Chapter 10

Revived and Refreshed: Selective Exposure to Blogs and Political Web Sites for Political Information

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ABSTRACT

This study uses an online panel of Internet users to examine the degree to which those who visit U.S. political websites and blogs practice selective exposure as they construct their individual political networks. Specifically, the analysis addresses the extent to which individuals say they visit websites and blogs with which they agree and disagree. The findings indicate strong support for the detection of selective exposure in this context. Reliance on political websites and blogs as well as partisanship emerged as predictors of selective exposure for political information after controlling for demographic and political factors.

INTRODUCTION

As the number of people who seek out U.S. election news from the four major networks has declined, the number of people seeking more partisan sources such as cable television, political Web sites and blogs has been on the rise (Pew Research, 2008a; 2008b, 2010; Project for Excellence, 2008). Partisans increasingly are seeking out media that support their viewpoints and consequently voters could have received a completely different view of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign depending on which sources they sought out (Project for Excellence, 2008). For instance, the majority of MSNBC viewers were Democrats and the news they saw was more supportive of Barack Obama and more critical of John McCain than the news media generally (Project for Excellence, 2008).
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MSNBC viewers were also more likely to hear about Sarah Palin’s $150,000 wardrobe spending spree and Colin Powell’s decision to endorse Obama than Fox News viewers, who were more likely than MSNBC viewers to hear about Obama’s connection to the ACORN community organization that was linked to voter fraud (Pew Research, 2008).

Selective exposure to more partisan sources such as political Web sites and blogs is an important topic to explore because of the democratic implications of people only searching out views congenial to their opinions and beliefs. While some researchers suggest that selective exposure may actually motivate people to participate in politics and help them to organize political information meaningfully (Schudson, 1995), others fear selective exposure will contribute to existing problems in democracy. For instance, some researchers claim that engaging in partisan selective exposure will lead people to develop more polarized attitudes and more fragmented political networks (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Meffert et al. 2006; Sunstein, 2001; Prior, 2002). Polarized views could lead to a more biased processing of information and to less tolerance of opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2002). Selective exposure may also produce a less informed electorate as democratic theory suggests that citizens should gather and critically evaluate a range of opinions before reaching decisions (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

While several studies have examined selective exposure to the Internet as a whole (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Garrett, 2009), few studies could be found that have explored selective exposure to different components of the Internet such as political Web sites and blogs (Johnson et al., 2009; in press; Stroud, 2006, 2008, 2010). Studies suggest that selective exposure effects are stronger for more partisan content (Best et al., 2005; Stroud, 2010), and therefore, selective exposure may be stronger for political blogs and political Web sites that often employ and engage a more partisan network (Johnson et al., 2008; Papacharissi, 2004; Thompson, 2003; Trammell Tarkowski, Hofmokl, & Sapp 2006). While selective exposure tends to look at whether individuals actively seek out stories that conform to their partisan biases, fewer studies explore whether people avoid conflicting information. Finally, while studies have linked motivations for seeking out sources to political attitudes, cognitions and behaviors (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah et al., 2005) as well as to credibility (Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson et al., in press), few researchers have analyzed the connection between gratifications and selective exposure. Those studies that have explored the gratifications and selective exposure association have typically examined how gratifications predict exposure to specific media genres (Hawkins et al., 2001; Kim and Rubin, 1997), not the degree to which different gratifications predict selective exposure and the management of individual networks.

This study employs an online panel of Internet users in the United States to investigate the degree to which those who rely on political Web sites and blogs practice selective exposure. More specifically, this study will examine whether those who rely on political Web sites and blogs for political information will be more likely to say that they visit sites and blogs that they agree with versus those they disagree with. This study will also focus on whether people are significantly more likely to practice selective exposure with blogs than political Web sites and whether people are more likely to seek out information that conforms to their beliefs than avoid information that confronts their beliefs. Finally, this study will explore the degree to which reliance, motivations for seeking out blogs and political Web sites and degree of partisanship predict amount of selective exposure to political Web sites and blogs after controlling for demographic and political factors. This study, then, will show how people manage their own social networks on political blogs and websites by examining one way people try to control in-