Lisa, 26, female). Altogether—and reflecting the common democratic ideals prominent in the vertical perspective on citizenship—informed citizenship was conceived as an individual's duty toward democracy because it allows one to cast an informed ballot and hold the government accountable in the case of any wrongdoing. Yet the most dominant reason for having an informed opinion was found to be self-defense against manipulation by right-wing actors. Sabrina's (34, female) account is especially telling: "If one informs oneself, one has a basis . . . a consolidated opinion of one's own. Even if a new group forms, which advocates another opinion . . . you do not become a blind follower so fast."

Table 2. Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Practices</i>	<i>Normative beliefs</i>	<i>Vocabulary</i>
<i>Individual</i>	Informed citizenship as an individual practice	Informed citizenship as individual responsibility	Individual effort
<i>Social</i>	Informed citizenship as a relational practice	Informed citizenship as a shared responsibility	Collective social effort

In the Serbian sample, the opinions were divided. More than half of the sample considered informing oneself to be the "ground zero of citizenship" (Ivan, 27, male), something that an individual who is part of a wider community owes to the community.² For others, however, informed citizenship did not play an essential role in their self-understanding as citizens. For example, Marko (27, male) avidly followed news about football and gas prices but considered reading information about politics a matter of personal choice, one he opted against (cf., Thorson, 2015). Because most people in the sample did not have a sense of discourse ownership and the ability to hold the government accountable, not informing oneself was a widespread and somewhat acceptable coping strategy to navigate daily life (Aharoni, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2021; Palmer & Toff, 2020).

Furthermore, and in contrast with the accessibility of news in the German sample, everyone in the Serbian sample, even those with the highest levels of information and news media literacy, informing themselves was exhausting: "a lot of time and a lot of nerves, [which] in a way diminishes the value [of being informed]" (Luka, 23, male). The shared perception of the dysfunctional information environment underscores the contextual necessity of occasional and self-protective news avoidance (Aharoni et al., 2021) and partially relieves citizens of their duty to inform themselves.

² On that note, the Serbian participants mostly spoke about "community" or "society" rather than "democracy," which was very common in the German sample.

Notwithstanding, in both information environments, those who did not perform their roles properly—either purposely or because of a lack of resources—were seen as being at the center of the information disorder. Accordingly, the capacity for individual resilience to junk news emerged as one of the prominent aspects of informed citizenship in the digital era. Individual resilience is mirrored in an understanding of informed citizenship as an individual effort that we inductively conceptualized as consisting of four strategies. Following Tandoc and colleagues' (2018) categorization, the internal strategies included relying on one's intuition (also in Swart & Broersma, 2022) and efforts to nurture certain habits, such as consuming a diverse news diet and paying attention to trustworthiness heuristics, such as news source and grammar. The relevant external strategies when one doubted certain news (Tandoc et al., 2018) included validating the content by cross-referencing, consulting fact-checking websites and asking friends, and removing junk spreaders from one's social media feed. We found minor differences in the concrete practices within these categories. For example, the interviews showed that politically interested Serbian participants consciously engaged in cross-referencing as a way to "find the truth in the cracks between [the outlets]" (Marko, 27, male) and did so more than the German participants, who routinely read a few news outlets without explicitly comparing them in the search for truth. In contrast, the German participants relied more strongly on the credibility heuristics of the media, such as familiarity and image (Swart & Broersma, 2022).

Despite the similarities in the practices that comprised individual effort, the two groups differed in their expectations about individual resilience. Given their normatively laden understanding of informed citizenship as an individual duty toward democracy and the perceived convenience of access to news, the German participants largely considered developing resilience as a "doable" imperative if only people "tried harder." This view strongly reflects the common conceptualizations of informed citizenship as entrenched in rationality (Swart & Broersma, 2022). This was less true for the Serbian participants, who considered individual resilience to be wishful thinking, given the ubiquity of dis- and misinformation, dysfunction of the media system, and overall low education levels. Instead of counting on individual capacities, the Serbian participants believed that better conditions could come about only as a result of changes in the political and media systems, and that until then, they would rely on and invest in their friends and contacts to uphold the practice of informed citizenship.

Informed Citizenship as a Relational Practice

Although "individual" implies "alone" and the practice of consuming news is typically solitary in both samples, informing oneself with and through others was common. In the German sample, discussing news with others was considered a substantial part of informed citizenship. The participants reported engaging in political discussions with their friends and families regularly. Discussion functioned as a way of getting to know what they thought about issues and developed empathy for those with different perspectives and understandings. This underscores that informed citizenship is a "discursive interactional process" rather than "atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149). For discussions to be meaningful and empowering, however, the participants expected people to first inform themselves to be able to engage in opinion-forming political discussion and to adhere to the norms of discussion—particularly, respect for different opinions. The participants typically juxtaposed online discussions with strangers and discussions with friends and acquaintances (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Thorson, 2014). They described the former as lacking in meaningful social connections and discussion norms and the latter as more pleasant

because, notwithstanding the content of the discussion, in the end, “we say that we all like each other and all is good” (Patrick, 33, male).

Among the Serbian participants, political discussions were not found to be integral to informed citizenship. Expressing similar sentiment as those of the young people in Ekström’s (2016) study on everyday political talk, where politics was considered an “unsafe” topic, one participant said that “you don’t discuss politics with your friends because you know it’s not going to end well” (Milutin, 29, male). Several participants thus refrained from discussions as a way of preserving social relationships (Eliasoph, 2003). Instead, informed citizenship comprised consuming news and *informing* others. It was thus less important to engage argumentatively with people on a particular topic but rather to ensure they had the “right” information to form an opinion. Grounded in the participants’ observations that many people informed themselves “wrongly” or not at all, informed citizenship as a relational practice functioned as a form of help for those who were misinformed or were at risk of being misinformed. Mutual help was widely accepted and welcomed. In contrast, although most German participants appreciated being informed by others on social media, they reacted “allergic” to others who tried to educate them. Natascha (25, female) criticized this as “a typical quirk . . . going around being a smartass.”

In both samples, informed citizenship was embedded in social relations, yet it was structured around different practices and norms. In the language of cultural sociology, we can say that informed citizenship is shaped by certain boundaries consisting of practices and understandings that designate social relations as appropriate or inappropriate (Zelizer, 2012, p. 146). When we consider informed citizenship as a social relation, we recognize it as a set of relational practices that serve to advance the objective to inform oneself—and not simply as a social behavior for its own sake (Bandelj, 2012). Across the two countries, informed citizenship entailed relational work in the sense that people engage in processes through which these relations come to be, are maintained, or are dissolved (Zelizer, 2012). Ekström (2016) also hinted at this when he described political talk as a *social* achievement. In this sense, it is telling that “unfriending” was found to be a common way to deal with people who spread misinformation among the German participants, thus terminating a social relationship because of a violation of the norm to inform oneself properly. In contrast, the Serbian participants were rather reluctant to unfriend people “just because they are misinformed” (Klara, 27, female).

Relevant to the networked environments of social media, one’s own actions were seen as having implications for others, as Sabrina (34, female) explained: “I believe that many people just randomly press the like button and do not even know that in this way they give this article a huge value and weighting.” Similarly, the Serbian participants routinely complained about people who mindlessly shared whatever they came across:

People are bored and uneducated...so they shoot all sorts of idiotic links in chat groups, on social media, everywhere . . . For me, it’s easy, I just hide them, but my mom . . . I ask her, “Where did you get that [information]?” and she always tells me this or that neighbor posted it, so she believes it. I saw her feed; it’s full of just plain wrong stuff (Maja, 22, female).

Both examples illustrate the interdependency of informed citizenship in networked environments, where the misbehavior of a few has an impact on what others see in their personal information environments. In such instances, informed citizenship highly depends on the ability and motivation to curate personal feeds (Thorson et al., 2018) and having access to social networks that could intervene (Moe, 2020).

Informed Citizenship as a Collective Social Effort

Grounded in people's observations that citizens play a central role in disseminating dis- and misinformation, we found two relational strategies to navigate information disorder: prevention and intervention.

Most respondents underlined the individual duty to engage in preventive behavior when posting something, such as ensuring that the content is trustworthy. A commonly used metaphor was "sweeping before your door" to indicate that if everyone minded what they consumed, posted, or shared (as opposed to mindlessly liking and sharing), online environments would be less polluted. Being aware that mere engagement with junk content could contribute to its virality, some participants advocated ignoring falsehoods so that they "die away with no clicks, no comments, no retweets" (Natalija, 19, female). At the same time, ignoring falsehoods stood in conflict with the urge that many participants had to intervene against junk news by pointing to the falseness of the allegations and/or providing further information sources (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Reporting was the most common intervention, although most people were not convinced that it had any effect; hence, many did it, for example, just to "calm one's own consciousness" (Jennifer, 29, female). The Serbian respondents found mocking falsehoods posted by friends and acquaintances on social media to be an effective and "amusing" way to voice criticism. In their effort to "protect the people from stupid opinions" (Nemanja, 29, male) on social media, the participants relied on help from other users: "If [a countercomment] is in the top comments, on Facebook at least, then there are definitely a hundred people who join you" (Laura, 21, female).

The groups differed significantly regarding the responsibility of responding to misinformation online. Resonating with research from other national contexts (e.g., Tandoc et al., 2018), everyone recognized that such interventions' efficacy is minor because "it is difficult to change people" and because social media are not considered suitable for constructive debates. Most German participants refrained from intervening and instead hid, deleted, or unfollowed misinformation spreaders. A few participants felt obliged to react to falsehoods and were motivated by the need to counter the pollution of the public discourse (Gagrčin et al., 2022). In stark contrast, most Serbian participants expressed a sense of responsibility, frequently termed as "moral obligation," to engage with the citizen victims of falsehoods, especially if these were friends or acquaintances. However, in contrast with the justification for intervention provided by the German participants who focused on the democratic public discourse, the Serbian participants explained their urge to intervene as a "basic human empathy that we should all have innated . . . to protect the oppressed, to try to help someone who is in trouble in some way" (Jovica, 33, male). Finally, we observed that the boundaries of informed citizenship are set differently. Although both samples emphasized individual agency in the collective effort to prevent the spread of falsehoods, the Serbian participants set their boundaries wider to include correcting and educating others.

Based on these illustrations, informed citizenship can be understood as a collective social effort. Inspired by the term “collective social correction” (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022), informed citizenship as a collective social effort articulates the idea of mutually enabled and enabling information practices, including a shared responsibility to prevent and counteract the spread of junk news.

Discussion

In this study, we examine how people in two different information environments think about and practice informed citizenship in light of information disorder and digital media affordances. Our findings show that the people in the examined information environments experience information disorder differently, which aligns with the practical and normative emphasis given to vocabularies of informed citizenship as an individual and collective social effort. Notwithstanding these differences, the findings underscore the relevance of informed citizenship as a horizontal civic matter. This section presents two theoretical considerations that emerge from the findings.

Toward a Social Ontology of Informed Citizenship

Informed citizenship is traditionally treated as a vertical norm—a sense of responsibility that individuals feel toward the polity—that is relevant mainly as a prerequisite for institutional participation, such as voting. Extending this perspective by employing a cultural approach to citizenship (Dahlgren, 2006), we conceptualized informed citizenship as a relational practice and horizontal civic norm.

First, we find that becoming informed requires a sounding board. Accordingly, citizens form and nurture social relations that are instrumental to informed citizenship. Expanding on previous research (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Palmer & Toff, 2020; Wagner et al., 2021), we show that informed citizenship is inherently social; as such, it entails the relational work needed to create, uphold, or dissolve relationships related to practicing informed citizenship. Belonging to communities that value informed citizenship provides social incentives, and these communities can regulate deviant practices by imposing social norms (Palmer & Toff, 2020; Vraga, Tully, Maksl, Craft, & Ashley, 2021). Furthermore, the networked nature of citizens’ public connections enables citizens not only to inform people but also to observe when they are misinformed and to intervene accordingly. In such a complex environment, the division of labor should be understood as a social component of informed citizenship (Moe, 2020) that manifests in two ways: as an individual commitment to prevent the proliferation of falsehoods and as a collective effort to protect one another and the discourse.

Our findings point to the boundaries of vertical political ontology, focusing on the atomized rational individual. Political communication scholarship would benefit from the social ontological view of informed citizenship. First, social ontology recognizes that individuals are shaped by the relations in which they partake, and that these relations are highly contextual (Dahlgren, 2006; Frega, 2019). Second, it posits that the normative properties that emerge from social relations “cannot be reduced to nor derived from the normative properties of either individuals or structures,” such as institutions or democratic theory (Frega, 2019, p. 163). In this line of thought, Ekström (2016), for example, notes that political talk is *social* rather than normatively charged *deliberative* achievement. Our study goes a step further, suggesting a view of

informed citizenship as a collective social effort. Besides the social aspect, this view entails a normative aspect that takes note of people's normative beliefs related to informed citizenship as a shared endeavor. It also conveys more than a description of an outcome; informed citizenship as a collective social effort is a proceeding relation prescribing that one should engage *with others* and prevent the spread of junk content *for the sake of others* (imagined both as individuals and as a collective). Like democracy, becoming informed is a never-ending effort that should be treated as a process instead of an achievement.

Resonating with the studies that employ a social approach, we offer new conceptual frames for understanding and assessing informed citizenship in complex and disorderly environments. For example, the notions of social verification practices (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Waruwu, Tandoc, Duffy, Kim, & Ling, 2021), the mesonews space (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020), or informed citizenship as a habit (Palmer & Toff, 2020), could all be treated as horizontal civic matters of informed citizenship that unfold specific contextual norms relevant for understanding how democracy functions today.

Role of Information Environments in Informed Citizenship

Our findings portrayed two distinct information disorders. For the German participants, the information disorder was located online. They had a clearly defined "Other" in the form of right-wing groups and individuals whom they considered the main perpetrators of information disorder. By seeing the disorder as a right-wing attack on democracy, the participants could clearly draw boundaries of informed citizenship among the citizen perpetrators of disorder, the citizen victims of disorder, and themselves as endeavoring participants in democracy (cf. Lindell, 2020). The presumably higher permeability of media systems for junk news (Serbian case) resulted in more pronounced experiences with information disorder. For the Serbian participants, disorder was the default mode of their entire information environment, stemming primarily from the political and media elite as a means of enriching and reproducing power at the expense of ordinary citizens.

The information environment played a role in setting expectations for individual resilience against information disorder and in emphasizing individuals' responsibility and tolerance of news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) and illustrating distinct civic cultures of news consumption (Pasitselska, 2022). Related to the notion of informed citizenship as a collective social effort, the German respondents expressed more individual understanding of citizenship where other citizens were seen as part of a *discourse* community. Hence, prevention and intervention were the methods for upholding a shared discourse. On the other hand, the Serbian respondents shared a sense of citizenship as a *fate* community (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) connected through a shared struggle; hence, the responsibility for prevention and intervention was not related to the democratic discourse but a struggle to protect oneself and one's community from the political establishment. The more disorderly the perception of the information environment, the more people displayed informed citizenship as a collective social effort in their ideals of democratic citizenship. We conclude that weak institutions and low trust in media may create a sense of informational uncertainty that requires stronger civic compensation. Although our study's generalizability is limited, given its boundedness to two media systems, we believe that our results, especially those from the Serbian context, may be helpful to understand informed citizenship in countries with more repressive regimes and stricter censorship.

Our results should be interpreted carefully also because of the age group of our participants. We interviewed mainly millennials who grew up with the Internet, a group that certainly shares sociocultural experiences that may be different from other media generations. In general, research on democratic norms and ideals in the digital age should pay more attention to digital infrastructures' embeddedness in larger vocabularies, media systems, and political struggles. For example, it would be relevant to understand how access to and consumption of foreign and transnational media shape (alternative) vocabularies of informed citizenship in repressive regimes. In any case, considering the state of democracies worldwide, inquiries into citizens' perspectives on democracy continue to be profoundly relevant because, as Stoycheff (2020) poignantly noted, "today's democratic reversal is not a grandiose political upheaval, but rather a quiet and persistent chipping away at its core norms and values" (p. 12).

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