

**Red Media, Blue Media:
Evidence of Ideological Polarization in Media Use**

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Abstract

We show that the demand for news varies with the perceived affinity of the news organization to the consumer's political preferences. In an experimental setting, conservatives and Republicans preferred to read news reports attributed to Fox News and to avoid news from CNN and NPR. Democrats and liberals exhibited exactly the opposite syndrome – dividing their attention equally between CNN and NPR, but avoiding Fox News. This pattern of selective exposure based on partisan affinity held not only for news coverage of controversial issues, but also for relatively “soft” subjects such as crime and travel. The tendency to select news based on anticipated agreement was also strengthened among more politically engaged partisans. Overall, our results suggest that the emergence of Fox News has contributed to the polarization of the news audience.

The division of America into predictably “red” and “blue” states and the gradual decline in the number of genuine “battlegrounds” (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005) where either party has a genuine chance of victory suggests that American politics today is more polarized than in eras past. The standard explanation for polarized politics is the tendency for candidates to cater to the preferences of political activists. Because activists on both sides represent the far ideological wings of the parties (McCloskey et al., 1960; Stone, Rapoport, & Abramowitz, 1990), rational candidates calibrate their campaign rhetoric accordingly and avoid middle-of-the-road appeals (Jacobson, 2000; Fiorina et al., 2005; Abramowitz, Alexander, & Gunning, 2006).

Political activists are polarized, but at the level of the mass public there is considerable debate. Some scholars believe that increased polarization is only an illusion, stemming from the tendency of the media to treat conflict as more newsworthy than consensus (see Fiorina et al., 2005). Alternatively, the impression of mass polarization may reflect the nomination of extreme rather than centrist candidates, and an electorate that votes along party lines (Layman & Carsey, 2002). Other researchers, however, point to evidence that increasing numbers of ordinary citizens have migrated to the opposite ends of the liberal-conservative scale. Between 1972 and 2004, for instance, the average difference in ideological self-placement between non-activist Democrats and Republicans more than doubled (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006).

An alternative indicator of political polarization -- and one that also suggests increased polarization at the mass level -- is the intensification of partisan attitudes. There is a wealth of time series data tracking Americans’ evaluations of the incumbent president. These data show that on balance, Democrats’ and Republicans’ negative evaluations of a president of the other party have steadily intensified (Jacobson, 2006;

Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006). The approval data document a widening partisan chasm between Republicans and Democrats; the percentage of partisans who respond at the extremes (“strong approval” or “strong disapproval”) has increased significantly over time. In fact, polarized assessments of presidential performance are higher today than at any other time in recent history, including the months preceding the resignation of President Nixon. In this sense at least, mass public opinion is polarized.

This paper provides a behavioral indicator of the growing partisan divide in America. Our proposed indicator concerns partisan differences in the consumption of news, more specifically, the tendency for partisans to seek out sympathetic news sources. Fifty years ago, virtually everyone with an interest in politics tuned in to one of the major networks’ evening newscasts. These newscasts offered a generic “point – counterpoint” perspective on the news. Today, news offerings are far more diverse with the addition of cable news, talk radio, and twenty-four hour local news stations.

The revolution in information technology has only accelerated the fragmentation of the national audience. In the era of the Internet, the great majority of Americans can access -- with minimal effort -- newspapers, radio and television networks the world over. Does this dramatic expansion of available news outlets mean that Americans will be exposed to a more diverse “marketplace of ideas,” gain familiarity with new points of view and thus become more tolerant and accepting of disagreement? Or, as implied by the trend towards greater polarization, will consumers gravitate to politically compatible sources while screening out those who offer unfamiliar or disagreeable perspectives?

The availability of talk radio and Fox News as significant news outlets provides an opportunity to assess whether partisan polarization characterizes the demand for news. Both offer a distinctive conservative slant on issues and events, thus providing partisans

on the right with a consistently sympathetic perspective on issues and events. In effect, the availability of Republican-leaning news outlets has made it increasingly possible for Republicans and conservatives to avoid exposure to discordant points of view. In a polarized environment, we would expect to find significant differences in exposure to conservative-leaning news outlets with Republicans and conservatives seeking them out and Democrats and liberals doing the opposite. That is, polarization implies a pattern of selective exposure to ideologically proximate news outlets. Moreover, we would anticipate this “approach-avoidance” pattern regardless of the content of the news. In a world of polarized news consumers, conservatives should prefer exposure to Fox News not only when the subject of the news is some pressing policy issue (e.g. the war in Iraq), but also when the news focuses on less politicized subjects such as healthcare or travel.

As yet, there is little evidence to indicate that consumers apply a political litmus test in deciding which news sources to use. We designed this study to find out whether people do in fact prefer to encounter news reports from sources they believe to be more sympathetic or compatible with their views. More specifically, we observed whether attention to the identical news story was increased or decreased when the story was attributed to Fox News, NPR, CNN or the BBC.

Methodology

Experimental Design

Using the MSNBC daily news feed (which includes reports from a wide variety of news organizations) as our source, we randomly assigned news stories to one of four sources -- Fox, NPR, CNN, or BBC. We attained the maximum level of realism by

providing participants with the most recent news stories in real time. Study participants were provided with a brief headline accompanied by the logo of the news organization and asked to indicate (by clicking a box) which of four reports displayed on the screen they would like to read. Because respondents could also click a “Can’t Say” box; each respondent had a choice between five alternatives. They repeated this task across six different subject matter categories evenly divided between “hard” and “soft” topics. The former included reports on American politics (e.g. the relations between President Bush and Democrats in Congress), the war in Iraq, and race relations. The soft topics included crime, travel, and sports. We also included a baseline or control condition in which all source logos were deleted; here participants could only choose between the reports based on the text of the accompanying headlines.

In the analyses that follow, the control condition formed the baseline to which the selection rate of news stories in the treatment condition was compared. Any difference in the rate of selecting a particular story between the control and treatment conditions can only be attributed to the presence or absence of the source label because the same set of stories were provided to both groups. Figure 1 shows a screen shot from the condition featuring stories about the war in Iraq; the upper panel shows how choices were presented to control group participants whereas the lower panel represents the equivalent screen for treatment group participants.

[Figure 1 here]

All other aspects of the presentation were equalized across the different conditions. For instance, the placement of a particular story or news source on the screen was randomized so that no particular source gained from being the first or last on the screen. The study was run between March 30 and April 16, 2006. The total sample of

news stories was 383. Because the MSNBC feed features more rapid daily replacement of stories on political issues (e.g. Iraq and politics), the sample included more stories on Iraq and politics (60 and 71, respectively) than the more specialized topics of race and travel (40 and 11, respectively).

The Sample

Using the services of Polimetrix -- an opinion research firm -- we administered the experiment on a nationally representative sample of 1,023 (772 and 251 assigned to the treatment and control conditions respectively) registered voters. Polimetrix has developed a new methodology for sampling from pools of opt-in respondents (the sampling methodology is available at www.polimetrix.com). Their two-stage procedure first draws a conventional probability sample from a large-scale consumer or voter database. For each member of the target sample, Polimetrix then selects one or more matched members from their pool of opt-in respondents. This is called the matched sample. Matching -- searching for an available opt-in respondent who is as similar as possible to the corresponding member of the target sample -- is accomplished using a large set of variables (such as race, gender, age, region, and party identification). The result is a sample of opt-in respondents with equivalent characteristics as the target sample; under most conditions, the matched sample will have similar properties to a true random sample (see Rivers, 2005). Table 1 presents several descriptive statistics of our study sample.

[Table 1 about here]

Hypotheses

Given the line-up of news sources, we naturally expected that the demand for news stories would be heightened among Republicans and those with conservative political views when stories were labeled as Fox reports. Conversely, we expected participants on the left of the political spectrum to show greater interest in stories assigned to CNN or NPR. Even though CNN and NPR both claim to be committed to non-partisan and objective reporting (as does Fox), in the context of the four choices available to participants, the content provided by CNN and NPR more closely matches the preferences of Democrats than the content provided by Fox. And since the BBC is a foreign news source with a well-known reputation for independent journalism, we expected uniform indifference for the BBC label among Democrats, Republicans and non-partisans alike. We also expected that the effects of the source manipulation on story selection would be stronger for political subjects where partisan divisions are intense, but would be weakened when the news dealt with non-political subjects such as travel or sports.

Based on the polarization literature, we further anticipated significant differences in news preferences between more and less attentive partisans. Weak partisans and those with no party preference (who tend to be less attentive) might be less capable of recognizing the partisan slant of particular news outlets, while more attentive partisans are well aware of the partisan signal conveyed by the Fox, NPR or CNN logos. Thus, we expected that the interaction of political interest and ideology would significantly affect news selection -- more interested conservatives, for instance, would display stronger preferences for Fox.

Analysis

Our dependent variable consisted of five “unordered” choices. An unordered choice situation is one in which outcomes cannot be scaled, i.e. outcome A does not necessarily denote more of the underlying concept than outcome B, and B more than C for all observations. Thus, the appropriate analytic tool is an unordered choice model in which individuals choose the option that gives them the most utility. For the i th individual with j choices, the utility of the j th choice can be given by: $U_{ij} = X_{ij}\beta + u_{ij}$. Because this individual’s choice reveals his preference, if any individual i chooses j , then the utility of j is great than the utility from all other options, say, k .

Although multinomial logit (see Agresti, 1996; Maddala, 1983) is the conventional way of modeling random utility functions, it is unsuitable for the current choice problem at hand. In MNL, the explanatory variables (X), being characteristics of an individual, are themselves constant across the choice alternatives.¹ A limitation of the MNL model is that it allows only one response function (the type of restriction imposed on the dependent variable) for all independent variables in the model. In practice, this means that MNL cannot be used to examine a choice situation where choices can be attributed to characteristics of the choice alternatives. That is, the basic MNL model typically permits only individual-specific attributes to be included as covariates. On the other hand, we specify that $\Pr(Y_i = j)$ is a function of both alternative- and individual- specific attributes and their interactions. More specifically, in our current study, the key

¹ Thus, in practice, MNL estimates a set of $J - 1$ coefficients (β_i) for each individual-specific explanatory variable. The estimated coefficients show the effects of the X variables on the probability of choosing each alternative relative to one alternative that serves as a common benchmark.

alternative-specific attributes are the labels associated with the different news reports respondents encountered, whereas the individual attribute of primary interest is respondents' political ideology. Our primary interest concerns how the individual respondent's political ideology may affect the way that he responds to a particular label.² For instance, a Republican supporter may be particularly responsive to the Fox News label; on the other hand, a Democratic supporter may be particularly responsive to CNN or NPR.

A more flexible specification of choice functions is provided by the conditional logit model (See McFadden, 1974; Maddala, 1983; Long, 1997). Conditional logit is appropriate for examining situations in which a choice among alternatives is treated as primarily a function of the characteristics of the alternatives, in addition to the characteristics of the individual making the choice. More succinctly, the conditional logit model can be written as follows:

$$P_{ij} = \frac{\exp(X_{ij}\alpha)}{\sum_{k=1}^J \exp(X_{ik}\alpha)},$$

where X_{ij} indicates variables measuring the characteristics of alternative J relative to individual i and disturbances u_{ij} , are assumed to be independent across alternatives.

In McFadden's conditional logit model,³ variables characterizing the choices (i.e. the categories of the dependent variable in the MNL model) can be included as covariates.

² If we were to employ the basic MNL model, control group participants would have to be dropped from our analysis. This is because the presence of a logo is an alternative-specific attribute, and not everyone encountered these "unlabeled" alternatives. For clarification, in this case, the baseline category would have to be set as one of the alternatives labeled as either Fox News, CNN, NPR, BBC, or "Can't say," where those who encountered unlabeled news stories (i.e., control group participants) cannot be included in the analysis.

³When the conditional logit model does not include choice characteristics, the likelihood function is equivalent to that of the MNL model, producing the same coefficients and standard errors.

In other words, news story attributes that differ across alternatives but are constant across respondents within an alternative can be in the vector of explanatory variables since they could be reasons for choosing one alternative over another. Accordingly, the conditional logit model partitions covariates into (1) alternative-specific attributes of the choices (such as news story labels), and (2) characteristics of the individual (such as education, party identification, etc.). To estimate the effects of some individual characteristic, the researcher typically creates $j-1$ dummy variables for choices and interacts each of them with an individual-level attribute variable.⁴

Intuitively, conditional logit groups together the alternatives in each participant's choice set (or menu). A binary outcome variable shows which alternative was actually picked; it is a dummy variable equal to 1 for the alternative at which the respondent matriculated and 0 for all of the other alternatives. McFadden's conditional logit model has been applied to a wide variety of choice situations including employer preferences for characteristics of employees (e.g., Logan, 1996), consumer preferences for product attributes (Berry, 1994), employees' choice of health insurance plans (e.g., Parente et al., 2004), voters' candidate choices (e.g., Adams & Merrill, 2000; Cutler, 2004), government formation in parliamentary democracies (e.g., Martin & Stevenson, 2001), or, in the canonical example, preferences for transportation options (e.g., McFadden, 1974).⁵

In our analysis, we are interested in analyzing the determinants of the choice of

⁴ Technically we can only justify using the conditional logit model if we can make the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) assumption (See Alvarez & Nagler, 1994, 1996; Greene, 2003). IIA means that the odds ratio above doesn't shift when alternative choices are added. A maximum likelihood model that relaxes the IIA assumption is the multinomial probit model (e.g., Alvarez & Nagler, 1994, 1996). However, when having five choices, one has to draw from a four dimensional multivariate Normal, and the computation burden becomes excessive in most cases (See Alvarez & Nagler, 1994, 1996). Accordingly, we believe that our current analytical strategy seems most feasible since often the IIA property is neither relevant nor particularly restrictive (See Dow & Endersby, 2004).

⁵As Alvarez and Nagler (1996) note (pp. 69), the superiority of the conditional logit model over multinomial logit is not a new notion in the literature (See Agresti, 1990; Hoffman & Duncan, 1988).

news stories. Using the conditional logit formulation, generally those subjects who made their selection of news stories without associated labels form the baseline data against which we will compare the findings from the treatment group. Against this baseline, how might the labels of different news outlets influence participants' preference for news items?

Results

Overall Effects of News Labels

Prior to assessing the degree of partisan polarization in news selection, we begin by considering the influence of the source labels by themselves. We constructed four dummy variables (coded 0 or 1) denoting each of the four news sources: (1) FOX, (2) CNN, (3) NPR, and (4) BBC. We further included an indicator variable denoting those who answered "can't say" (ABST). Table 2 displays the coefficient estimates from a conditional logit model predicting the selection of news stories with the individual-level data. As noted above, the selection rate of "unlabeled" news stories forms the baseline in our analysis. Thus, the four dummy variables -- FOX, NPR, CNN, and BBC -- capture differences in the selection rate associated with the presence of each label in any given subject matter dimension.

Overall, the results suggest that news source labels are an important cue for readers. Nineteen of the 24 coefficient estimates presented in Table 2 were positively signed and statistically significant (at least at $p < .10$ level). Of the five remaining coefficients, four obtained positive signs. These results indicate that, holding constant the content differences of news stories, the presence of news labels increases the appeal

of news stories across all subject matter dimensions.

[Table 2 about here]

The Fox label had the strongest impact on story selection in five of the six issue dimensions examined in the current study. As can be seen from Table 2, for the categories of politics, race relations, Iraq, sports, and crime, the Fox label increased the likelihood of respondents selecting news stories beyond that of non-labeled stories. More formally, we tested the null hypothesis $H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_k$,⁶ where k is the second largest coefficient estimate in any given topical dimension. As can be seen from Table 3, the null hypothesis was rejected in all five cases: politics ($\chi^2_1 = 9.53$, $p < .01$), race relations ($\chi^2_1 = 11.90$, $p < .01$), Iraq ($\chi^2_1 = 11.80$, $p < .01$), sports ($\chi^2_1 = 3.11$, $p < .10$), and crime ($\chi^2_1 = 9.02$, $p < .01$). On the other hand, in the case of travel news where CNN proved to be the most popular source based on the point-estimates, the null hypothesis $H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{CNN}$ could not be rejected ($\chi^2_1 = .38$, n.s.), indicating that CNN was not necessarily more popular than Fox in the case of travel news (See Table 3). All told, these results indicate that among the four news organizations included in the current study, the Fox label was the most powerful. Clearly, Fox's strategy to cater to a conservative audience has worked to increase its market share.

[Table 3 about here]

Ideological Polarization in News Selection

Next, we turn to assessing the role of respondent attributes in news story selection, i.e. who chose which news stories to read? Of course, our primary focus was to assess

⁶ For testing for the differences between coefficients, Wald tests (see Lehmann, 1959; Fox, 1997) were conducted.

whether respondents' ideological leanings induced a polarizing effect in news selection. As a first-cut at the data, we plotted story selection rates with and without source labels for Republicans, independents, and Democrats (see Figure 2). Here the unit of analysis is the individual news story and the selection rate is the proportion of respondents clicking on this story. As described earlier, one-quarter of the study participants were provided with the news reports without source labels. Therefore, we can compare the fraction of the study participants who selected the same story when it was either unlabelled, or attributed to Fox, CNN, or NPR.

Figure 2 provides considerable evidence of political selectivity: the very same news story on crime or Iraq or politics or racial issues attracts a different audience when labeled as a Fox, CNN or NPR report. Consistent with our expectations, the effects of the Fox label were weakened for non-political news. Nonetheless, the effects of the Fox label nearly doubled the selection rate for travel and sports stories among Republicans. While Republicans were drawn to the Fox label, they avoided CNN and NPR. On average, the probability that a Republican would select a CNN or NPR report was around 10 percent. As for the Democrats, they were just as averse to Fox as the Republicans were to CNN and NPR. But unlike the Republicans, they did not seem to converge on a particular news source. Although the CNN and NPR labels boosted interest among Democrats, the effects appeared somewhat weak.

[Figure 2 about here]

Next, we proceed to a more rigorous testing of the polarization hypotheses based on individual rather than story-level data. More specifically, we created interaction terms

between the respondent's self-reported political ideology⁷ (IDE) and the Fox, NPR, CNN, and BBC labels. Note that no individual attributes are included in the vector of explanatory variables by themselves. As explained earlier, this is because the respondent's own characteristics remain the same regardless of the choice he makes, so they cannot – on their own -- be a reason for choosing one news story over another; it is only when they are interacted with news story attributes (or choice-specific attributes such as the source labels) that they can influence the respondent's choice.

Our results demonstrate that the divide in news selection between conservatives and liberals is considerable. As shown in Table 4, in every subject matter dimension but one, the FOX*IDE interaction was positive,⁸ and four of the coefficients were statistically significant at the $p=.01$ level. These findings suggest that the Fox label attracted a disproportionately large number of conservatives when holding the content of news stories constant. In sharp contrast, all the coefficient estimates for other news outlets (i.e., CNN, NPR, and BBC) were negative, and the vast majority of them (twelve of eighteen) were statistically significant.

[Table 4 about here]

As a further test of polarization in news selection, we conducted Wald tests of the difference between the most and the second most positive coefficient estimates in each subject matter dimension (see the three middle columns in Table 5). After Fox, conservatives preferred NPR in politics, BBC in race relations and Iraq, and CNN in the

⁷ We asked, "When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative or haven't you thought much about this?" Responses to this question were rescaled to range between -2 to 2 yielding a five-point ideology scale. The results are consistent when we substitute party affiliation for ideology.

⁸ From Figure 2, the relationship between partisan preference and channel selection seemed more or less linear. Accordingly, for parsimony, we did not create separate dummy variables for conservatives and liberals. Instead, we included a single scale of the respondent's political ideology and its interactions with the four news organization dummies.

three soft news subjects (i.e., sports, crime, and travel). As shown in Table 5, the null hypotheses were clearly rejected ($p < .01$), meaning that the difference between Fox and the second-most selected source were consistently significant for conservatives, thus adding to the case for ideology-based polarization in news selection.

[Table 5 about here]

It is worth noting that ideological polarization occurred in all six subject areas. As expected, the test statistics shown in Table 5 reveal that the divide between conservatives and liberals proved considerably larger in the hard news dimension (i.e., politics, race relations, and the war in Iraq) when compared with the soft news categories (i.e., sports, crime, and travel). Nonetheless, a considerable ideological divide was apparent even in exposure to soft news. Conservatives prefer Fox even when reading about vacation destinations, while liberals avoid Fox when the focus is sports. These findings illustrate the pervasiveness of the ideological divide in news selection.

For purposes of comparison, we also tested the equivalent null hypotheses concerning interactions between political interest and the four news outlet dummies (see the first three columns in Table 5). Here we applied much looser criteria (for the purpose of finding any traces of division between the more and the less interested) by testing the difference between the most and the least positive coefficient estimates. We detected no consistent pattern of polarization by interest; the null hypothesis could be rejected in only one (sports) of the six subject matter dimensions. These contrasting results suggest that our findings of the ideological divide in news selection do not stem from some unknown methodological artifact.

It is also worth noting that liberals did not converge on a single source; instead they divide their selections between the non-Fox News channels making little distinction

amongst them. To pursue this question further, we again conducted Wald tests to detect any significant differences between non-Fox News channels by choosing a pair of non-Fox News organizations with the largest difference among liberals in terms of the point estimates (see the last three columns in Table 5).⁹ As shown in Table 5, none of the tests revealed any statistically significant differences. These findings illustrate that liberals have a strong aversion to Fox, but no particular affinity for any of the non-Fox sources.

Are More Involved Partisans More Polarized?

Next, we turn to testing a higher-order version of the polarization hypothesis, namely, that polarization is intensified among the more engaged strata. As noted earlier, some contend that polarization is limited to activists whereas the general public remains little divided (e.g. Fiorina et al., 2005). We tested this prediction by creating three-way interaction terms between respondents' political interest, ideology, and the four news outlet dummies. The significance of these interactions tells us whether polarization occurs at a differential rate for more and less interested partisans. As shown in Table 6, although most of the three-way interaction terms (the bottom four rows) were non-significant, at least in the case of two hard news subjects (politics and the war in Iraq), the interactions proved significant. For example, in the case of news stories about politics, the more interested conservatives (liberals) avoided (preferred) CNN ($b = -.372$, $p < .05$) and NPR ($b = -.342$, $p < .10$). Similarly, the more involved conservatives (liberals) preferred (avoided) Fox News ($b = .348$, $p < .05$).

[Table 6 about here]

⁹ For example, we chose the NPR-BBC pair in the case of politics; similarly, we chose the CNN-BBC pair for sports news.

We also tested the statistical significance of the four three-way interaction terms as a block in each topical dimension. That is, for each subject matter category, we tested the significance of the differences in the likelihood of the full- and reduced-models before and after including all four three-way interaction terms. As shown in Table 7, the results provide at least partial support for the “greater polarization among activists” hypothesis. Although the increase in the likelihood ratio was marginal in four of the six topical dimensions, it proved statistically significant in the cases of more contentious topics such as race relations and the war in Iraq. These findings suggest that the polarization pattern is especially pronounced among the more interested, at least when the media cover controversial issues. When the media turn to relatively non-political subjects, more and less engaged conservatives and liberals are equally divided in their news choices.

[Table 7 about here]

Conclusion

No matter how we sliced the data -- either at the level of individuals or news stories -- the results demonstrate that Fox News is the dominant news source for Americans whose political leanings are Republican or conservative (the results presented above are equally strong if we substitute party identification for ideology). Although Fox’s brand advantage for conservatives is especially strong when the news deals with highly politicized subjects, it also applies to areas that are typically not associated with partisan division. Indeed, the most surprising of our findings is the level of polarization in exposure to soft news.

The gradual emergence of Fox News as the cable ratings leader suggests that in a competitive market, systematically slanted news programming allows a new organization to create a niche for itself. Recent theoretical work in economics shows that under competition and diversity of opinion, newspapers will provide content that is more biased: “Competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers, and greater competition typically results in more aggressive catering to such prejudices as competitors strive to divide the market” (Mullainathan & Schleifer, 2005, p. 18). Thus, as the audience becomes polarized over matters of politics and public policy, rational media owners stand to gain market share by injecting more rather than less political bias into the news, a tendency that is especially powerful when issues and events have no immediately observable referents (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). In the case of Fox News, partisan bias has clearly helped the network strengthen their competitive position vis-a-vis the more “objective” cable networks. When the audience is polarized, “news with an edge” is a recipe for market success.

A further implication of voters’ increased exposure to one-sided news coverage is an “echo chamber” effect -- the news serves to reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes. During periods of Republican governance, for instance, criticisms of the incumbent administration conveyed by mainstream news organizations can be dismissed as evidence of “liberal bias” thus further increasing partisan polarization. In a striking example of this phenomenon, Democrats and independents were most responsive to news coverage questioning the accuracy of the Bush Administration’s pre-war claims concerning WMD. After the revelations in the news media (beginning in early 2004), Democrats switched to the “no WMD” response by a factor of more than 30 percent (when asked whether the US had found WMD in Iraq). Independents also switched, by more than 10 percentage

points. But Republicans remained steadfast in their beliefs affirming the presence of WMD -- between June 2003 and October 2004 the percentage of Republicans acknowledging that the US had not found WMD increased by less than five points (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis 2003; Iyengar & McGrady 2006). Thus, in October the gap between Democrats and Republicans on the question of whether the US had found WMD was huge -- 80 percent of the Democrats believed we had not found the weapons, 70 percent of the Republicans believed the opposite.

The importance of source cues to news exposure and the resulting “reinforcement of priors” effect will only grow as technology diffuses and consumers increasingly customize their online news menus. There is the real possibility that news will no longer serve as the “social glue” that connects all Americans; instead, the very same lines that divide voters will also divide news audiences.

In more general terms, our results add to the growing debate over the impact of new media on the political process and are consistent with the argument that Internet technology will, in practice, narrow rather than widen users’ political horizons. Although an infinite variety of information is available, individuals may well sample selectively, limiting their exposure to news or sources that they expect to find agreeable. There is no doubt that the Internet makes available an ample supply of “news” that is not screened for accuracy or objectivity. By turning to biased but favored providers, consumers will be able to “wall themselves off from topics and opinions that they would prefer to avoid” (Sunstein, 2001, pp. 201–202). The end result could be a less informed and more polarized electorate.

Selective exposure is especially likely in the new media environment because of information overload. New forms of communication not only deliver much larger chunks

of campaign information, but they also facilitate consumers' ability to attend to the information selectively. The audience for conventional news programs is hard-pressed to avoid coverage of the candidate they dislike, because news reports typically assign equal coverage to each. But when browsing the web, users can filter or search through masses of text more easily. Thus, as candidates, interest groups, and voters all converge on the Internet, the possibility of selective exposure to political information increases. As we have found, people prefer to encounter information that they find supportive or consistent with their existing beliefs.

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Table 1

Sample Demographics

Age	
18 or 19	3.05%
20-29	14.83%
30-39	20.43%
40-49	19.06%
50-59	17.09%
60-69	13.46%
70 <	12.08%
Education	
Some High School	3.43%
High School	32.65%
Some College	33.43%
College	19.80%
Post College	10.69%
Female (%)	50.69%

Table 2**Baseline vs. Labeled Conditions: Conditional Logit Estimates^a**

	Hard News Dimension						Soft News Dimension					
	Politics		Race Relations		Iraq		Sports		Crime		Travel	
	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	B	s.e.	β	s.e.
FOX	.613	(.267)**	.743	(.201)***	.981	(.229)***	.645	(.166)***	.767	(.203)***	.360	(.168)**
NPR	.223	(.271)	.373	(.206)*	.407	(.236)*	.083	(.184)	.451	(.207)**	.375	(.167)**
CNN	.306	(.270)	.380	(.206)*	.643	(.233)***	.403	(.173)**	.438	(.207)**	.435	(.166)***
BBC	.125	(.272)	.346	(.206)*	.469	(.235)**	-.280	(.201)	.438	(.207)**	.287	(.169)*
ABST	-.908	(.219)***	-.056	(.160)	-.401	(.180)**	1.933	(.131)***	-.056	(.160)	1.057	(.128)***
N of Obs.	1,023		1,023		1,023		1,023		1,023		1,023	
LR χ^2	155.88***		47.84***		128.75***		765.89***		48.16***		138.10***	
Pseudo R ²	.047		.015		.039		.233		.015		.042	

Note. * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

^aCoefficient estimates show deviations in news selection rates from the baseline in labeled conditions.

Table 3**Formal Tests of Labeling Effects: Wald Test Statistics^a**

	Null Hypothesis	χ^2_1	p-value
Hard News			
Politics	$H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{CNN}$	9.53	$p < .01$
Race Relations	$H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{CNN}$	11.90	$p < .01$
Iraq	$H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{CNN}$	11.80	$p < .01$
Soft News			
Sports	$H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{CNN}$	3.11	$p < .10$
Crime	$H_0: \beta_{FOX} = \beta_{NPR}$	9.02	$p < .01$
Travel	$H_0: \beta_{CNN} = \beta_{FOX}$.38	n.s.

^aTest statistics concern the differences between the largest and second largest coefficient estimates in each subject matter category.

Table 4

Antecedents of News Selection: Conditional Logit Estimates^a

	Hard News Dimension						Soft News Dimension					
	Politics ^a		Race Relations ^b		Iraq ^c		Sports ^d		Crime ^e		Travel ^f	
	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.
FOX	-2.537	(.769)***	.214	(.729)	-.435	(.803)	-.306	(.672)	1.344	(.850)+	.142	(.725)
NPR	-3.143	(.849)***	-.608	(.836)	-1.101	(.887)	-1.518	(.938)+	1.130	(.886)	1.736	(.666)***
CNN	-3.079	(.841)***	.282	(.791)	-.948	(.850)	-.524	(.759)	1.770	(.866)**	1.850	(.647)***
BBC	-2.208	(.816)***	.633	(.775)	-.328	(.840)	.599	(.798)	1.222	(.883)+	1.249	(.708)*
ABST	-.972	(.228)***	-.095	(.165)	-.464	(.187)**	1.917	(.133)***	-.123	(.167)	1.046	(.130)***
FOX*PI	.897	(.218)***	.163	(.197)	.314	(.221)+	.182	(.180)	-.227	(.227)	-.017	(.194)
CNN*PI	1.025	(.237)***	.081	(.215)	.453	(.233)**	.255	(.203)	-.386	(.232)*	-.385	(.175)**
NPR*PI	1.029	(.239)***	.329	(.226)+	.419	(.243)*	.444	(.250)*	-.192	(.237)	-.375	(.181)**
BBC*PI	.727	(.232)***	-.022	(.212)	.229	(.232)	-.245	(.223)	-.222	(.236)	-.268	(.192)+
FOX*IDE	.183	(.138)+	-.051	(.105)	.514	(.119)***	.498	(.089)***	.461	(.100)***	.414	(.094)***
CNN*IDE	-.466	(.140)***	-.633	(.111)***	-.181	(.118)+	-.141	(.086)*	-.035	(.101)	-.270	(.082)***
NPR*IDE	-.456	(.141)***	-.693	(.111)***	-.242	(.123)**	-.163	(.097)*	-.157	(.100)+	-.346	(.085)***
BBC*IDE	-.551	(.143)***	-.595	(.111)***	-.177	(.121)+	-.172	(.116)+	-.101	(.100)	-.397	(.088)***
N of Obs.	978		978		978		978		978		978	
LR χ^2	300.05	***	162.06	***	254.71	***	778.22	***	129.42	***	223.41	***
Pseudo R ²	.095		.052		.081		.247		.041		.071	

Note. +p<.15; *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

^aCoefficient estimates show deviations in news selection rates from the baseline in labeled conditions.

Table 5**Formal Tests of Polarization: Wald Test Statistics^a**

	Interactions with Political Interest			Interactions with Ideology					
	Null Hypothesis	χ^2_2	p-value	Null ^a Hypothesis	χ^2_2	p-value	Null ^b Hypothesis	χ^2_2	p-value
Hard News									
Politics	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$	2.33	n.s.	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{NPR}$	55.77	p<.01	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$	1.12	n.s.
Race Relations	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$	3.11	p<.10	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{BBC}$	38.50	p<.01	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$	1.20	n.s.
Iraq	$\beta_{CNN}=\beta_{BBC}$	1.44	n.s.	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{BBC}$	59.81	p<.01	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$.48	n.s.
Soft News									
Sports	$\beta_{NPR}=\beta_{BBC}$	4.73	p<.05	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{CNN}$	31.88	p<.01	$\beta_{CNN}=\beta_{BBC}$.05	n.s.
Crime	$\beta_{CNN}=\beta_{NPR}$	1.07	n.s.	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{CNN}$	32.41	p<.01	$\beta_{CNN}=\beta_{NPR}$	1.96	n.s.
Travel	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{CNN}$	3.06	p<.10	$\beta_{FOX}=\beta_{CNN}$	41.89	p<.01	$\beta_{CNN}=\beta_{BBC}$	1.67	n.s.

^aTest statistics concern the differences in the relevant pair of coefficient estimates.

^bFox vs. A non-Fox organization with the most (least) positive (negative) coefficient estimates.

^cThe most (least) positive (negative) coefficient estimate vs. the second most (least) positive (negative) coefficient estimate among non-Fox channels.

Table 6

Interaction between Political Interest and Ideology: Conditional Logit Estimates^a

	Hard News Dimension						Soft News Dimension					
	Politics ^a		Race Relations ^b		Iraq ^c		Sports ^d		Crime ^e		Travel ^f	
	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.	β	s.e.
FOX	-2.872	(.856)***	.884	(.889)	.310	(.844)	-.024	(.779)	1.889	(.936)**	1.057	(.830)
NPR	-3.576	(.878)***	-.416	(.957)	-1.023	(.918)	-1.523	(.939)+	1.358	(.947)+	1.939	(.700)***
CNN	-3.525	(.871)***	.456	(.919)	-.885	(.881)	-.571	(.771)	2.000	(.931)**	2.065	(.684)***
BBC	-2.641	(.836)***	.779	(.911)	-.321	(.879)	.598	(.799)	1.503	(.941)+	1.449	(.742)**
ABST	-.972	(.228)***	-.095	(.165)	-.464	(.187)**	1.917	(.133)***	-.123	(.167)	1.046	(.130)***
FOX*PI	1.012	(.250)***	-.027	(.243)	.102	(.234)	.104	(.212)	-.372	(.250)+	-.269	(.226)
CNN*PI	1.167	(.253)***	.033	(.250)	.437	(.241)*	.266	(.206)	-.444	(.248)*	-.440	(.185)**
NPR*PI	1.169	(.254)***	.271	(.259)	.395	(.251)+	.446	(.250)*	-.248	(.251)	-.428	(.189)**
BBC*PI	.870	(.245)***	-.067	(.248)	.223	(.241)	-.246	(.224)	-.293	(.250)	-.325	(.200)+
FOX*IDE	.847	(.609)+	-1.108	(.642)*	-.727	(.631)	.181	(.567)	-.668	(.703)	-.782	(.614)
CNN*IDE	.802	(.649)	-1.014	(.691)+	-.431	(.681)	.250	(.611)	-.533	(.709)	-.879	(.537)*
NPR*IDE	.700	(.658)	-.241	(.715)	-.078	(.708)	-.153	(.769)	-1.318	(.742)*	-.814	(.551)+
BBC*IDE	-.075	(.611)	-.268	(.661)	.164	(.662)	-.045	(.613)	-.814	(.729)	-.274	(.575)
FOX*PI*IDE	-.209	(.177)	.291	(.175)*	.348	(.175)**	.087	(.153)	.304	(.187)*	.325	(.166)**
CNN*PI*IDE	-.372	(.186)**	.104	(.187)	.071	(.186)	-.105	(.162)	.130	(.188)	.165	(.144)
NPR*PI*IDE	-.342	(.188)*	-.120	(.193)	-.041	(.193)	-.003	(.202)	.310	(.196)+	.126	(.148)
BBC*PI*IDE	-.159	(.177)	-.091	(.180)	-.092	(.182)	-.035	(.169)	.189	(.193)	-.036	(.154)
N of Obs.	978		978		978		978		978		978	
LR χ^2	305.28		172.37		266.67		779.11***		133.60***		228.83***	
Pseudo R ²	.097		.055		.085		.248		.042		.073	

Note. + $p < .15$; * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

^aCoefficient estimates show deviations in news selection rates from the baseline in labeled conditions.

Table 7**Polarization among the More Interested: Likelihood Ratio Tests^a**

	LR χ^2_4	p-value
Hard News		
Politics	5.23	.265
Race Relations	10.31	.036
Iraq	11.96	.018
Soft News		
Sports	.89	.926
Crime	4.18	.382
Travel	5.42	.247

^aTest statistics concern the significance of the increase in the model's log-likelihood after including four three-way interaction terms between the channel, ideology, and political interest.

Figure 1

Experimental Manipulation: Control versus Treatment Group Screen Shots

Which of the following articles about the CONFLICT IN IRAQ are you most interested in reading?

- Sunni-on-Sunni violence snags U.S. plan**
Sunni insurgents attacked fellow SunniArabs on Wednesday, the latest in a growing campaign against those who cooperate with the U.S.-backed Iraqi government.
- Iraqi to graduate Army's Ranger school**
A former lieutenant in Saddam Hussein's army on Friday will become the first Iraqi to graduate from the Army's Ranger School, a 61-day training ordeal that pushes soldiers to their physical and mental limits in forests, swamps and mountains.
- Bomb kills 10 outside Baghdad court**
A suicide bomber attacked a crowd of people waiting outside a heavily guarded court building in Baghdad on Thursday, killing 10 Iraqis and wounding dozens, police said.
- U.S. shows unseen al-Zarqawi video**
The U.S. military command Thursday released previously unseen video of al-Qaida in Iraq's leader, showing him unable to operate his machine gun.
- Can't Say**

Which of the following articles about the CONFLICT IN IRAQ are you most interested in reading?

-  **Sunni-on-Sunni violence snags U.S. plan**
Sunni insurgents attacked fellow SunniArabs on Wednesday, the latest in a growing campaign against those who cooperate with the U.S.-backed Iraqi government.
-  **Iraqi to graduate Army's Ranger school**
A former lieutenant in Saddam Hussein's army on Friday will become the first Iraqi to graduate from the Army's Ranger School, a 61-day training ordeal that pushes soldiers to their physical and mental limits in forests, swamps and mountains.
-  **Bomb kills 10 outside Baghdad court**
A suicide bomber attacked a crowd of people waiting outside a heavily guarded court building in Baghdad on Thursday, killing 10 Iraqis and wounding dozens, police said.
-  **U.S. shows unseen al-Zarqawi video**
The U.S. military command Thursday released previously unseen video of al-Qaida in Iraq's leader, showing him unable to operate his machine gun.
- Can't Say**

Figure 2

Effects of Story Label on Story Selection

