
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

Kerry's seat in Senate targeted by Swiftvet

Author Jerome Corsi to relocate to Massachusetts, oust Democrat

NukAlert™ Compact Keychain!

The screenshot shows a Google News search result for the article "US Hostage Pleads for Life in Iraq". The article is from ABC News, dated 2 hours ago. The snippet reads: "In this image taken from insurgents video released on Tuesday Jan. 26, 2005 a man who identifies himself as American Roy Hallums pleads for Arab rulers to intercede to spare his life." Below the snippet are several related links, including "Stucky: Strong earnings send Wall Street higher", "Google, Yahoo Jump Into Video Search Arena", "Want Super separation? Reid Knows His Limits", "Winners and losers emerge even before the states are handed out", and "Wives linked to 'hundreds' of deaths".

Partisan Sources

CNSNews.com: The Cybercast News Service - Mozilla Firefox

Moving Ideas Network - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View Go Bookmarks Tools Help

http://www.movingideas.org/

About Us | Contact Us | Join | RSS

moving ideas The Electronic Policy Network
Connecting You to the Progressive Community

A project of The American Prospect

Member Organizations Action Center Issues For the Press Jobs Events Donate Links Search

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, American Prospect

Sign up for our Email Newsletters

your email

Join Moving Ideas!

Our Partners

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

News Aggregators

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window with the address bar containing `http://news.google.com/news?hl=en&ned=us&ie=UTF-8&q=abortion&`. The search term "abortion" is entered in the search box and is circled in red. The page displays search results for "abortion" with 10,600 results found in 0.27 seconds. The results are sorted by relevance. A red box highlights a portion of the results, with two red arrows pointing to specific headlines. The first arrow points to the headline "Hillary raps Bush on abortion" from BBC News, UK. The second arrow points to the headline "Abortion Advocates Hold March for Life Counterparts at Supreme ..." from LifeNews.com. The left sidebar shows navigation options like "Top Stories", "World", "U.S.", "Business", "Sci/Tech", "Sports", "Entertainment", and "Health".

Google Search: abortion - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View Go Bookmarks Tools Help

http://news.google.com/news?hl=en&ned=us&ie=UTF-8&q=abortion&

Google News BETA

Web Images Groups News Froogle more »

abortion Search News Search the Web Advanced News Search Preferences

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

Sorted by relevance Sort by date

Top Stories

World

U.S.

Business

Sci/Tech

Sports

Entertainment

Health

News Alerts

About Google News

Done

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

Buffalo Ne

Seattle Post Intelligencer

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

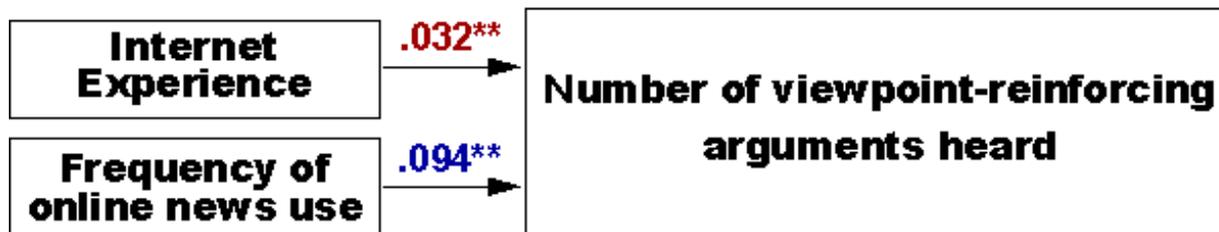
Viewpoint-reinforcement seeking

- 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.



$R^2 = .213$ for Bush supporters

$R^2 = .271$ for Kerry supporters

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

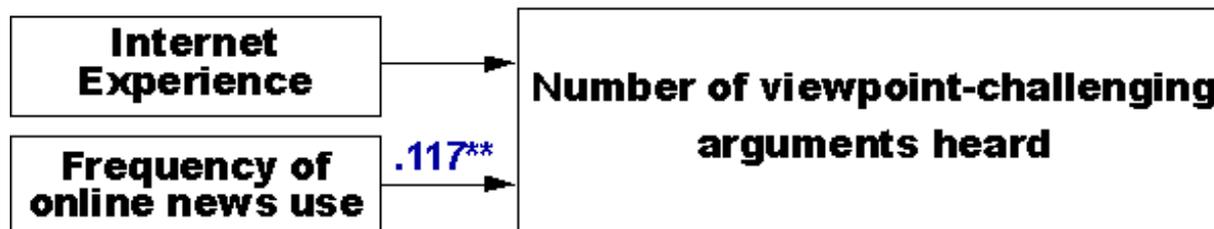
Not viewpoint-challenge avoidance

- 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.



$R^2 = .202$ for Bush supporters

$R^2 = .246$ for Kerry supporters

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

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

	(n)	Use Liberal site	Use Democratic site	Use Conservative site	Use Republican site
Strong Bush	304	4.9%	4.3%	14.7%	15.1%
Weak Bush	142	6.4	2.1	9.9	4.9
Other	96	10.5	6.3	7.4	3.2
Weak Kerry	263	12.9	10.2	7.6	6.1
Strong Kerry	138	20.9	20.9	13.0	5.8
Undecideds	59	5.2	4.6	5.2	2.9

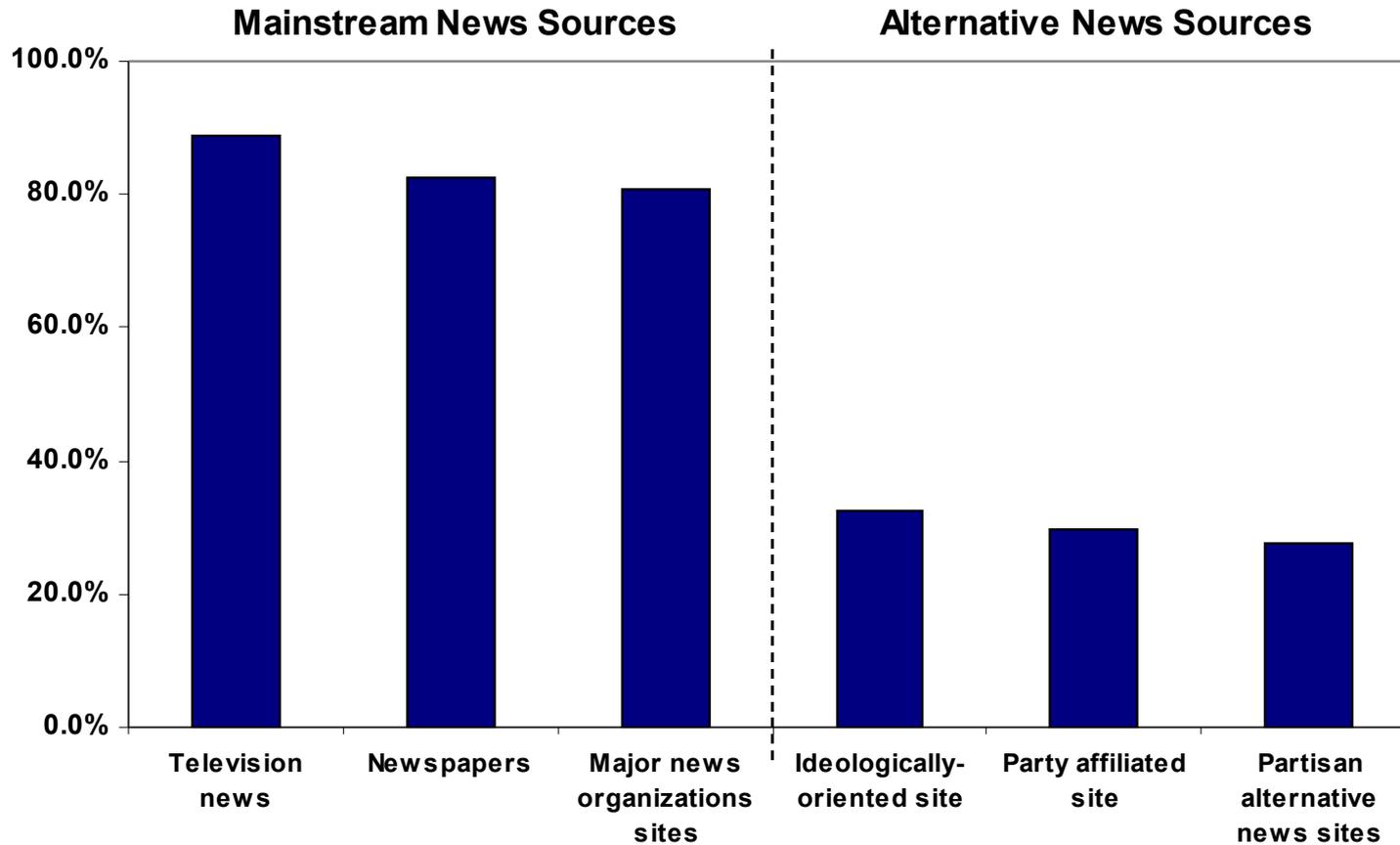
Not viewpoint-challenge avoidance

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

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Weak Bush	142	6.4	2.1	9.9	4.9
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Weak Kerry	263	12.9	10.2	7.6	6.1
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Not abandoning non-partisan media

Comparing Media Usage Levels



■ 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

Source used	(n)	Newspaper	Television	Web site of a major news organization	At least one mainstream source
Alternative news site	(109)	78% – 92%	78% – 92%	85% – 96%	97% – 100%
Ideologically-oriented site	(164)	80 – 91	85 – 94	78 – 90	96 – 100
Party-affiliated site	(128)	85 – 96	85 – 96	74 – 88	95 – 100