

ABSTRACT

Exposure to Controversy in an Information Society

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How will people use the Internet and other emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) to shape their exposure to political information? Will Internet users be inclined to fashion an information environment that reflects their own political predispositions, or will they continue to encounter a range of perspectives online?

The dissertation addresses these questions using two interconnected research projects. The first project uses nationally representative survey data to examine how contemporary use of the Internet is influencing citizens' overall exposure to political information. The second project focuses on individual choices about exposure to news items in an online environment that affords enhanced control over partisanship. Taken together, these projects clarify the contemporary dynamic of selective political exposure, providing evidence about citizens' underlying preferences regarding political information.

This work makes two theoretical contributions. First, it argues that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of selective exposure: seeking out viewpoint-reinforcing information and avoiding viewpoint challenge. This distinction reconciles several contradictory conclusions evident in prior research. Results presented here confirm that individuals' preference for support and their aversion to challenge are different. People (1) seek out sources that support their viewpoints; (2) are interested in news items with which they agree; and (3) use online sources to increase their repertoire of opinion-supporting arguments. They do not, however, systematically exclude exposure to other viewpoints. Though online news users are selective about which opinion-contrary news items they will consider, the bias is slight and is partially offset by longer read times. Online newsreaders experienced no overall drop in familiarity with other perspectives. The second theoretical contribution is to distinguish between avoiding *all* contact with viewpoint-challenging information and avoiding *repeated* exposure to such information. This research suggests that individuals value awareness of other perspectives, while simultaneously wanting to limit their contact with them.

Finally, this work contributes two methodological innovations. It offers a unique approach to surveying individuals' selective exposure behaviors, measuring exposure to viewpoint-reinforcement and viewpoint-challenge separately using concrete questions about readily recalled arguments. The online experiment provides an opportunity to observe regular newsreaders engaging with real, contemporary news.