Echo Chambers or Windows on the World?
Selective Exposure and the Online News Environment

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Overview

- Are people using new technologies to create a political information environment that reflects their political predispositions?

- Yes, but…
  - People have a strong preference for viewpoint-supportive information, but not a strong aversion to viewpoint-challenging information
  - Preference for avoiding repeated contact with challenging information, not for excluding it entirely
Outline

- Motivation for research
- Theoretical background
- Research methods
- Findings
- Discussion & Implications
The same medium that allows people to peruse a near-infinite number of news sources also lets them pinpoint the one they want and filter out the rest.

"Politics of the Web: Meet, Greet, Segregate, Meet Again,"
Amy Harmon, New York Times, January 25, 2004
Partisan Sources

http://www.movingideas.org/

- **The Issues**
  - Civil Liberties
  - The Economy
  - Education
  - Foreign Policy
  - Health Policy
  - Women's Issues
  - View All Issues

- **Action Center**
  - **Oppose the Execution of Michael Ross**
    - National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
    - Posted 01/25/05
    - Help stop the first execution to occur in Connecticut in nearly 45 years.
  - **The Progressives' Guide to the Inauguration**
    - Moving Ideas Network
    - Updated 01/21/05
    - Post-inaugural action and analysis featuring articles, reports, and commentary.
  - View All

- **Links**
  - Blogs
  - Online News Services
  - Columnists/Commentary

- **Must Reads**
  - **Bush's House of Cards: The Privatization Fraud**
    - The American Prospect and Moving Ideas Network
    - Updated 01/25/05
    - Updated: Saving Social Security: America's Prospect...
News Aggregators

Google Search: abortion - Mozilla Firefox

Results 1 - 10 of about 10,600 for abortion. (0.27 seconds)

Top Stories
World
U.S.
Business
Sci/Tech
Sports
Entertainment
Health

News Alerts
About Google News

Ever hopeful, abortion foes gather
Chicago Tribune (subscription), IL - 9 hours ago
WASHINGTON -- Marching with evangelical purpose—but little sense that their

Hillary raps Bush on abortion
BBC News, UK - 5 hours ago
... it is unclear however if abortion rates have gone up or down under Mr Bush. Since taking office in 2001, he has tightened legislation regulating terminations. ...

Sen. Clinton Notes Rise in Abortion Rates
Los Angeles Times (subscription)
On Abortion, Mrs. Clinton Reaches Out
New York Times
Senator Clinton Speaks of 'Common Ground' on Abortion
New York Times
Cybercast News Service - Press & Sun-Bulletin - all 106 related

Abortion Advocates Hold March for Life Counterparts at Supreme ...
LifeNews.com, MT - 2 hours ago
Washington, DC (LifeNews.com) -- Abortion advocates came to town, too, on Monday to oppose the hundreds of thousands of pro-life participants in the annual...

Hundreds of Thousands March for Life in Washington Against ...
LifeNews.com
March for Life Will Mourn 32 Years of Unlimited Abortion Under Roe
LifeNews.com
Los Angeles Times Poll: 53% Oppose All Or Most Abortions
LifeNews.com
all 4 related
Preferences Matter

- Preferences influence exposure to other viewpoints

- Exposure influences
  - Democratic deliberation
  - Political tolerance
  - Political fragmentation
Theoretical Background

- Selective exposure, especially avoiding viewpoint-challenging information, a topic of debate for several decades
  - First thought to be commonplace (E.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1948)
  - Evidence weak, inconsistent (Sears and Freedman 1967)
    - *De facto* selectivity
  - People seek opinion-reinforcing information, weakly avoid opinion-challenging information (Frey 1986)
    - Seek the latter in some circumstances
Contemporary Debate

- Growing popularity of Internet news has reinvigorated the debate
- Inconsistency remains
  - “Daily Me” and echo chambers (Sunstein 2001)
  - Control and exposure to dissonant information inversely correlated (Mutz and Martin 2001)
  - Technology-afforded control not being used to avoid dissonant information (Iyengar et al. 2003, DiMaggio and Sato 2003).
- Reconcile: seek viewpoint reinforcement without avoiding viewpoint challenges
Examining Partisan Selectivity

- **Survey**
  - Changes in overall information exposure associated with Internet use

- **Experiment**
  - Decisions about use of individual news items based on political ideologies expressed
Survey Methods

- National telephone survey
  - Funded by Pew Internet & American Life, conducted by PSRA
- In the field June – July 2004
- 1,510 adult Americans
  - Response rate of 31.2%
  - Data weighted in analysis
- Measured respondents’
  - Use of Internet/online news
  - Candidate preferences and exposure to opinion statements about candidates
  - Demographics/controls
Viewpoint-reinforcement seeking

- Controlling for relevant factors, Internet/online news users experience an overall increase in exposure to viewpoint support

Linear regression, weighted sample data

**Significant Internet-related coefficients** after controlling for open-mindedness, education, age, off-line news use, campaign interest, strong candidate support

Red for Bush supporters, Blue for Kerry supporters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet Experience</th>
<th>Frequency of online news use</th>
<th>Number of viewpoint-reinforcing arguments heard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.032**</td>
<td>0.094**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 = 0.213 \text{ for Bush supporters} \]
\[ R^2 = 0.271 \text{ for Kerry supporters} \]

* \( p < 0.05 \) ** \( p < 0.01 \) *** \( p < 0.001 \)
Not viewpoint-challenge avoidance

- Controlling for relevant factors, Internet/online news users do not experience a drop in exposure; Kerry supporters see an increase.

Linear regression, weighted sample data

**Significant Internet-related coefficients** after controlling for open-mindedness, education, age, off-line news use, campaign interest, strong candidate support

Red for Bush supporters, Blue for Kerry supporters.

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$R^2 = 0.202$ for Bush supporters

$R^2 = 0.246$ for Kerry supporters

*p < 0.05  **p < 0.01  ***p < 0.001
Experimental Methods

- Web-administered experiment
- In field February – March 2005
- 727 readers of partisan online news services
  - Volunteer rate slightly less than 3%
  - Among volunteers, completion rate about 50%
- Measured subjects’
  - Perceived political leanings of 5 news items
  - Decision to view
  - Time spent viewing
  - Demographics/controls
Viewpoint-reinforcement seeking

- When considering individual news items, subjects...
  - More likely to view items that contain more opinion-supporting information
  - Spend more time viewing items that include more opinion-supporting information
Not viewpoint-challenge avoidance

- When considering individual news items, subjects...
  - Slightly *less* likely to view items that contain more opinion-contrary information, but...
  - Spend *more* time viewing items that include more opinion-contrary information
Summary of Findings

- Individuals consistently seek viewpoint-supporting information
  - Online news use correlated with increased exposure to arguments for preferred candidate
  - Subjects more likely to view and spend more time viewing items the more opinion-supporting information they contain

- Individuals do not systematically exclude viewpoint-challenging information
  - Online news use not correlated with a reduction in exposure to other viewpoints
  - Subjects less likely to view items the more opinion-contrary information they contain, but they spend more time viewing those selected
Discussion

- How to reconcile slight tendency to avoid viewing challenging items with no drop in overall exposure among online news users?
  - May be that people want familiarity with other arguments, but avoid repeated contact with them
Thank You

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Viewpoint-reinforcement seeking

- The stronger an individual’s political preferences, the more likely the individual is to use viewpoint-reinforcing partisan site

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<tr>
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<th>Use Democratic site</th>
<th>Use Conservative site</th>
<th>Use Republican site</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Bush</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
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<td>9.9</td>
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<tr>
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Not viewpoint-challenge avoidance

- Stronger partisans do not consistent avoid viewpoint-challenging partisan sites

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Not abandoning non-partisan media

Comparing Media Usage Levels

Mainstream News Sources
- Television news
- Newspapers
- Major news organizations sites

Alternative News Sources
- Ideologically-oriented site
- Party affiliated site
- Partisan alternative news sites

Respondents for whom Internet is one of top two sources (n=224)
### Not abandoning non-partisan media

Those who use more partisan online sources also use mainstream sources

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source used</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Web site of a major news organization</th>
<th>At least one mainstream source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative news site</td>
<td>(109)</td>
<td>78% – 92%</td>
<td>78% – 92%</td>
<td>85% – 96%</td>
<td>97% – 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideologically-oriented site</td>
<td>(164)</td>
<td>80 – 91</td>
<td>85 – 94</td>
<td>78 – 90</td>
<td>96 – 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party-affiliated site</td>
<td>(128)</td>
<td>85 – 96</td>
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<td>74 – 88</td>
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