

The Political Economy of Mass Media: Implications for Informed Citizenship

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Informed citizenship is taken as fundamental to democratic governance. Deliberation, political participation and holding elected officials accountable for their actions presuppose an electorate capable of expressing informed opinions. In modern democracies, the institution entrusted with delivering relatively costless access to public affairs information is the news media. In recent years, however, as outlined below, significant changes to the regulatory and economic framework within which news organizations function have called into question the media's ability to make good on this civic responsibility.

In this chapter, we focus on two key transformations in the media landscape. First, news organizations the world over are moving in the direction of a profit-driven or market-based model. Second, the revolution in information technology has set off an explosion in the quantity of media choices available to consumers. The net impact of these changes on the news audience is twofold. First, market pressures coupled with enhanced consumer choice have reduced the public's exposure to news programming, thus increasing the number of citizens who are either ignorant or misinformed about current affairs. Second, people who seek out news are increasingly turning to sources that provide a limited perspective on political issues, but one they find agreeable. Thus, the emerging media environment is unlikely to nurture voters' civic potential: on balance, more people will be in a position to tune out the news altogether, while those who tune in are exposed to a narrow range of perspectives on the issues of the day.

Explaining Levels of Information: Demand versus Supply

Conventional theories of political knowledge posit that attributes of the news consumer (such as educational attainment) are the principal determinants of political knowledge. No matter how knowledge is defined -- as textbook-based civic knowledge, the ability to locate the policy positions of political parties, or familiarity with current events and issues (for a discussion of alternative definitions of political knowledge, see Schudson 1998), scholars have treated indicators of political involvement or motivation as the key discriminators between the more and less informed. The list of “usual suspects” includes generic interest in politics (e.g. “How often do you follow news about government and public affairs?”) and the strength of an individual’s partisan affiliation (strong partisans are more informed). The argument is that people with stronger political “drive” regularly pay closer attention to the news and current events.

The demand for political information can also be considered a question of resources. The educated and affluent have more time to keep abreast of the news; for them the opportunity costs of staying informed are lower (see Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Socio-economic standing also confers stronger material incentives for paying attention to the political world -- the more affluent are likely to accrue non-trivial economic benefits through political action thus making it worthwhile for them to “invest” in the acquisition of information.

In fact, the connection between socio-economic factors and political information is well-documented. For instance, familiarity with topics in the news – across a variety of subjects -- was significantly higher among more educated Americans (see Zaller and Price 1993).

Other dispositional or individual-level antecedents of the demand for political information include cultural norms that predispose individuals to become involved in politics. These norms include the sense of political efficacy or competence and civic duty. Efficacy consists of two constituent beliefs, corresponding to “internal” and “external” targets. Internal efficacy refers to the individual’s self-perception that she is capable of exercising political influence, while external efficacy reflects perceptions of governmental institutions and electoral processes as responsive to public opinion. Efficacy is thus a proxy for the expectation that individuals can intervene successfully in the political process; the efficacious citizen participates because he expects that his actions will make a difference.

Unlike efficacy, the norm of civic duty provides a non-instrumental and more unconditional basis for acquiring political information. The dutiful citizen values political involvement in and of itself no matter what the probability of having an impact and irrespective of the question of anticipated benefits.

A final set of individual-level explanations of political information concern social networks and interpersonal cues (see Putnam, 2000; Mutz, 2006). Most forms of political participation are social and people with stronger social ties are more likely to experience pressures to behave in conformity with small group or community norms. Regular churchgoers and those active in their neighborhood association are not only more likely to encounter meaningful political information through these contacts, but also consider it important that they keep abreast of political issues and events.

Although it is clearly important to understand the individual-level factors that discriminate between attentive and inattentive citizens, variations in political knowledge

can also be considered a byproduct of the political context. Most notably, the sheer amount and frequency of news programming made available on a daily basis is an important conditioning variable that makes it more or less difficult for individuals to acquire information. When news coverage is both substantive in content and delivered regularly, the motivational threshold for becoming informed declines because the less motivated have greater opportunities to encounter the news (for a pioneering analysis of the joint effects of individual-level and contextual factors on knowledge, see Jerit et al. 2006). Conversely, for people exposed to information-poor environments, or environments where there is an abundance of entertainment-oriented programs, motivational factors become even more important as explanations of information (see Prior 2003; 2005). In these contexts, the acquisition of information becomes more challenging and concentrated among individuals who self-select into the news audience. Thus, the prevailing level of information is necessarily a function of *both* demand and supply side variables. Decreases in the supply of information work to strengthen the importance of motivational factors.

National Media Systems as Information Contexts

Communications scholars have documented systematic variations in the ownership, regulation and reach of news organizations across the world (see, for instance, Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). The most basic difference is between market-based and public service oriented systems. In market-based systems, all major news organizations are privately owned and subject to minimal government regulation. Public service systems feature governmental ownership and regulatory control over major

broadcast news organizations. These properties of national media systems have important implications for the supply and content of news.

In countries with predominantly market-based media systems, news programming tends to be less frequent and more entertainment-centered. However, in countries that actively support public broadcasting and enforce programming requirements on both public and private broadcasters, news content is less “soft” and media users have more frequent opportunities to encounter news programming. Thus, one fundamental difference between market-based and public service oriented media systems concerns the supply of hard news.

Market and public service media systems also differ in the attention devoted to international news. Market-based systems have gradually increased their ratio of domestic to international news (see Moisy, 1996; Norris, 1996) as individual news organizations have been forced to scale back on their overseas presence. The major television networks in the United States, for instance, now maintain only a handful of foreign bureaus (see Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). Public broadcasting systems, by contrast, have maintained an active presence across the globe.

Finally, and most importantly, market and public service based systems differ in the availability and timing of news programming. Public service regimes typically deliver multiple daily news broadcasts during the peak hours of the broadcast day. The major television channels in Finland and Denmark, for example, air their main news programs at multiple time slots between 6 pm and 10 pm. Britain’s top three television channels broadcast news at 6 pm, 6.30 pm, 7 pm, 10 pm and 10.30 pm. In contrast, market systems offer fewer regularly scheduled newscasts, typically one or two programs

per day. The three major American television networks, for instance, transmit their respective national newscasts in the early evening and reserve prime time hours for entertainment programs.

The fact that television news programs in public service systems air more frequently -- and are often delivered adjacent to popular entertainment programs such as sporting events -- means that *exposure to news is less dependent on individuals' level of interest or motivation*. In effect, the airing of news programs during prime time significantly increases the "inadvertent" audience for news -- individuals who encounter news reports while seeking to be entertained. (We will return to the question of the inadvertent audience in a later section.)

The increased accessibility of news programming, as already noted, has a leveling effect on the distribution of political information. Differences in the level of information between the most and least motivated strata of the public -- the so-called "knowledge gap" -- will be narrowed in public service systems because the less motivated find it more difficult to avoid exposure to the news.¹ Conversely, given the reduced opportunities to encounter news programming during prime time, the scope of the knowledge gap will be widened in market systems.

Cross-National Differences in Information

The available evidence on cross-national differences in political knowledge tends to support the prediction that citizens exposed to market-based media will be less

¹ Most research on the attentiveness-based knowledge gap has been conducted by researchers in mass communication (see Tichenor et al. 1970; Genova and Greenberg, 1979; Graziano 1983; Kwak 1999; Eveland and Scheufele 2000). Although the standard knowledge gap is typically defined in terms of socio-economic status (e.g. education), there is also evidence of differential acquisition of information in relation to gender (Mondak and Anderson 2004; Dow 2008).

informed than their counterparts in public service systems. In the particular case of foreign affairs information, and despite their significant advantage in years of formal education, Americans continue to lag behind citizens of other industrialized democracies. In 1994, for example, citizens of Spain, Italy, Canada, Germany, Britain, and France were generally more likely to provide correct answers to a series of questions tapping international affairs. Using the percentage of each national sample unable to provide the correct answer to a single question as the indicator of public ignorance, the level of ignorance was twice as high in the US: 37 percent of the American sample was classified as ignorant compared with an average of 19 percent for Italy, France, Britain, Germany and Canada (Kohut, Toth, & Bowman, 1994).

Dimock and Popkin (1997, p. 223) have argued that the significantly lower levels of international affairs information in the US can be attributed to significant cross-national differences in the “communication of knowledge” i.e. the greater prominence of public broadcasting networks in Europe that devote significant attention to international news (also see Emery, 1989). Their conjecture is bolstered by evidence that Europeans who report more extensive use of their country’s public television newscasts display greater levels of information about the European Union (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001) than those who watch commercial channels.

The most extensive test of the media systems hypothesis comes from a four-nation study covering the United States, Britain, Denmark, and Finland. The countries in this study -- all industrialized liberal democracies -- represent three distinct locations in the space defined by the market versus public service continuum. Denmark and Finland are closest to a relatively pure public service media model in which stringent

programming and regulatory principles still dominate. At the other extreme, the US exemplifies a pure market-based regime. In between, Britain represents a hybrid media system that combines increasingly deregulated commercial media with strong public service broadcasting (for a more detailed description of the four media systems, see Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2008).

The authors of the four-nation study coupled a systematic content analysis of television newscasts and newspapers with national surveys designed to measure public awareness of domestic and international news stories, both hard and soft. The results of the content analysis – at least with respect to television newscasts -- were consistent with the anticipated differences between market-based and public service systems: broadcast news reports in the US and Britain featured a mix of soft and hard news, while Danish and Finnish news coverage was predominantly hard.²

The content analysis further revealed significant cross-national differences in the level of international news. As expected, American media were preoccupied with domestic news. The American television networks allocated 20% of their newscasts to foreign news (of which nearly half concerned Iraq). In contrast, European public service television channels devoted significantly more attention to international news. As a proportion of programming time, foreign news coverage on the main news channels in Britain and Finland amounted to nearly twice the level in the United States (see Curran et al., 2008).

² The content analysis for print sources yielded ambiguous results. US newspapers had a higher level of hard news coverage, a result that can be attributed to the inclusion of the New York Times. In addition, whereas the European print sample included three daily tabloids which were coded in their entirety, the US print sample was limited to the main “news” section of three daily (non-tabloid) newspapers. The print results concerning hard news are thus inevitably skewed in favor of the US because all non-hard news sections (e.g. entertainment, sports) in US newspapers were excluded.

The survey responses to the political knowledge questions mirrored the findings of the content analysis. The researchers devised a large battery of questions to measure citizens' awareness of both hard and soft news as well as their familiarity with domestic versus international subject matter. A series of questions tapping awareness of international events and personalities (both hard and soft) and were asked in all four countries. This common set included an equal number of relatively 'easy' (international news subjects that received extensive reporting within each country) and 'difficult' (those that received relatively infrequent coverage) questions. For example, the common questions included one asking respondents to identify "Taliban" and the incoming President of France (Sarkozy); more difficult questions included the location of the Tamil Tigers separatist movement and the identity of the former ruler of Serbia.

In the arena of soft news, relatively easy questions focused on highly visible targets such as the video sharing website YouTube and the French footballer Zinedine Zidane. Relatively difficult questions addressed the site of the 2008 summer Olympics and the identity of a professional tennis player (Maria Sharapova).

A different set of survey questions -- specific to each country -- tapped awareness of domestic news. Most of these questions addressed recognition of public officials and current political controversies. Domestic-soft news questions focused primarily on national celebrities, either entertainers or professional athletes. Once again, these items were selected so as to match the difficulty level across countries.

As anticipated, the survey results showed that Americans were especially ignorant about hard news subjects. Overall, the average percent of the American sample that answered the hard news items correctly was 50 percent. This contrasted with 63, 70, and

75 percent in Britain, Denmark and Finland respectively. In the case of soft news, the results were as anticipated in one respect, namely, Americans were more likely to answer the soft news questions correctly (the average answering correctly increased from 50 to 63 percent). However, contrary to expectations, the Americans actually trailed the Europeans in the overall level of soft news information.

Turning to international news, the survey results revealed that Americans' knowledge was truly limited. American respondents averaged a 41 percent level of information on international news subjects. In contrast, the comparable averages for British, Finnish, and Danish respondents were 69, 66, and 65 percent respectively. Clearly, Americans are substantially less familiar with international events than Europeans.³

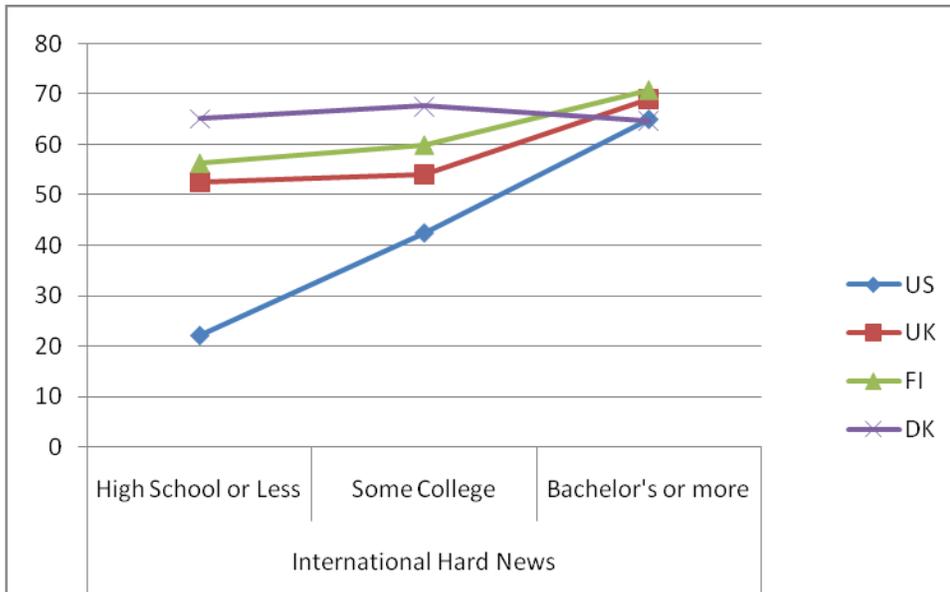
In general, the cross-national differences in knowledge paralleled the differences in the content of news programming. The US market-based media tend to under produce both hard and international news; Americans are poorly informed about both.

The cross-national study investigated one further difference between market and public service media systems, namely, the scope of the knowledge gap on both hard and international news. As discussed earlier, the researchers anticipated that the greater frequency of broadcast news programming in public service systems would increase the probability of chance encounters with news reports. As a result, the knowledge gap between the more and less motivated strata of the citizenry would be enlarged in market systems. The results fully supported these expectations.

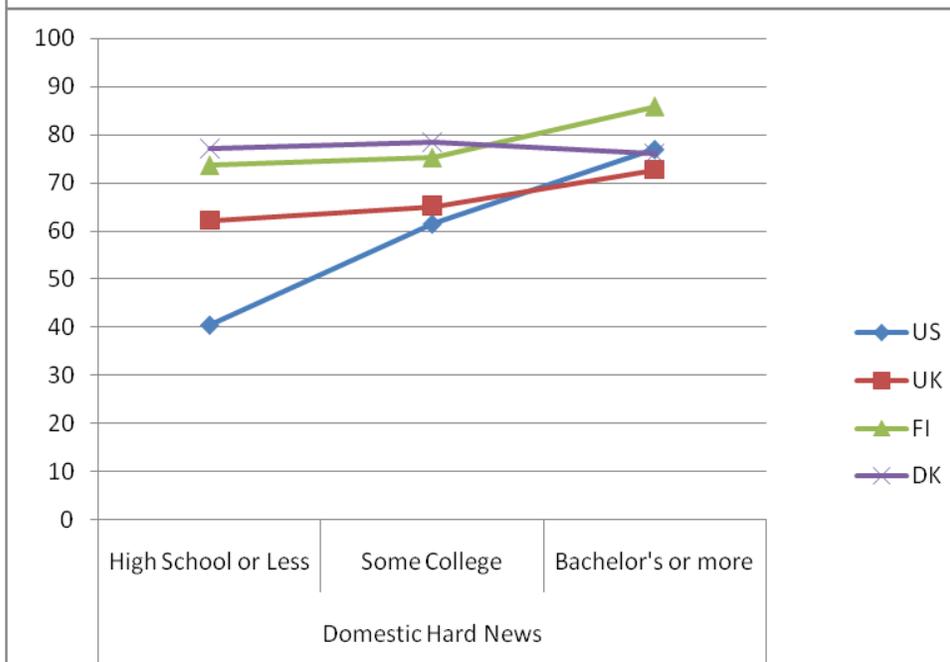
³ Indeed, the American-European gap was truly striking in some topics: for example, 62% of Americans were unable to identify the Kyoto Accords as a treaty on climate change, compared with a mere 20% in Finland and Denmark, and 39 % in Britain.

As shown in Figure 1, a citizen's level of education was a powerful predictor of both international and domestic affairs knowledge in the United States, but proved significantly less consequential in Finland or Denmark. In Scandinavia, where public service requirements continue to be imposed on the broadcast media including commercial broadcasters, the flow of news programming is more extensive and occurs at multiple points during the programming day making it more likely that relatively apathetic viewers will manage to encounter public affairs information at least on a sporadic basis.

Figure 1: Knowledge Gaps Associated with Level of Education



Source: May 2007, four-nation survey of political knowledge (Curran et al., 2008)



Source: May 2007, four-nation survey of political knowledge (Curran et al., 2008)

The greater availability of broadcast news is only part of the explanation of the reduced knowledge gap in public service-oriented media systems. In these nations, public broadcasters, who have a mandate to serve all sections of society, have been relatively successful in getting disadvantaged groups to join in the national ritual of watching the evening television news. Much higher proportions of the less educated and less affluent watch television news on a regular basis in Finland or Denmark than in the United States (see Curran et al., 2008). Thus, the knowledge gap between more and less educated citizens may be further reduced in public service-oriented systems because public broadcasters make greater attempts to reach all educational levels. By contrast, commercial media prioritize affluent, high spending audiences in order to maximize advertising revenue.

In conclusion, the available cross-national evidence supports the inference that media systems are an important ingredient of the individual citizen's information environment. Public service media deliver more informative news programming and make their news coverage more accessible. Europeans are more familiar than Americans with international news and hard news because their news media are more likely to focus on this subject matter. Americans find questions about hard or international news more challenging because American media focus more extensively on domestic and soft news. The information context affects how much people know about public affairs.

The Effects of “New Media”

The emergence of new forms of mass communication in the aftermath of the information technology revolution represents a dramatic change in the information context. On the surface, we might expect significant gains in civic information in the era of new media given the exponential increase in the supply of information. After all, citizens interested in the American presidential election have access to thousands of online sources ranging from unknown bloggers to well-established news organizations whose reports and views receive wide circulation through email, viral videos and other forms of content sharing.

But the availability of more information in the era of new media does not necessarily translate into greater exposure to information. The output of thousands of news sources has created the imminent prospect of information overload; it is humanly impossible to process information on this scale. The immediate question for communication researchers, therefore, concerns consumers’ coping strategies; that is, just how do they sort through this vast array of news sources and decide where they get the news?

The question is particularly challenging because the use of newer forms of information is correlated with not only demographic attributes (e.g. age), but also with levels of political motivation. It is well-established, for instance, that the young disproportionately avoid conventional news channels and choose instead to congregate in online interactive environments where they are co-producers of messages. Similarly, people who seek out news on the Internet are much more involved in political life than their counterparts who spend their time online shopping for travel bargains or long-lost

relatives. Thus, the audience for new media is especially subject to processes of self-selection.

The Fragmentation of the Audience

One of the most striking consequences of the expanded menu of media choices is increased competition for audiences and the erosion of individual news organizations' market share. The more competitive media market has made it less likely that all Americans will be exposed to the same news.

Fifty years ago, Americans depended primarily on television news and the dominant sources of public affairs information were the daily evening newscasts broadcast by the three major networks. The norms of objective journalism meant that no matter which network voters tuned in to, they encountered the same set of news reports, according balanced attention to parties, candidates, or points of view (see Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). In the era of "old media," accordingly, it made little difference where voters obtained their news. The flow of news amounted to an "information commons." Americans of all walks of life and political inclination encountered the same stream of information.

The development of cable television in the 1980s and the explosion of Internet-based media outlets more recently both created a more heterogeneous information environment in which political commentary, talk radio, twenty-four hour news outlets, and myriad non-political outlets all compete for attention. The rapid diffusion of new media makes available a much wider range of media choices, providing greater variability in the content of available information. This means that stratification and fragmentation of the audience are occurring at the same time. Stratification occurs by

level of political involvement: the mainstream media continue to matter for the attentive public, but more and more people are abandoning mainstream news in favor of web-based and more interactive sources of information, most of which provide minimal political content. Thus, on the one hand, the typical citizen (who is relatively uninterested in politics) can avoid news programming altogether by tuning in to ESPN or the Food Network on a continuous basis. On the other hand, the attentive citizen -- facing a multiplicity of news sources -- is forced to exercise some form of selective exposure to news.

The Demise of the Inadvertent Audience

The premise of this chapter is that some minimal level of exposure to information facilitates the exercise of citizenship. In the first section of the chapter we argued that the acquisition of information depends on both the availability and supply of news as well as individual-level attentiveness or demand. As outlined below, it is the demand or motivational side of the information function that is most affected by changes in the media landscape.

During the heyday of network news, when the combined audience for the three evening newscasts exceeded 70 million, exposure to political information was less affected by the demand for information because many Americans were exposed to television news as a simple byproduct of their loyalty to the entertainment program that immediately followed the news (Robinson, 1976; Prior, 2007). These viewers may have been watching television rather than television news. Although precise estimates are not

available, it is likely that this “inadvertent” audience may have accounted for half the total audience for network news.⁴

During the heyday of broadcast news, the massive size of the audience meant that television had a leveling effect on the distribution of information. The evening news reached not only those motivated to tune in, but also people with generally low levels of political interest, thus allowing the latter group to “catch up” with their more attentive counterparts. But once the networks’ hold on the national audience was loosened, first by the advent of cable, then by the profusion of local news programming, and eventually by the Internet, some minimal exposure to news was no longer a given for the great majority of Americans. Between 1968 and 2003, the total audience for network news fell by more than 30 million viewers. The decline in news consumption occurred disproportionately among the less politically engaged segments of the audience thus making exposure to information more closely correlated with the demand for news programming. Since exposure to news was more contingent on motivational factors, the knowledge gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” expanded. Paradoxically, just as technology has made possible a flow of information hitherto unimaginable, the size of the total audience for news has shrunk substantially.

In any given society, the knowledge gap is mainly a reflection of differing levels of demand for information (see footnote 1). As noted in the preceding section, demand is contingent on basic cultural norms such as a sense of community identity and civic pride or duty. As these norms have weakened, so too have the psychological incentives for acquiring political information. The principal implication is that under conditions of

⁴ In Robinson’s words (1976, p. 426), the inadvertent audience consists of those who “fall into the news” as opposed to the more attentive audience that “watches for the news.”

enhanced consumer choice, the knowledge gap between more and less motivated citizens widens (see Prior, 2003; 2005; for a contrary view, see Baum, 2003). Thus, part of the explanation for the increased width of the knowledge gap in the United States (as compared with European nations) may be the higher level of media choices on offer.

To reiterate, the increased availability of media channels and sources makes it possible for people who care little about political debates to evade the reach of news programming. As a result, this group is likely to possess very little information about political issues and events, thus increasing the size of the knowledge gap.

Selective Exposure among Information Seekers

The demise of the inadvertent audience is symptomatic of one form of selective exposure -- avoidance of political messages among the politically uninvolved members of the audience. But technology and the increasing quantity of news supply also makes it necessary for the politically attentive to exercise some form of choice when seeking information. As outlined below, there are two principal forms of selective exposure mechanisms reflecting either individuals' partisan predispositions or issue agendas.

Partisan Selectivity

Ever since the development of consistency theories of persuasion and attitude change in the 1950s, communications researchers have hypothesized that a person's exposure to political information will reflect individual partisan leanings. In other words, people will avoid information that they expect will be discrepant or disagreeable and seek out information that is expected to be congruent with their pre-existing attitudes (see, for instance, Mutz, 2006).

In the days of old media, selecting conventional news sources on the basis of partisan preference was relatively difficult given the demise of the partisan press in the 19th century. But during campaigns, voters could still gravitate to their preferred candidate, and several studies documented the tendency of partisans to report greater exposure to appeals from the candidate or party they preferred (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Schramm & Carter 1959; Sears & Freedman 1967). Early voting researchers deemed this preference for in-party exposure antithetical to the democratic ideal of reasoned choice. As Lazarsfeld et al. put it,

In recent years there has been a good deal of talk by men of good will about the desirability and necessity of guaranteeing the free exchange of ideas in the market place of public opinion. Such talk has centered upon the problem of keeping free the channels of expression and communication. Now we find that the consumers of ideas, if they have made a decision on the issue, themselves erect high tariff walls against alien notions. (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948, p. 89).

Initially, research on selective exposure to information in the era of mass media yielded equivocal results. In several instances, what seemed to be motivated or deliberate selective exposure turned out to occur on a de facto or byproduct basis instead: for instance, people were more likely to encounter attitude congruent information as a result of their social milieu rather than any active choices to avoid incongruent information (see Sears & Freedman, 1967).

It is not a coincidence that the increased availability of news sources has been accompanied by increasing political polarization. Over time, polarization appears to have spread to the level of mass public opinion (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Jacobson, 2000; 2006; for a dissenting view, see Fiorina, Abrams & Pope, 2005). For instance, Democrats' and Republicans' negative evaluations of a president of the other party have steadily intensified (Jacobson, 2006; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006). The presidential

approval data reveal a widening 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.

Given the presence of inter-party animus, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations. People who feel strongly about the correctness of their cause or policy preferences are more likely to seek out information they believe is consistent with their preferences. But while as recently as twenty-five years ago, these partisans would have been hard-pressed to find overtly partisan sources of information, today the task is relatively simple. In the case of Republicans, all they need to do is tune in to Fox News or the O’Reilly Report. More recently, viewers on the left have found credible news programming on MSNBC.

The more diversified information environment makes it not only more feasible for consumers to seek out news they might find agreeable, but also provides a strong economic incentive for news organizations to cater to their viewers’ political preferences (Mullainathan & Schleifer, 2005). The emergence of Fox News as the leading cable news provider is testimony to the viability of this “niche news” paradigm. Between 2000 and 2004, while Fox News increased the size of its regular audience by some 50 percent, the other cable providers showed no growth (Pew Center, 2004).

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that politically polarized consumers are motivated to exercise greater selectivity in their news choices. In the first place, in keeping with the well-known “hostile media” phenomenon (Vallone, Ross &

Lepper, 1985; Gunther et al., 2001), partisans of either side have become more likely to impute bias to mainstream news sources (Smith, Lichter & Harris, 1997). Cynical assessments of the media have surged most dramatically among conservatives; according to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey, Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to rate major news outlets (such as the three network newscasts, the weekly news magazines, NPR, and PBS) as biased (Pew Center, 2004). In the aftermath of the *New York Times*' front-page story on Senator McCain's alleged affair with a lobbyist (Rutenberg et al., 2008), the McCain campaign was able to use this "liberal attack" as a significant fund-raising appeal (Bumiller, 2008). Given their perceptions of hostile bias in the mainstream media environment, partisans of both sides have begun to explore alternative sources of news. During the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, Republicans were more frequent users of talk radio, while Democrats avoided talk radio and tuned in to late night entertainment television (Pfau et al., 2007, pp. 36-38).

Experimental studies of news consumption further confirm the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences. In one online study administered on a national sample, the researchers manipulated the source of news stories in five different subject matter areas ranging from national politics and the Iraq War to vacation destinations and sports (Iyengar & Hahn, 2008). Depending on the condition to which participants were assigned, the very same news headline was attributed either to Fox News, National Public Radio, CNN, or BBC. Participants were asked which of the four different headlines they would prefer to read, if any. The results were unequivocal: Republicans and conservatives were much more likely to select news stories from Fox, while Democrats and liberals avoided Fox in favor of NPR and CNN. What was

especially striking about the pattern of results was that the selection applied not only to hard news (i.e. national politics, the war in Iraq, healthcare), but also to soft news stories about travel and sports. The polarization of the news audience extends even to non-political subject matter. The partisan homogenization of the Fox audience is also confirmed in a Pew national survey reported in Bennett and Manheim (2006, 224).

There is reason to think that the interaction between increasingly individualized reality construction and proliferating personal media platforms has accelerated in just the last few years. For example, the news selection study reported earlier revealed strong evidence of partisan polarization in news selection, yet seven years earlier, in a similar study of exposure to campaign rhetoric, the researchers could detect only modest traces of partisan selectivity (see Iyengar et al., 2008). In this study, the investigators compiled a large selection of campaign speeches by the two major presidential candidates (Al Gore and George W. Bush) along with a full set of the candidates' television advertisements. This material was assembled on an interactive, multi-media CD and distributed to a representative sample of registered voters with Internet access a few weeks before the election. Participants were informed that they were free to use the CD as they saw fit and that their usage would be recorded on their computer. Following the election, they were provided instructions for downloading and transmitting the data to the market research firm from which they received the CD.

The CD tracking data in this study showed only modest traces of a preference for information from the in-party candidate. Republicans and conservatives were significantly more likely to seek out information from the Bush campaign, but liberals and Democrats showed no preference for Gore over Bush speeches or advertisements.

These findings suggest either that the intensity of partisan identity is higher among Republicans, or that selective exposure has become habitual among Republicans because they were provided earlier opportunities than Democrats (with the launch of the Fox Network in 1986) to engage in biased information seeking. The news selection study, conducted in 2007, suggests that Democrats are now keeping pace; in 2000, very few Democrats in the CD study showed an aversion to speeches from Governor Bush, but by 2007 hardly any Democrats selected Fox News as a preferred news source.

Issue Salience as a Basis for Selective Exposure

People may respond to the problem of information overload by paying particular attention to issues they most care about while ignoring others. Given that citizens' vote choices are based, at least in part, on their perceived agreement-disagreement with the candidates on salient issues, it is likely that they will seek out information that reveals the candidates' attitudes on those same issues. Thus, members of an issue public will be especially motivated to encounter information on "their" issue.

Price and Zaller (1993) tested the issue salience-based exposure hypothesis, although only indirectly. They examined whether people whose characteristics suggested they might belong to a particular issue public were more able to recall recent news on the issue. They found support for the issue public hypothesis in about half of their tests. In another related investigation, Iyengar (1990) found that recall of news reports about social security and racial discrimination increased significantly among older and minority viewers, respectively. This study found other evidence consistent with the issue public hypothesis as well: African Americans, for instance, though less informed than whites on typical "civics knowledge" questions, proved more informed on matters pertaining to

race and civil rights (Iyengar 1990). Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2000) reported parallel findings on gender and information about women's issues: women knew more than men.

The most direct evidence concerning the effects of issue salience on information-seeking behavior is provided by the CD study described earlier. The authors tested the issue public hypothesis by examining whether CD users with higher levels of concern for particular issues also paid more attention to the candidates' positions on those issues. In terms of their design, the key outcome measure was amount of CD usage: did issue public members register more page visits for issues of interest? The findings supported the hypothesis in multiple policy domains including healthcare, education and abortion. In terms of CD usage, members of issue publics registered between 38 and 80% more usage than non-members (see Iyengar et al., 2008).

In summary, a media environment featuring an abundance of consumer choice implies first, that we will witness increasing inequality in the acquisition of political information. The "haves" will find it easier to keep abreast of political events and the "have-nots" will find it easier to ignore political discussion altogether. Second, the increased availability of information implies an important degree of selective exposure to political information. Among the relatively attentive stratum, partisans will gravitate to information from favored sources, while ignoring sources or arguments from the opposing side. Information seekers also limit their attention span to issues that affect them most directly. Meanwhile, the large ranks of inadvertent citizens remain disconnected from the political world, frustrating those who attempt to communicate with them, fueling the costs of political communication, while diminishing the effects.

General Implications

The emerging changes in the American news environment likely to exacerbate inequalities in the distribution of information. The less informed -- who are most in need of exposure to news -- will fall further behind their more-informed counterparts. And even though the presence of new media makes it possible for the more attentive segments of the citizenry to expand the breadth of news sources they encounter, the tendency of individuals to rely on familiar and comforting sources means, at least in a normative sense, that citizens are less able to deliberate over questions of public policy.

From the perspective of ownership, the changing composition of the news audience is promising. As this audience increasingly polarizes over questions of politics and ideology, rational media owners stand to gain market share by injecting more rather than less political bias into the news (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). The emergence of Fox News as the cable ratings leader suggests that in a competitive market, politically slanted news programming meets demand and allows a new organization to create a distinct niche for itself.

The Fox experience is likely to result in other news sources following suit. Recent theoretical work in economics, for instance, shows that under competition and diversity of opinion, daily 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). In the world of cable television, the significant increase in the ratings enjoyed by MSNBC is especially revealing. The network’s fastest-growing evening program is “Countdown

with Keith Olbermann.” This program, which has frequently won the daily ratings contest with Fox, conveys an unabashedly anti-Bush Administration perspective. The network now plans to “to showcase its nighttime lineup as a welcome haven for viewers of a similar mind” (Steinberg, 2007).⁵ When the audience is polarized, “news with an edge” makes for market success.

The evidence concerning the effects of partisan bias on news consumption and production is generally consistent with the argument that technology narrows rather than widens the news audience’s political horizons. Over time, avoidance of disagreeable information may become habitual so that users turn to their preferred sources automatically no matter what the subject matter. By relying on 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 will be a less informed and more polarized electorate, with the political communication game aimed, paradoxically, at those who have largely tuned out.

The increasingly self-selected composition of audiences has important consequences for those who study media effects. Survey researchers, who rely on self-reported measures of news exposure, will find it increasingly difficult to treat exposure as a potential cause of political beliefs or attitudes. Those who say they read a particular

⁵ More recently, the network attempted to extend this model of partisan style reporting to the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions. MSNBC coverage was anchored by Chris Mathews and Keith Olbermann, both of whom are commentators rather than “objective” reporters. The more interpretive coverage provided by the MSNBC anchors clashed with the more mainstream norms of the NBC correspondents (such as Tom Brokaw) leading to periods of tension and disagreement during the convention coverage, and to ratings that were disappointing to the network. Tom Brokaw went so far as to publicly distance himself from the views of Olbermann and Mathews (Stelter, 2008). In the aftermath of the controversy, NBC announced that their debate coverage would be anchored by David Gregory – a reported from the news division – rather than Mathews or Olbermann.

newspaper or watch a network newscast are likely to differ systematically in their political attitudes, and it will be imperative that survey-based analyses disentangle the reciprocal effects of media exposure and political attitudes or behaviors.

Self-selection also has consequences for experimental research. Actual exposure to political messages in the real world is no longer analogous to random assignment. As we have noted, news and public affairs information can easily be avoided by choice, meaning that exposure is limited to the politically engaged strata. Thus, as Hovland (1959) pointed out, manipulative control actually weakens the ability to generalize to the real world where exposure to politics is typically voluntary. Accordingly, it is important that experimental researchers use designs that combine manipulation with self-selection of exposure.

In substantive terms, we anticipate that the fragmentation of the national audience reduces the likelihood of attitude change in response to particular patterns of news. The persuasion and framing paradigms require some observable level of attitude change in response to a media stimulus. As media audiences devolve into smaller, like-minded subsets of the electorate, it becomes less likely that media messages will do anything other than reinforce prior predispositions. Most media users will rarely find themselves in the path of attitude-discrepant information.

The increasing level of political polarization will further bring into question findings of significant media-induced persuasion effects. Findings suggesting that audiences have shifted their position in response to some message will be suspect because discrete media audiences tend to self-select for preference congruence. Further, those who choose to watch the news will be more resistant to any messages that prove

discrepant; thus, we would expect to observe reinforcement effects *even when voters encounter one-sided news at odds with their partisan priors*. For example, after the revelations in the news media that the Bush Administration's pre-war intelligence claims were ill-founded, the percentage of Republicans giving an affirmative response when asked whether the US had found WMD in Iraq remained essentially unchanged, while at the same time the percentage of Democrats giving a "no WMD" response increased by about 30 percentage points (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis 2003). In short, the Republicans remained unaffected by a tidal wave of discrepant information.

The increasing level of selective exposure based on partisan preference thus presages a new era of minimal consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects are concerned. But other forms of media influence, such as indexing, agenda-setting or priming may continue to be important. Put differently, selective exposure is more likely to erode the influence of the tone or valence of news messages (*vis-à-vis* elected officials or policy positions), but may not similarly undermine media effects that are based on the sheer volume of news.

The stratification of the news audience based on level of political involvement, however, conveys a very different set of implications. The fact that significant numbers of Americans are chronically unexposed to news programming means that this segment of the electorate knows little about the course of current issues or events. On those infrequent instances when they can be reached by political messages, therefore, they are easily persuadable (see Zaller, 1992 for a discussion of persuadability). When political events reach the stage of national crises and news about these events achieves a decibel level that is sufficiently deafening even for those preoccupied with entertainment, the

impact of the news on these individuals' attitudes will be immediate and dramatic. In the case of the events preceding the US invasion of Iraq, for instance, many Americans came to believe the Bush Administration's claims about the rationale for the invasion since that was the only account provided by news organizations (see Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007). In short, during periods of high-profile and one-sided news coverage of particular issues, the inattentive audience can be manipulated by the sources that shape the news.

In summary, the changing shape of the American media universe has made it increasingly unlikely that the views of the attentive strata of the audience will be subject to any media influence. But as increasing numbers of Americans fall outside the reach of the news, they become both less informed about current affairs and more susceptible to the persuasive appeals of political elites.

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