Effects of Selective Exposure and Media Selection Bias on Reader Attitudes, Trust and Belief in News Outlets

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INTRODUCTION:

Social media platforms give users the chance to customize their news feeds, a trait that can also lead to selective exposure. This is defined as "the tendency of users to ignore dissenting information and to interact with information adhering to their preferred narrative" (Cinelli et al., 2019, p. 2). Selective exposure can create political polarization because people usually prefer to follow news sites that align with their political beliefs. For example, Democrats might prefer to follow MSNBC while Republicans most likely prefer Fox News. These partisan news outlets tend to present biased information, thus causing partisan viewers to strengthen their beliefs and their own personal bias. The following study will include an experiment and survey to analyze the relationship between selective exposure and people's bias for or against a news article based on the source; this will demonstrate how people's own biases play a role in their attitudes/beliefs toward partisan media outlets and how much they believe the media outlet is telling the truth.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Partisan Identity:

"Across the electorate, Americans have been dividing with increasing distinction into two partisan teams" (Mason, 2018, p. 3). People's party affiliation often becomes part of their main identity, especially for major party supporters (Sunstein, 2018; Mason, 2018). This is known as the Social Identity Theory, which states that a person's self-image comes from the social categories that he/she believes he/she belongs to. The stronger people's political identities are, the more firm they are in their beliefs and the less likely they are to understand people from the out-party. As Ha, Ji and Shin (2018) mention, the gap between Democrat voters and Republican voters has significantly widened over the last several decades (p. 64). According to research, most partisans prefer to socialize with people from their political party and avoid people from the

opposite party (Mason, 2018; Druckman et al., 2019; Settle, 2018; Smith & Searles, 2014).

"Research has shown that for the first time in more than twenty years, majorities of both parties hold strongly unfavorable views of their opponents" (Mason, 2018). This has created an "us" versus "them" mentality that arguably might be difficult to undo.

Selective Exposure:

Most Americans used to receive their daily news from only a few sources, thus giving people similar news. However, advancements in technology have created numerous new sources for information, the main one being the Internet. Although useful, the Internet creates information overload that research has shown to be overwhelming (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Cinelli et al., 2019; Auxier & Vitak, 2019). To eliminate the information overload, social media users often customize their newsfeed, purposely or subconsciously leaving out dissonant information, so that they only have to handle a small amount of information (Mummolo, 2016; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Cinelli et al., 2019). This aligns with cognitive dissonance theory, which states that people pursue news that aligns with their beliefs and avoid news that causes dissonance (Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018). This customization, also referred to as "selective exposure," can create ideological segregation, more extreme views and less tolerance (Auxier & Vitak, 2019; Stroud, 2010; Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018; Sindermann et al., 2019). In the realm of political communication, partisan selective exposure is defined as "the tendency to restrict one's news diet to politically agreeable sources" (Mummolo, 2016, p. 763).

Polarization:

Partisan selective exposure causes polarization, or "the strengthening of one's original position or attitude," (Stroud, 2010, p. 557), which makes it difficult to understand and compromise with the out-party (Mason, 2018; Settle, 2018; Smith & Searles, 2014; Sindermann

et al., 2019). In addition, polarization increases if people believe their identity is attached with their political party or they have a strong sense of solidarity with their party (Sunstein, 2018; Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018). For example, Stroud (2010) showed that Democrats (Republicans) who read more liberal (conservative) news had higher polarized attitudes than Democrats (Republicans) who read less liberal (conservative) news. However, it is important to note that polarization is more likely to occur among people who are highly engaged in politics, not the general public (Settle, 2018; Barbera et al., 2019; Barnidge et al., 2020). This is because the "voice" of highly partisan people is stronger than the voice of the general public. Consequently, other partisans are drawn to them; the combined reinforcement and validation of similar beliefs creates polarization (Barbera et al., 2019).

Other research has shown that when people watch a news outlet with an opposing viewpoint (i.e. if a Democrat watches Fox News), polarization can increase if the news anchors are not being civil toward the other side or if they are discussing highly controversial topics (Druckman et al., 2019; Smith & Searles, 2014; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Barbera et al., 2019). "Fox News and MSNBC appear to serve as attack dogs for the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively" (Smith & Searles, 2014, p. 85). This incivility causes less favorable attitudes and less trust toward the opposing side.

Partisan Media:

Researchers believe that another cause of polarization and selective exposure can be attributed to partisan media outlets. Partisan media "has become a defining element of the American political communication environment" (Druckman et al., 2019, p. 291). These outlets are known to be biased, opinionated and subjective because they present stories that heavily favor their own party and "create a coherent liberal or conservative vision of the news"

(Levendusky, 2013, p. 2; Druckman et al., 2019; Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018). For example, Fox News is typically conservative while CNN and MSNBC are more liberal (Mummolo, 2016; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Levendusky, 2013; Druckman et al., 2019). Consequently, research has shown that Republicans prefer news from Fox News and avoid CNN while Democrats prefer CNN and avoid Fox News (Settle, 2018; Smith & Searles, 2014; Mason, 2018; Sunstein, 2018; Barnidge et al., 2020). This pattern of selective exposure remains true for both hard news and soft news (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Levendusky, 2013). Several studies show that these partisan outlets make strong party supporters even more extreme in their beliefs by reinforcing their political attitudes (Barnidge et al., 2020; Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018).

Some scholars even argue that partisan media's job is "not to build a case for the in-party candidate, but instead to paint the opposition candidate as unacceptable and dangerous" (Smith & Searles, 2014, p. 85). This could also be in part due to partisans wanting one party to be the winner (Mason, 2018). Interestingly, the public as a whole believes the media to have a slightly liberal bias overall (Settle, 2018; Barnidge et al., 2020). Sunstein (2018) notes that "people's level of interest in the same exact news stories is greatly affected by the network label" (p. 65). This leads me to my research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between people who selectively expose themselves to news and their bias for either accepting or rejecting an article based on the news source?

RQ2a: How will the news source affect the reader's belief in the articles, attitude toward the source and trust in the source?

RQ2b: Will one partisan party show more change in attitudes, beliefs, and trust of the news source than the other partisan party?

METHODS:

For participation, I will use a convenience sample of American participants over the age of 18 by recruiting them from the Amazon Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing service. This will allow me to get a larger and broader array of participants than using a smaller service such as Manship's Media Effects Lab. This diversity in participants will also help me enhance the generalizability of the study. Participants will be paid $1-$2 to participate in the study.

To conduct this experiment, I will first create a survey that asks participants for their political affiliations and preferred media choices. Its purpose is to weed out the general public who might not have strong political beliefs or who might not participate in selective exposure by only choosing a partisan medium that aligns with their political beliefs. Participants who fail to meet the requirements will be taken to the end of the survey and paid $1 for participating even though they were not the ideal participant.

Meanwhile, participants who affiliate themselves with either the Republican party or the Democrat party will move forward. These participants will also have to have said that they prefer to receive news from either Fox News or MSNBC, respectively; this will be the selective exposure aspect of this study. In other words, I will only accept partisans who selectively expose themselves to partisan media outlets that match with their given political party.

These participants will further answer questions that evaluate their attitudes toward the partisan news outlet, belief and trust in the partisan news outlet and how truthful they perceive the partisan news outlet to be. Question types will mainly be semantic differential scale and Likert-scale. Likert-scale questions such as "On a scale of 1-7, how much do you trust this source?" "On a scale of 1-7, to what degree do you think this source gives you honest, fair, and objective news?" and "On a scale of 1-7, how believable is this source?" are just a few examples of questions that will analyze belief and trust in the designated media outlet. To measure attitude

toward the news source, asking questions similar to an Aaker's Brand Personality Test might be interesting. For example, participants have to pretend that the news source is a person; they will be presented with a series of words and will have to rate on a scale of 1-5 to what degree they believe that personality trait applies to them. These series of words can include the following: honest, confident, fair, objective, reliable, leader, or intelligent.

Next, these participants will be divided into four groups: Control Group 1, Control Group 2, Experiment Group A and Experiment Group B. Control Group 1 will only have Republicans who receive two news articles from Fox News. Conversely, Control Group 2 will only have Democrats who are given two news articles from MSNBC. These groups will serve as the control groups so that I can get a baseline of knowledge. On the contrary, the experiment groups will have participants who receive manipulated information. Like Control Group 1, Experiment Group A will contain Republicans who prefer to see Fox News. However, they will receive two news articles from MSNBC with Fox labels on it. This will make it appear as though the article is from Fox News, but it is actually from MSNBC. Likewise, Experiment Group B will consist of Democrats who prefer to see MSNBC; they will see two news articles from Fox News with MSNBC labels on it. All groups (control and experiment) will receive articles from the same day and about the same topic; this will control for other variables besides just the news source and personal bias.

After participants read their given articles, they will then be asked the same questions that they were previously asked to see if there was any change in their attitudes and beliefs from their original answers. I think it will be interesting to see if they are more likely to believe something they normally would not believe just because it comes from their favorite news source. I will also ask if their trust in the source has changed at all. Moreover, I will ask questions about the

articles to determine whether or not participants read the article or if they simply read the headline. Upon completion of the study, these participants will receive $2 instead of $1 because they did more work than participants who I had to weed out earlier.

CONCLUSION:

As previously mentioned, selective exposure is a way for people to cut down on information overload and avoid conflicting information (Mummolo, 2016). Unfortunately, selective exposure leads to polarization, especially in the political realm. Furthermore, people who selectively expose themselves to partisan media outlets such as Fox News or MSNBC are typically seeing opinionated and slanted news (Druckman et al., 2019; Ha, Ji, & Shin, 2018). As Mummolo (2016) notes, "So long as partisans prefer like-minded news sources and have the technology to personally tailor their news intake, many have predicted they may increasingly restrict themselves to partisan echo chambers" (p. 763). Research has shown that these partisan outlets have the potential to give party supporters even stronger thoughts and beliefs (Levendusky, 2013; Barnidge et al., 2020). This study aims to analyze the relationship between selective exposure and people's bias for/against a news article based on the source and how this relationship affects people's trust in the source as well as their attitudes and beliefs toward the source. The proposed study builds upon previous research to further the conversation of public opinion and political communication. By understanding how selective exposure and bias affects people's attitudes and trust toward a particular partisan media outlet, scholars can determine if people are forming their opinions based on logic and facts or simply because their party or news source is telling them what to think. As Mason (2018) notes, "As citizens, we may not be able to change the primary rules or tone down the partisan media, but we can begin to understand how much of our political behavior is driven by forces that are not rational or fair-minded" (p. 16).

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