

Is Partisan Media Good or Bad for Our Society?

From the 1960s through the 1980s, when people thought of media and news, they thought of newspapers and the broadcast television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC). Cable news soon emerged to provide an alternative (CNN, Fox, MSNBC), but one that for the most part followed the same style in their major nightly newscasts as the big networks. Late in the 1980s, talk radio, which had been around for some time, boomed in popularity and hosts such as Rush Limbaugh became household names. Hosts gleefully tweaked the mainstream media and embraced a much more aggressive, hard-hitting style that was explicitly ideological and partisan. There was, in this new forum, no pretense to being objective but, talk-radio fans would argue, the mainstream media were also not objective—they just pretended to be. News-oriented talk shows on CNN, Fox, and MSNBC followed the same pattern, as did politically oriented humor such as that offered by Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver. The rise of the Internet in the 1990s was the most recent dramatic change in communications technology. Today, Twitter receives much of the attention for breaking stories, blogs are prominent in presenting wide-ranging opinion and analysis, and Facebook provides an easy way for individuals to voice their opinions on the news.

Is it a problem for democracy if the media outlets consumed by the public are explicitly partisan and ideological? One side of this debate says that selective exposure to partisan media is good for democracy: it enhances participation in

politics, influences the flow of ideas in public discourse, and potentially portrays American politics with more accuracy than the conventional “balanced” press. From another perspective, one-sided media exposure is harmful: it encourages extreme political beliefs, polarizes the electorate, creates an “echo chamber” that diminishes the ability to learn from opposing views, and leads to stalemate and gridlock in Washington.

This chapter’s debate provides three perspectives on the effects of partisan media exposure. Political scientist John Sides argues that most Americans who watch news actually do so from a variety of different sources and notes that partisan media outlets do not polarize voters so much as they instead attract the already-polarized. Sides also argues that partisan media can have the positive outcome of spurring political engagement. Journalist Jihii Jolly describes a “filter bubble” (on new media platforms, prior search and reading behavior influences what articles are presented to readers as future options) that makes it easy for individuals to expose themselves selectively to one particular point of view without even knowing it. Should we worry about filter bubbles? Quoting one analyst, Jolly suggests we should, noting that even individuals visiting the same site will have a different experience and “not have a baseline to compare what is real and what is not.” Political scientist Matthew Levendusky argues that partisan media has its strongest effects on those who are already at the ideological extremes, pushing them further to the extremes. But overall, this is a small group of people. At the same time, Levendusky notes that many important questions remain unanswered about the possible effects of partisan media exposure.

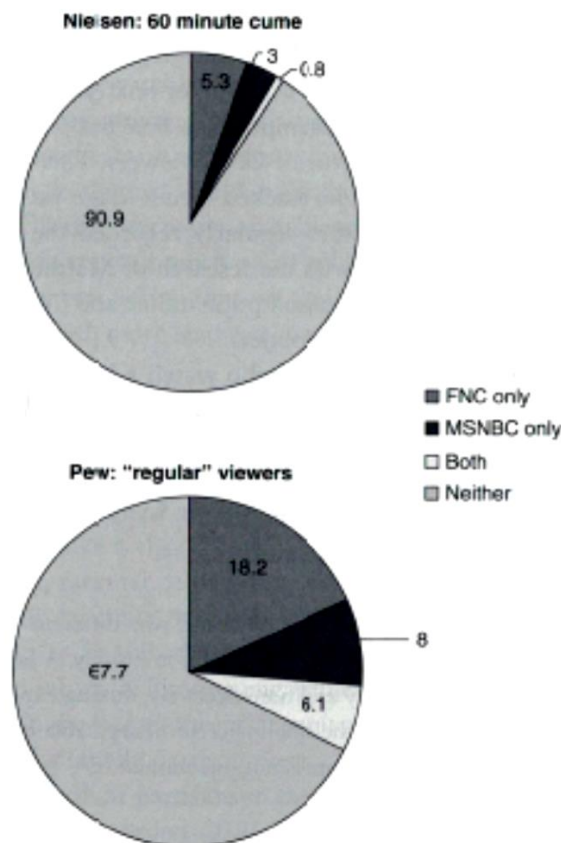
John Sides

Can Partisan Media Contribute to Healthy Politics?

On Monday at 5 P.M. I’m participating in a South by Southwest panel entitled “How Partisan Media Contributes to Healthy Politics.” I prefer to think of this as a question: Can partisan media contribute to healthy politics? For my contribution, I want to do two things. The first is report on the available social science to show that partisan media might not be as powerful as is sometimes suggested. I think that’s an important piece of context for this discussion. The second is to raise some questions about whether and how partisanship—an often maligned notion—can play a valuable role in democracy.

The Audience for Partisan News Is Not as Big as You Might Think

What percentage of Americans watches cable news for 10 minutes or more per day? Only about 10–15 percent, if you simply add up the audiences for Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. This is based on calculations by political scientist Markus Prior, drawing on detailed data about what people actually watch and not what they report in a survey. Survey reports of news consumption are often highly inaccurate. Consider this comparison of a 2008 Pew survey to data on viewership from the Nielsen Company:



In the survey, almost a third of Americans believe they watch one of the three cable networks "regularly." It's not quite clear what "regularly" means, of course. This is one of the problems of using survey questions to measure media exposure. But if we assume that a regular viewer should watch at least an hour per week, then in reality only about 6–7 percent of Americans meet that description.

And even those numbers may be too high, because they double-count anyone who watches more than one of those channels. The seemingly inconceivable possibility that someone might watch both Fox and MSNBC leads to the next point.

Most People Are News Omnivores

Most people's "diet" of news isn't all that skewed by their partisans. There is actually a lot of overlap viewers of various cable news networks. Markus Prior reports that people who watch at least 1 minute of Fox News each week devote about 7.5 percent of their news consumption to Fox but 3.7 percent to other cable news channels. The same is true of CNN viewers. This is consistent with the research of Michael LaCour, who tracked media usage via devices that participants carried with them and that regularly recorded the ambient sounds around them. It is also consistent with the research of Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro, who examined news consumption online and found that most consumers read ideologically diverse new outlets.

Unsurprisingly, if you isolate people who watch a lot of Fox News or a lot of MSNBC, their viewing habits reflect more skew. But this is a small group of people. The same is true of people who read political blogs: they are anything but omnivores, according to my research with Eric Lawrence and Henry Farrell, but they are also a small fraction of the public.

Prior has an excellent summary of these points:

Automatic tracking of television viewing using two different technologies reveals that most people avoid cable news almost entirely. A large segment watches cable news infrequently and nonselectively, mixing exposure to different cable news channels. In the small slice of heavy cable news viewers, however, partisan selective exposure is not uncommon.

Partisan News May Not Polarize Partisans, but Attract Polarized Partisans

There is surprisingly little research that attempts to deal with a fundamental issue. Do people who watch partisan news become more polarized, or do people with polarized views simply like to watch partisan news? In one experiment political scientist Matthew Levendusky randomly assigned people to watch partisan news that either did or did not share their political outlook, or to a neutral news source. He found that partisan news that reinforced subjects' political outlook made their attitudes modestly more extreme. This effect was stronger among those who said that they preferred to consume news that shared their political outlook—suggesting that even if the people who watch partisan news are already pretty partisan, partisan news will make them more so.

However, other research by Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson arrives at a different conclusion. They conducted a set of experiments and allowed people to choose whether they watched their side's partisan news, the other side's news, or entertainment programming that had no news content. They found that the news shows had no effects on attitudes as long as people were allowed to choose. This suggests that, in the real world, partisan news doesn't polarize. If anything, it may be that polarization creates an audience for partisan news.

A few experiments isn't much of an evidentiary base. Much more needs to be done. But it's worth noting that we don't really know that partisan news is polarizing us, and with more evidence, we may find that it isn't.

Learning to Love Partisanship

As you can tell from the title of the panel, it was deliberately framed as a provocation. It's sometimes (often? always?) hard to like partisan news and even partisanship itself. But here is the trade-off I want to emphasize. We want politics to involve calm, civil, rational deliberation about the common good. Partisanship doesn't necessarily facilitate that goal and can actively detract from it. But we also want politics to be full of active, eager, and engaged citizens. Partisanship does a very good job of facilitating engagement. It's one reason why voter turnout was so high in the late eighteenth century during the heyday of strong party organizations and a largely partisan press.

Indeed, if you look at partisans in the public, they look like ideal citizens in many respects. In a December 2011 YouGov poll, 65 percent of people who

identified as "strong" Democrats or Republicans said they were "very much interested" in politics. Only 35 percent of those who identified as independents with no partisan leaning said that. Partisans are more likely not only to follow politics but to participate in it. Indeed, it is sort of odd to expect people to care deeply about something but then tell them they're not allowed to have strong opinions. It's like saying, "You should love baseball, but please don't actually root for a team."

I'm not suggesting that partisanship is an unalloyed good. Partisans can be misinformed if they are buying the spin their side is selling—spin that, by the way, they can usually hear in neutral news outlets doing "he said, she said" reporting, not simply in partisan news. Partisanship militates against other democratic goals, like tolerance for opposing points of view. Or compromise.

And, in any case, we've only got an hour in this panel, so we're hardly going to resolve this. I just think it's worth exploring these tensions in the folk theories we have about politics.

Jihii Jolly

How Algorithms Decide the News You See

Homepage traffic for news sites continues to decrease. This trend is the result of an "if the news is important, it will find me" mentality that developed with the rise of social media, when people began to read links that their friends and others in their networks recommended. Thus, readers are increasingly discovering news through social media, email, and reading apps.

Publishers are well aware of this, and have tweaked their infrastructure accordingly, building algorithms that change the site experience depending on where a reader enters from.

While publishers view optimizing sites for the reading and sharing preferences of specific online audiences as a good thing, because it gets users to content they are likely to care about quickly and efficiently, that kind of catering may not be good for readers.

"We can actually act on the psychological predisposition to just expose ourselves to things that we agree with," explains Nick Diakopoulos, research fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, where he recently published a report on algorithmic accountability reporting. "And what the algorithms do is they throw gasoline on the fire."

Visitors who enter BuzzFeed via Pinterest, for instance, see a larger “Pin It” button, no Twitter share button, and a “hot on Pinterest” module. Medium, launched less than two years ago by Twitter co-founder Evan Williams, recommends content to readers via an intelligent algorithm primarily based on how long users spend reading articles. Recommended content sidebars on any news site are calculated via algorithm, and Facebook has a recommended news content block that takes into account previous clicks and offers similar links.

Diakopoulos categorizes algorithms into several categories based on the types of decisions they make. *Prioritization*, for example, ranks content to bring attention to one thing at the expense of another. *Association* marks relationships between entities, such as articles or videos that share subject matter or features. *Filtering* involves the inclusion or exclusion of certain information based on a set of criteria.

“Algorithms make it much easier not just for you to find the content that you’re interested in, but for the content to find you that the algorithm thinks you’re interested in,” Diakopoulos says. That is, they maximize for clicks by excluding other kinds of content, helping reinforce an existing worldview by diminishing a reader’s chance of encountering content outside of what they already know and believe.

This type of exclusion on the internet has become known as the filter bubble, after a 2011 book by Eli Pariser. As [Columbia Journalism Review]’s Alexis Fitts explains in a recent feature about Pariser’s viral site, Upworthy:

In Pariser’s conception, the filter bubble is the world created by the shift from “human gatekeepers,” such as newspaper editors who curate importance by what makes the front page, to the algorithmic ones employed by Facebook and Google, which present the content they believe a user is most likely to click on. This new digital universe is “a cozy place,” Pariser writes, “populated by our favorite people and things and ideas.” But it’s ultimately a dangerous one. These unique universes “alter the way we’d encounter ideas and information,” preventing the kind of spontaneous encounters with ideas that promote creativity and, perhaps more importantly, encouraging us to throw our attention to matters of irrelevance.

“It’s easy to push ‘Like’ and increase the visibility of a friend’s post about finishing a marathon or an instructional article about how to make onion soup,” writes Pariser. “It’s harder to push the ‘Like’ button on an article titled, ‘Darfur sees bloodiest month in two years.’”

These types of algorithms create a news literacy issue because if readers don’t know they are influencing content, they cannot make critical decisions about what they choose to read. In the print world, partisan media was transparent about its biases, and readers could therefore select which bias they preferred. Today, readers don’t necessarily know how algorithms are biased and how nuanced the filters they receive content through really are.

“Newspapers have always been able to have an editorial voice and to possibly even affect voting patterns based on that editorial voice,” says Diakopoulos. “But what we’re seeing [now] is the ability to scale across a population in a much more powerful way.” Facebook recently did a study that found that simply showing more news in the newsfeed affects voting decisions.

Furthermore, the algorithms that social sites use to promote content don’t evaluate the validity of the content, which can and has spread misinformation.

Beyond the filter bubble, algorithmic bias extends to search engine manipulation, which refers to the process undertaken by many companies, celebrities, and public figures to ensure that favorable content rises to the top of search engine results in particular regions. Though not intuitive to the average Web user, it’s actually a form of soft censorship, explains Wenke Lee, Director of the Georgia Tech Information Security Center.

After reading Pariser’s book, Lee and his research team set out to test the effect of personalized search results on Google and built a tool called Bobble a browser plug-in that runs simultaneous Google searches from different locations around the globe so users can see the difference between Google search returns for different people. They found that results differ based on several factors: Web content at any given time, the region from which a search is performed, recent search history, and how much search engine manipulation has occurred to favor a given result. Though Bobble has largely been confined to research purposes, it has been downloaded close to 10,000 times and has tremendous potential as a news literacy teaching tool.

“When we do this kind of work, there is always some pushback from people who say ‘Why should people care? Why should people care about the filter bubble or biased news?’” says Lee. “But in the print media age, if somebody was to give me a manipulated version of *The New York Times*, I would be able to put my newspaper next to yours and find out that mine is different. But now? You and I can very likely see different front pages of newspapers online because they are customized for individuals, and that’s pretty dangerous. Because that means I don’t have a baseline to compare what is real and what is not.”

For these reasons, the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University dedicates a portion of its curriculum to the filter bubble, covering issues of search engine manipulation and teaching how to search incognito on a Web browser—that is, without it storing your information.

Other efforts to mitigate media bias from algorithmic personalization include NewsCube, a Web service which automatically provides readers with multiple viewpoints on a given news item, and Balance, a research project at the University of Michigan that seeks to diversify the result sets provided by news aggregators (such as Google News).

Meanwhile, Diakopoulos is working on a framework for how to be transparent about algorithms, as well as processes for how they can be investigated, be it through reverse engineering by users (for which he offers methods in his report) or policy regulations on an institutional level.

“Transparency is important for the same reason why we want our newspaper editors to be transparent,” he says. “If the purveyor of this very powerful media tool is honest with us about how they are using it, then at least we can be a little bit more trusting of them.”

And it’s also a way to give people the choice to be more media savvy—to exit the filter bubble, if they wish. “If I know your search engine works that way and I know someone else’s search engine works a different way, then I can choose which one I would prefer to use.”

Matthew Levendusky

Are Fox and MSNBC Polarizing America?

A generation ago, if ordinary Americans turned on the television at 6 P.M., they had basically one choice: to watch the evening news. They could have chosen to watch ABC, CBS, or NBC, but it wouldn’t really have mattered, because they all basically gave the same news in a similar format. Today, if they did that, they would have hundreds of options, including not just the news, but also sports, movies, re-runs, and so forth. Even within news, they have a variety of choices. Not only would they have the major network news programs, but they would have many choices on cable, most notably the partisan outlets of Fox News and MSNBC (not to mention even more choices online). This choice of explicitly partisan outlets means that individuals can choose to hear messages that reinforce

their beliefs, while avoiding those from alternative points of view, which some claim leads to polarization. Does this high-choice media environment, especially with its partisan outlets, polarize the public?

The evidence suggests that the media may contribute to polarization, but in a more circumscribed way than many commentators suggest. Take first the question, of choice, and in particular, whether people seek out media choices that reinforce their existing beliefs. The answer is (perhaps not surprisingly) yes: Republicans are more likely to tune in to Fox News and liberals are more likely to watch MSNBC. Researchers have also found that these effects are stronger for those who are more partisan and politically involved.

But there is perhaps an even more important type of selection at work. While the political can tune into Fox and MSNBC, those who dislike politics also have more options than ever for avoiding it. In lieu of the nightly news—or a televised presidential address—they can watch *Sports Center*, *Entertainment Tonight*, or a rerun of *The Big Bang Theory*. When confronted with a political option, they simply change the channel to something else that they find more agreeable. Even the most popular cable news programs get 2 to 3 million viewers on a typical evening in a country of 300 million Americans. In earlier decades, some of these individuals would have been incidentally exposed to political news and information (by, say, watching the television news at 6 o’clock, when there were no other options). Now that they can avoid news altogether, they know less about politics and are less likely to participate. So the growth of media choice strengthens the extremes while hollowing out the center, making the electorate more divided.

But what about the effects of partisan media on those who do watch these programs? While this research tradition is still relatively young, scholars have found a number of effects: on vote choice, participation, and attitudes toward bipartisanship and compromise, among others. The research looking at effects on attitudes finds that while there are effects, they are concentrated primarily among those who are already extreme. This suggests that these programs contribute to polarization not by shifting the center of the ideological distribution, but rather by lengthening the tails (i.e., moving the polarized even further away from the center).

It is vital to put these effects into context. As noted above, these programs attract a small audience, but those who watch these shows are more partisan, politically interested, and politically involved; these are the individuals who are more likely to make their voices heard in the halls of power. So to the extent that

these shows matter, it is by influencing this relatively narrow audience. These programs have few direct effects on most Americans.

While scholars have learned a great deal about how media might shape polarization, there are still many questions to be answered. First, we know essentially nothing about the indirect effects of these shows: Do those who watch these shows transmit some of the effects to non-watchers through discussion in social networks? Does the Rachel Maddow fan in the cubicle next to you shape your opinions by telling you what she discussed on her show last night? Second, what is the effect of these shows on the broader media agenda, and on elites? Do the frames and issues that originate on Fox or MSNBC influence the broader media agenda? If so, that's an important finding, as it shows how these networks help to shape what a wider swath of Americans see.

In general, we understand little about how news outlets influence one another, especially in a 24-hour news cycle. Some recent work suggests that these outlets (particularly Fox) have shaped the behavior of members of Congress. The work discussed here has focused on the effects of cable TV news (with similar effects found previously for political talk radio). But there is an even broader range of material on the Internet, and few works have yet explored these effects. How the Internet—and especially social media sites like Twitter and Facebook—contributes to polarization will be an important topic in the years to come.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which part or parts of the news media—newspapers, television, websites, blogs, radio, Facebook, Twitter—do you rely on most? Which would you say you trust the most? What makes these sources the most trustworthy?
2. Considering the evidence presented in these three articles, how pervasive is exposure to news coverage that is implicitly or explicitly partisan or ideological? On balance, is this exposure good or bad for American democracy? What are the strongest areas of concern? What might be the chief benefits?
3. How do you know partisan bias when you see it? Define three criteria you would use to determine whether a media outlet is catering to readers' or viewers' partisan bias.