

Access to Information, News Consumption and Democratic Participation: A Nationwide Experiment in French High Schools

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Abstract :

Despite unprecedented access to information in the digital age, young citizens face growing challenges related to misinformation and political disengagement. This large-scale randomized controlled trial examines the impact of two complementary interventions designed to enhance news consumption and media literacy among high-school students, implemented in France over the 2024-2025 academic year. The study involves 241 high schools (for a total number of 7,562 students), randomly assigned to receive one or both of the following interventions: (i) a free digital subscription to the leading daily newspaper, and (ii) media education modules implemented by teachers. We can uniquely track the actual online news consumption of the students. We document a very large uptake of the free subscription, and a large increase in both news consumption (+0.30 to 0.43 standard deviation) and media literacy skills (+0.14 to 0.19 sd). We observe a 0.16 to 0.23 sd increase in news knowledge among the subset of students from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, reducing information inequality by between one third and one half. Our findings thus suggest that providing high-school students with free access to high-quality media may be an effective and scalable tool to improve information access and equality.