

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Politically Motivated Reinforcement Seeking:
Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate**

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This article seeks to reframe the selective exposure debate by demonstrating that people exhibit a preference for opinion-reinforcing political information without systematically avoiding opinion challenges. The results are based on data collected in a national random-digit-dial telephone survey (n = 1,510) conducted prior to the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Analyses show that Americans use the control afforded by online information sources to increase their exposure to opinions consistent with their own views without sacrificing contact with other opinions. This observation contradicts the common assumption that reinforcement seeking and challenge avoidance are intrinsically linked aspects of the selective exposure phenomenon. This distinction is important because the consequences of challenge avoidance are significantly more harmful to democratic deliberation than those of reinforcement seeking.

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U.S. Americans' preferences regarding which opinions they encounter fundamentally shape their exposure to political information. This exposure process has been the subject of inquiry and debate since the 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), and although many findings point toward some form of selectivity, the literature remains plagued by discrepant claims. Resolving these contradictions is important because decisions about what news sources people use and which articles they read are profoundly important to the future of deliberative democracy. The contemporary information environment, by virtue of a rapidly expanding and increasingly specialized news market and sophisticated new computer and network technologies, allows individuals unprecedented ability to selectively acquire political information (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Neuman, 1991). If individuals seek to expand their familiarity with information that supports their beliefs and to limit their exposure to other perspectives, the prospects for deliberation are dire. In *Republic.com*, Sunstein (2001) predicts just such a future. He foresees a fragmented citizenry, where individuals use the Internet to construct "echo chambers" in which

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the only viewpoints they encounter are their own. According to Sunstein, this behavior will not be limited to small, deviant groups, but will come to dominate the political landscape as more and more Americans go online for news.

Although reinforcement seeking and challenge avoidance both have important consequences for attitude formation and opinion strength, avoiding opinion-challenging information is particularly harmful. Exposure to political difference is a defining element of effective deliberation and has a significant influence on individuals' ability to accept disagreement and seek political solutions. Exposure to contrasting perspectives also increases familiarity with the rationales that motivate opposing views, which can in turn foster political tolerance (Mutz, 2002; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Contact with other political viewpoints stimulates more thorough information searches and more careful scrutiny of alternatives (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Mendelberg, 2002; Nemeth, 1986; Nemeth & Rogers, 1996). Conversely, if individuals effectively avoid opinion-challenging information, the society to which they belong is likely to become more politically fragmented (Sunstein, 2001, 2002). In light of the important stakes for political deliberation and democratic society, it is critical that we understand what choices people will make in the changing political news environment.

The next section of this paper provides a more detailed overview of research on the topic of politically motivated selective exposure. This review suggests that an underlying pattern, namely, that people seek opinion-reinforcing information without avoiding opinion-challenging information, can help to explain inconsistencies between earlier findings. A discussion of psychological mechanisms that help to explain this behavior provides theoretical grounding for this claim. Results are presented after describing the survey methodology and measurement techniques. The data show that individuals who have additional control over their information environment do experience an increase in exposure to opinion-reinforcing information, but that their exposure to opinion-challenging information does not drop. The paper concludes with a discussion of these results, and recommendations for future research.

Selective exposure theory

Politically motivated selective exposure, the tendency to craft an information environment that reflects one's political beliefs, has been a topic of debate for several decades (for reviews, see Frey, 1986; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Research on the subject was largely dormant from the early 1970s until the late 1990s, but concern over the consequences of the evolving information environment has breathed new life into the topic (e.g., Mutz & Martin, 2001; Neuman, 1996, p. 15; Stroud, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). In the beginning of the 21st century, selective exposure, including politically motivated selectivity, has emerged as one of the most commonly used theories in communication scholarship (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

According to selective exposure theory, individuals' prefer exposure to arguments supporting their position over those supporting other positions.¹ As a consequence, individuals are more likely to read, listen to, or view a piece of information the more it supports their opinion, and less likely to attend to it the more it challenges their position (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Mutz, 2006; Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). Scholars argue that this preference also leads individuals to prefer information *sources* that are more supportive of their opinions over less supportive alternatives (e.g., Lowin, 1967; Mutz & Martin, 2001). For example, Mutz and Martin (2001) assert that control over opinion exposure is inversely correlated with exposure to opinion-challenging information. Comparing people's experiences with television, newspapers, news magazines, and talk shows, the researchers found that individuals who use sources offering more partisan information tend to encounter less opinion-challenging information. For example, people are less likely to come across opinions that differ from their own when listening to talk radio than when reading a newspaper or watching television. They also found that individuals who can choose among competing sources of partisan local news tend to have less contact with opinion-challenging information than those living in areas served by a single (less partisan) local news source. More recently, Mutz (2006) has argued that individuals' *social networks* are also unlikely to be a source of exposure to cross-cutting political attitudes. This is because individuals are selective about who they associate with and because they tend to shape their environments in ways that limit their exposure to other viewpoints (e.g., through their choice of neighborhood, their associational affiliations, etc.).

Critics of the theory of politically motivated selective exposure question the existence of an underlying psychological tendency to seek support and avoid challenge. According to these scholars, the data do not support the claim that citizens are disproportionately exposed to opinion-supporting information. In their review, Sears and Freedman (1967) contest the interpretation of the data reported in Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) seminal work on selective exposure, and observe that many early studies undermine selective exposure claims. Furthermore, they note that choices that do yield exposure to predominantly opinion-reinforcing information are not necessarily motivated by opinion-based selectivity per se, but may instead be secondary consequences of decisions unrelated to ideology. They refer to this as *de facto* selective exposure. For example, many financial analysts may choose to read the *Wall Street Journal* because of its coverage of financial news. The analysts' tendency to agree with the paper's political views is not motivated by an effort to find support or avoid challenge; instead, it is a reflection of their political similarity with those who write about financial news.

In a second major review of literature on selective exposure, Frey (1986) sought to re-establish the legitimacy of the phenomenon. He argued that the lack of support for selectivity prior to 1967 could be explained by Festinger's (1964) later articulations of dissonance theory. In his revised version, Festinger specified that selective exposure

only occurs if an individual's position is a product of choice and if the individual is personally committed to this position. Festinger also identified several conditions under which opinion-challenging information would be *desirable*, such as when the information might be useful for future decisions. Frey argued that earlier experiments failed to account for these important considerations. Reviewing research that attended to these factors, he concluded that when individuals are selecting information about decisions reached on their own accord and to which they are committed, they exhibit a consistently strong preference for viewpoint-reinforcement.

Frey also argued that individuals engage in selective challenge avoidance, but noted that the effect is much weaker than that of selective reinforcement seeking. This conclusion is echoed in recent research looking at the influence that new information and communication technologies are having on people's exposure to political information. A study examining people's use of an interactive CD-ROM containing campaign information about the two major candidates in the 2000 election found only limited evidence that subjects' political attitudes influenced their use of political information (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008). Similarly, analyses of 2000 General Social Survey data provide little evidence that people are using the Internet to avoid political difference (DiMaggio & Sato, 2003). Respondents reported using sites that are neutral or that challenge their opinion as often as they use those that reinforce it. Furthermore, individuals frequently report that their use of these sites leads them to revise or refine their opinions. Another survey conducted in 2000 examining knowledge of the presidential campaign suggests that the Internet could ultimately reduce the effects of partisan selectivity. In her study, Stroud (2004) found that online political information seeking was associated with comparable increases in knowledge about *both* presidential candidates, especially among individuals with the lowest levels of political knowledge.

The debate over selective exposure continues in the face of this contradictory evidence, with scholars on both sides of the debate treating preference for support and aversion to challenge as linked aspects of a single psychological preference. I argue that by conceiving of these preferences as *separate* phenomena we can reconcile these otherwise incompatible findings regarding citizens' political information acquisition practices. Building on the work of Frey (1986) and others, I suggest that most individuals are drawn to opinion-reinforcing information, but they do not exhibit a systematic bias against opinion-challenging information. In some circumstances, individuals may even seek out novel arguments with which they disagree.

Prior research results on both sides of the selective exposure debate can be explained in terms of a systematic preference for opinion reinforcement paired with a weaker and less consistent attitude toward opinion challenge. For example, Mutz and Martin (2001) take their findings as evidence that people prefer opinion-reinforcing partisan sources to those that include other opinions, but there is another interpretation. Their data describe individuals' preferences when selecting among partisan sources, not between partisan sources and those that present a more diverse

range of views. That is, in the evidence presented, the presence of opinion-reinforcing and the absence of opinion-challenging information are conflated. This is a useful starting point, but it is not possible to use these data to determine whether respondents were drawn to the sources with which they agreed, avoided those with which they disagreed with, or both. I argue that these data reflect a form of de facto selective avoidance, motivated by an attraction to opinion-reinforcing information, not an aversion to opinion-challenging information. On this view, I suggest that many of the individuals who choose an opinion-reinforcing partisan source would have preferred a source representing multiple opinions if one was available.

Mechanisms motivating distinct treatment of two information types

Before turning to methods, a brief discussion of the psychological mechanisms underlying the hypothesized preferences is in order. Selective exposure is historically premised on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which posits that (a) attitude-consistent postdecisional information elicits positive feelings in the decision-maker about the decision and him or herself, and that (b) attitude-inconsistent information produces dissonance, a state of mental discomfort and unease. Individuals are, for obvious reasons, motivated to reduce dissonance and one way to do this is to seek out opinion-reinforcing information although avoiding opinion-challenging information. There are, however, several mechanisms that help to explain why individuals might engage in one form of selectivity (reinforcement seeking) but not the other (challenge avoidance).

The first mechanism is Festinger's (1957) assertion that people prefer to minimize dissonance in the easiest way possible. Although avoidance is one strategy, individuals can also strive to reduce dissonance *after* an information encounter. For example, it may be that counter arguing opinion-challenging information or seeking additional opinion-reinforcing information can reduce dissonance to a level that is comparable to avoiding exposure to the challenge in the first place, and that this is easier than carefully avoiding all opinion-challenging political information exposure.

Festinger's (1964) revised model of cognitive dissonance offers a second mechanism for explaining why challenge avoidance is less common than reinforcement seeking. As Frey (1986, p. 59) notes, there are a variety of circumstances under which both opinion-reinforcing and opinion-challenging information is desirable. Opinion-reinforcing information produces positive feelings in the decision-maker and it can help to justify one's position. Although opinion-challenging information may have a negative emotional valence, it can still be *useful*. For example, knowing what your critics think, what arguments they are likely to make for their position, and how they are likely to criticize your position, can be valuable if you are preparing to engage in debate.

Finally, individuals who perceive of themselves as well informed and fair minded have a strong disincentive against selective avoidance. Cognitive dissonance can

occur when one's positive self-image is challenged by evidence that one's actions are inconsistent with that favorable assessment. In this case, intentionally avoiding opinion-challenging information would conflict with the perception that one fairly weighs alternative arguments when forming opinions, and so the behavior would itself become a source dissonance. On this view, the reduction in dissonance resulting from fewer encounters with other viewpoints would be offset by the dissonance produced by actively screening out political disagreement. The net benefits would be ambiguous at best.

In sum, although most selective exposure research has assumed that avoiding opinion-challenging information and seeking opinion-reinforcing information are equally likely, there are compelling theoretical reasons to expect that one will be more common than the other. Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that support seeking and challenge avoidance are distinct. The following hypotheses were formed to test this claim.

H1: Individuals desire exposure to opinion-reinforcing information.

H1a: The stronger an individual's opinion, the more likely he or she is to use a source that supports that opinion.

H1b: Individuals who have more control over their information exposure will have greater familiarity with information supporting their opinion than those with less control.

H2: Individuals' aversion to opinion-challenging information is weaker than their desire for opinion-reinforcing information.

H2a: The strength of an individual's opinion is less likely to deter the use of an opinion-challenging source than to promote the use of an opinion-reinforcing source.

H2b: Control over the information environment is less likely to reduce familiarity with opinion-challenging information than it is to increase familiarity with opinion-reinforcing information.

Methods

The online political information environment provides a unique opportunity to explore exposure preferences. There are many types of online sources, including major news organizations' websites, web-based political discussion boards, political blogs, and political e-mails (including those from issue-oriented groups, those forwarded by family and friends, etc.). Two characteristics of these online media are particularly important. First, the range of opinions accessible online is wider than with older news media, such as television or newspapers. Politically extreme groups have a significant presence online (e.g., Zook, 1996), and partisan news sites are commonplace (e.g., Atton, 2003). Second, the mechanisms for controlling which opinions one encounters are powerful and increasingly effective (Bimber & Davis, 2003, p. 152; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Neuman, 1996, p. 15).

Information seeking in this environment is a more active endeavor than it was in an earlier era characterized by fewer outlets and more rigid publication schedules, and is much more easily influenced by individual preferences and attitudes (Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2009). Search engines, news aggregations services (such as Google News), and partisan news sites afford opportunities for searching and filtering information that are unparalleled in traditional news media. Given the significant opportunities for shaping information exposure online, the choices that individuals make should more closely reflect their underlying preferences. Thus, use of online political news affords individuals increased control over their information environment.²

Survey data are used to assess the relationship between control over the information environment and exposure to political information. The author collaborated in the design of a national telephone survey that was sponsored by the Pew Internet & American Life Project and administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates between June 14, 2004 and July 3, 2004, shortly before the Democratic and Republican Party conventions. Respondents were contacted via a random-digit sample of telephone numbers, and interviewers asked to speak with either the youngest adult male at home at the time of the call or, if no males were present, the oldest adult female. This sampling strategy helps to ensure that young men and older women, who are less likely to participate in telephone surveys, are well represented in the sample. The technique has been shown to produce results similar to a random sample of all adults living in the household (Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000). The overall response rate was 31.2% (based on a 77% contact rate, 43% cooperation rate, and 94% completion rate), yielding a representative sample of 1,510 English-speaking adult Americans. Comparing the demographic characteristics of the unweighted sample to those of the 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement Survey (ASES) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) reveals that respondents tended to be slightly older and more educated than the national average, were more likely to be female, and were less likely to be of Hispanic descent. These differences were generally small. Weighting parameters were generated based on a comparison of the demographic characteristics of survey respondents to those of the Census Bureau's March 2003 ASES. These weights, which help to correct for known biases in telephone surveys, were used in all analyses. Nevertheless, there may also be a sampling bias not evident in the demographic characteristics. The survey included several factors potentially related to individuals' willingness to participate, and these are used as controls in the analyses.

The survey included several measures that were relevant to this research. (See Appendix for question wording.) In order to assess individuals' ability to shape their information environment, the survey included a battery of questions about respondents' use of the Internet to obtain political information, including their use of partisan websites in the past year and the frequency with which they use online news sources. Online news use is an aggregate measure that includes both web- and e-mail-acquired information. Web-based news affords significantly more information

control than e-mail, as web pages must be sought out, while incoming e-mail messages often arrive unsolicited. The survey does not distinguish between the two technologies, however, because both offer more control on average than is offered by offline sources. These measures were used to discriminate among respondents in terms of their opportunity to utilize the selectivity enhancing capabilities of the Internet.

The survey included a variety of controls, including campaign interest, measured by how closely the respondent followed the campaign; the strength of candidate support; and the number of offline news sources used on a typical day. Finally, the survey included several demographic measures including age, education, gender, and race/ethnicity.³

The assessment of political information exposure was based on respondents' exposure to information about the 2004 presidential election. Respondents were first asked a series of questions to determine which of the two leading candidates—George W. Bush, the Republican, or John Kerry, the Democratic—they preferred. Overall, 46% preferred Bush, 45% preferred Kerry. The remaining 9% refused to choose between Bush and Kerry, either because they were undecided or because they would only vote for a third-party candidate.

Respondents were subsequently asked about their familiarity with a series of opinion statements about the two candidates. The series included two arguments supporting and two challenging each candidate, for a total of eight arguments in all (see the Appendix for statement wording). Generating the list of statements was an iterative process. First, the survey design team assembled a list of statements used in other recent pre-election surveys. Next, the author consulted Google's directory service to identify four high-profile campaign websites. Content of these sites, including talking points and advertisements, was then coded in order to identify common themes. Finally, the original list of statements was modified to better reflect the concepts identified through the coding process. The final list included a mix of high- and low-prominence statements to help ensure that some arguments would be unfamiliar even to those who regularly followed the campaign.

Two exposure scores were computed based on familiarity with these statements. The opinion-reinforcement score is a summative measure based on individuals' familiarity with the statements favoring their preferred candidate or criticizing the opponent, with respondents receiving one point for each argument they heard at least once in a while. The opinion-challenge score is computed using the other four items. The resultant scores are summarized in Table 1.

As evidenced by the section of the table that examines Bush and Kerry supporters separately, the distributions of reinforcing and challenging statement exposure are different for the two groups. This reflects the fact that the opinion statements were interpreted differently for the two types of voters—an argument that was treated as reinforcing for Bush supporters was said to be challenging for Kerry supporters and vice versa—and that Bush arguments (pro and con) were better known than Kerry arguments overall (Bush $\mu = 3.0$, Kerry $\mu = 2.3$, $t = 24.79$, $df = 1,369$, $p < .001$).

Table 1 Summary of Argument Familiarity Scores

	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall (Bush and Kerry supporters)					
Pro-Bush statements	1,370	0	2	1.49	.72
Anti-Bush statements	1,370	0	2	1.55	.58
Total statements about Bush	1,370	0	4	3.04	1.04
Pro-Kerry statements	1,370	0	2	1.06	.80
Anti-Kerry statements	1,370	0	2	1.21	.78
Total statements about Kerry	1,370	0	4	2.27	1.28
Bush supporters					
Reinforcing (pro-Bush + anti-Kerry)	694	0	4	3.04	1.07
Challenging (pro-Kerry + anti-Bush)	694	0	4	2.41	1.19
Kerry supporters					
Reinforcing (pro-Kerry + anti-Bush)	676	0	4	2.83	1.06
Challenging (pro-Bush + anti-Kerry)	676	0	4	2.33	1.36
Undecided/Other candidate ^a					
Bush-favorable (pro-Bush + anti-Kerry)	140	0	4	2.09	1.44
Kerry-favorable (pro-Kerry + anti-Bush)	140	0	4	2.25	1.24

Note: Weighted data (unweighted $n = 1,510$).

^aIncludes individuals who declined to state a preference when asked to choose between Bush and Kerry.

Given the difference in the interpretation and distribution of the dependent variables for Bush and Kerry supporters, the two groups are treated separately in all analyses.

The method of assessing exposure employed in this study is unique, and offers some advantages over previously used alternatives. A variety of self-reported measures of exposure have been used in previous surveys. Some studies ask respondents to provide an estimate of aggregate agreement with the news media they use. For example, how often does the respondent disagree with the political views encountered when reading the newspaper (Mutz & Martin, 2001). Other studies focus on recalling specific media usage behaviors. For example, did the respondent pay attention to a TV news story about a specific candidate (Chaffee, Saphir, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2001). One limitation of measures such as these is that arriving at a response entails complex mental processes. In the first case, the assumption is that the response will accurately account for all news encounters in the specified outlet. A comprehensive review of these encounters seems unlikely, but even a more limited review would be taxing. The second example is equally demanding. In order for this technique to be effective, the respondent must recall with a high degree of specificity his media consumption practices. He must survey his memory for every instance in which he encountered political information, he must recall what the overall position taken by the news item was (e.g., did it support the preferred candidate or someone else), and he must recall how he reacted (e.g., did he read the item or not?). These are

burdensome tasks, and there are numerous opportunities for bias to influence the data. Given that individuals' responses to survey questions are strongly influenced by heuristics and top-of-the-head considerations (Zaller, 1992), the measures will tend to reflect recent news encounters or, more concerning, a generalized belief about how the respondent *thinks* he approaches political news. For example, an individual who believes that he usually considers all sides equally may use this rule of thumb to help him "remember" which viewpoints he attended to.

The alternative to relying on recalled media exposure employed in this study is to measure recalled argument exposure. Argument exposure is a direct consequence of media use, so that differences in argument exposure reflect differences in media exposure behavior. The memory task, however, is less difficult. Rather than reviewing all media exposure events, the individual focuses on whether or not he has previously encountered a series of arguments. By comparing argument exposure, the product of media use, to an individual's attitude, we can arrive at a reliable and a relatively straightforward measure of contact with opinion-reinforcing and opinion-contrary information.

One concern about this measure is that it still depends on respondents' memory, and is therefore susceptible to error. That is, respondents may have forgotten some of the arguments they heard. The measurement technique, however, should not produce systemic biases associated with political attitude. Although people are more likely to remember encountering information that runs counter to their *expectations* (Koriat, Goldsmith, & Pansky, 2000; Stangor & McMillan, 1992), there is little evidence that *attitude* influences memory (Eagly, Chen, Chaiken, & Shaw-Barnes, 1999; Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005, p. 750). Individuals do not exhibit a general bias toward either attitude-consistent or attitude-discrepant information. Furthermore, even if individuals were to more accurately recall information that supports their viewpoint than information that does not, the method of assessing the different forms of selective exposure used in this study would still be effective. There is no reason to expect selective retention effects to be more pronounced among online news users than among nonusers, so any correlation between argument familiarity and exposure control is the product of selective exposure. If selective retention did occur, it would be expected to lead to an underestimate of exposure to opinion-challenging information, exaggerating the evidence of selective avoidance. Thus, selective memory would make results that contradict the hypotheses advanced here more likely.

Results

The first stage of analysis examines the most direct measure of exposure: respondents' self-reported use of web-based sources of political information. Focusing on individuals' use of partisan media sources provides a useful starting point for examining selectivity, although its value is somewhat limited by the fact that the presence of opinion reinforcement and the absence of opinion challenge are linked. (This

Table 2 Political Site Use by Candidate Preferences (Internet users only)

	<i>n</i>	Liberal Site	Democratic Site	Conservative Site	Republican Site
Overall	1,017	9.6%	8.1%	10.4%	8.3%
Bush supporters	469	5.6	3.9	12.7	11.6
Strong	306	4.9	4.3	14.9	15.1
Not strong	162	6.8	3.1	9.3	4.9
Kerry supporters	459	14.8	12.9	9.0	5.7
Strong	139	20.9	20.9	13.0	5.8
Not strong	320	12.5	9.4	7.2	5.3
Undecided/other	90	3.4	5.6	5.6	4.5

Note: Weighted data (unweighted $n = 1,036$).

limitation is addressed in subsequent analyses.) Table 2 compares the use of partisan websites by supporters of each of the two leading candidates, and those who were undecided or who only expressed a preference for a third-party candidate. Together, these data shed some light on how political opinions influence information source use. We begin by considering the distribution of responses in the sample before turning to statistical analyses of these results.

Two implications of the data are immediately evident. First, partisan websites use is relatively uncommon: Only about one in 10 Internet users visited each of the sites identified. Second and more interesting, selective exposure appears to occur in some form. A larger proportion of Bush supporters used conservative and Republican websites than used liberal or Democratic websites, and the pattern was reversed among Kerry supporters. As a consequence, site usage appears polarized, with individuals preferring sites that are aligned with their candidate preferences. Respondents who did not support either candidate are included for comparison. Unsurprisingly, this group exhibited the lowest levels of partisan website use, and usage levels were comparable across the sites. At this level of analysis, however, we are unable to distinguish between a preference for opinion-reinforcing and an aversion to opinion-challenging information.

Strong candidate support not associated challenge avoidance

By splitting supporters of the two candidates into strong supporters and those whose support for their preferred candidate was not strong we can distinguish between preferences regarding opinion-reinforcing and opinion-challenging information. As historically interpreted, selective exposure theory predicts that strong supporters would be more likely than weaker supporters to use opinion-reinforcing sites *at the expense of* opinion-challenging sites (Brannon, Tagler, & Eagly, 2007; Stroud, 2008). In contrast, this paper asserts that although strong support will be associated with more exposure to reinforcing sources, it will not be linked to a comparable drop in exposure to challenging sources.⁴ In other words, strong support will produce a net

Table 3 Effect of Candidate Preference (Bush vs. Kerry) on Political Site Use (Internet users only)

	Liberal Site		Democratic Site		Conservative Site		Republican Site	
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	Stage 2
Supports Bush	-1.22**	-.74 [†]	-1.53**	-1.07*	.21	.26	.63*	-.07
Strong support	-.10	.33	.52 [†]	.65*	.45 [†]	.49	.43	-.12
Bush × strong	—	-.82	—	-.65	—	-.09	—	.98 [†]
<i>n</i>	908		907		902		906	
Cox and Snell <i>R</i> ²	.04	.05	.07	.07	.03	.03	.04	.05

Notes: Weighted data (unweighted *n* between 919 and 924). Cell entries are coefficients of logistic regression predicting use of specified site. Controls for education, attention to campaign, age, and gender were included in the analysis, but are omitted here for clarity.

[†]*p* < .1.

**p* < .05.

***p* < .001.

increase in exposure that is biased toward the favored candidate without substantially reducing contact with other viewpoints.

Returning to Table 2, the data appear to be consistent with these expectations. Candidate support levels do seem to influence use of sites favoring the preferred candidate. Nearly one in five strong Kerry supporters visited each of the Kerry-favorable sites, almost double the proportion of weaker supporters who visited those same sites. Bush supporters use of Bush-favorable sites exhibited a similar pattern. In contrast, strength of candidate support does not seem to have much influence of the use of sites favoring the candidate opposed. In fact in this survey, a larger proportion of strong Kerry supporters had visited a conservative site than weaker supporter.

There are a number of potential confounds that are not accounted for in the table above. For example, strength of support may be associated with overall political interest. On this view, any tendency to avoid other perspectives might be offset by the greater tendency to use all types of sources. A series of logistic regressions are used to more rigorously test the influence of candidate preference on political site use. In the models, site use is predicted based on candidate preference, strength of preference, and the interaction between these two terms. The models are computed in two stages, beginning with candidate preference and strength and then introducing the interaction term. In order to control for confounds, education, attention to the campaign (a proxy for campaign interest), age, and gender were also included as covariates in the model. The results are shown in Table 3.

These statistical tests demonstrate that the trends noted above hold up under conditions of multivariate control, providing evidence of the revised conceptualization of selective exposure proposed in this article. From the stage 1 models, we see that Kerry supporters are more likely than Bush supporters to use either liberal or Democratic websites, and Bush supporters are marginally more likely to use a conservative site. In other words, respondents are more likely to use the site associated with their preferred candidate than with the candidate's opponent. This could be a consequence of seeking reinforcement *or* avoiding challenge. The stage 2 models are more informative. In the presences of the interaction term, the coefficient on support strength when predicting Democratic site use is positive, indicating that strong Kerry supporters are more likely than weak supporters to use a Democratic site. Similarly, the coefficient on the interaction between support strength and Bush support is positive, though only marginally significant, when predicting Republican site use, suggesting that strong Bush support is associated with Republican site use. Thus, as predicted in H1a, strong supporters are more likely to use opinion-reinforcing sites than weaker supporters. The influence of support strength on use of sites favoring the opposed candidate, however, is not significantly different than zero. In other words, strong support is less likely to deter use of opinion-challenging sources (the effect was not significant) than to promote use of opinion-reinforcing sources (the effect was significant), as predicted by H2a.

A complementary source of evidence of selective exposure via news media choice is respondents' use of mainstream and alternative news outlets. If individuals desire opinion-reinforcing information they can turn to the more partisan alternative news media readily available online. Conversely, if individuals want to avoid opinion-challenging information, one strategy is to avoid newspapers and television news, which are explicitly marketed as giving all sides of a debate comparable consideration and fair treatment. Table 4 compares the use of these two types of news media by respondents' candidate preferences. Consider first the use of partisan sources, which are likely to offer extensive opinion reinforcement. The results suggest that more strong supporters than weak supporters get news from these outlets. This is consistent with the idea that people seek out opinion-reinforcing sourcing of information (H1a). The results, however, provide no evidence that strong partisans are abandoning the mainstream news media. To the contrary, among Kerry supporters in this sample, a strong candidate preference is associated with *increased* use of newspapers and television news. Thus, it does not appear that these Internet users are trying to avoid sources that include other viewpoints (H2a). Testing the influence of candidate preference on media use in the context of multivariate controls (as partisan site use is tested above) there are no significant effects associated with candidate preference or strength of support. This suggests that attitude strength plays a relatively trivial role in shaping whether or not individuals use online alternatives to the mainstream news media.

In sum, the usage patterns evident in the data are consistent with the hypotheses concerning source use (H1a and H2a), although the strength of the effects is only

Table 4 News Outlet Use by Candidate Preferences (Internet users only)

	(<i>n</i>)	Mainstream News Media	Alternative News Media
Overall	1,017	83.9%	10.8%
Bush supporters	469	85.7	10.9
Strong	306	86.3	11.5
Not strong	162	85.2	9.4
Kerry supporters	459	83.4	11.6
Strong	139	89.1	13.9
Not strong	320	81.2	10.6
Undecided/other	90	76.7	5.6

Note: Weighted data (unweighted $n = 1,036$).

modest. Individuals do prefer sources offering opinion-reinforcing information to those offering opinion-challenging information, but for highly committed supporters this effect is driven by a desire for opinion reinforcement more than by a desire to avoid opinion challenges. These analyses have focused on exposure differences that are based on individuals' commitment to their preferred candidate and are limited by their emphasis on one-sided sources. Another approach to understanding selective exposure preferences is to examine how individuals' exposure to political information changes when they have more opportunity to be selective.

Online news use not associated challenge avoidance

Now we turn to individuals' familiarity with the eight opinion statements about the leading candidates in the 2004 presidential election. Focusing on opinion statement exposure (as opposed to source exposure) more effectively decouples opinion-reinforcing and opinion-challenging information exposure, enabling us to assess the distinct influence of these factors on individuals' exposure decisions. Examining Table 2 again, notice that supporters of both candidates knew more on average about their preferred candidate than about the challenger ($t = 14.171$, $df = 693$, $p < .001$ for Bush supporters, and $t = 10.537$, $df = 675$, $p < .001$ for Kerry supporters). This again suggests that there is a relationship between individuals' political beliefs and their exposure to campaign information—evidence that some form of selective exposure is occurring—but it does not allow us to assess the hypotheses advanced in this article.

Knowing more about a preferred candidate tells us nothing about the respective contributions of opinion-reinforcement seeking and opinion-challenge avoidance. The hypotheses assert that although individuals do seek reinforcement, efforts to avoid opinion-challenging information will be comparatively weak. On this view, we should expect that individuals who have more control over their information exposure will be familiar with more of the arguments supporting their candidate, but the influence on exposure to opinion-challenging arguments will be slight. When

Table 5 Effect of Online News Use on Exposure to Opinion-Relevant Statements

	Opinion-Reinforcing Statements		Opinion-Challenging Statements	
	Bush Supporters	Kerry Supporters	Bush Supporters	Kerry Supporters
Online news frequency	.07*	.11*	.03	.10*
No. offline sources used	.09*	.09*	.09*	.08*
Campaign interest	.40***	.24***	.35***	.22***
Education	.09**	.13**	.15***	.13**
Age	.18***	.11**	.13***	.23***
Strong candidate support	.05	.04	-.02	-.03
<i>n</i>	676	663	676	663
<i>R</i> ²	.30	.18	.22	.19

Note: Weighted data (unweighted $n = 681$ [Bush supporters] and $n = 656$ [Kerry supporters]). Cell entries are standardized coefficients of OLS regression.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

testing these predictions, we must control for numerous other factors that are known to influence familiarity with political arguments.

A series of OLS regression models are used to examine differences in voters' exposure to political opinion statements. As noted above, the distribution of argument familiarity varied depending on which candidate a voter supported, so Bush and Kerry supporters are treated separately. For each group of supporters, there are two models, one predicting familiarity with opinion-reinforcing arguments, and the other predicting familiarity with opinion-challenging arguments. The results of these models are summarized in Table 5.

The first pair of models, which predict familiarity with opinion-reinforcing statements, explain around a quarter of the variation (Bush support $R^2 = .30$, Kerry support $R^2 = .18$) in respondents' argument familiarity. Several of the control factors are associated with increased exposure to opinion reinforcement. For both groups of supporters, campaign interest, education, and age are each positively correlated with exposure. Strength of candidate support also merits brief comment. The coefficient on this variable is nonsignificant for both groups of supporters, but its sign is consistent with evidence presented above that strong supporters are more likely than weaker supporters to engage in selective reinforcement seeking.

The key variable given the theoretical concern of this paper is the frequency with which respondents got campaign news online, as this practice affords users a unique opportunity to shape their political information environment. The sign of the coefficient was positive and significant for both groups, although the association was stronger among Kerry supporters. The magnitude of influence of this factor among

Kerry supporters is particularly noteworthy. The standardized coefficient rivals that of education or age, and although it is not as large as the coefficients associated with campaign interest, it is of the same order of magnitude as that important political variable. Overall, these results support the hypothesis that familiarity with opinion-reinforcing information will grow as exposure control increases (H1b). Both Kerry and Bush supporters use the additional control afforded by the Internet to augment their exposure to opinion-favorable information.

The second pair of models predicts respondents' familiarity with opinion-challenging information. These models explain about a fifth of the variance (Bush support $R^2 = .22$, Kerry support $R^2 = .19$), and most factors have a similar influence on Bush and Kerry supporters. Importantly, campaign interest and age are again among the most influential items, providing additional evidence that many factors promote exposure to both types of information (Chaffee et al., 2001). It is also appropriate to mention the results concerning candidate support strength again. As before, the coefficient is nonsignificant for both group, but this time sign is negative. If candidate commitment is promoting selective avoidance of opinion challenges, its influence is very small.

Returning to the key theoretical variables, we find that Bush and Kerry supporters differ, and the relationship is only significant for Kerry supports. Surprisingly, the frequency of online news use among this group is correlated with *increasing* exposure to opinion-challenging statements. (The sign on the coefficient is also positive for Bush supporters.) Traditional conceptualizations of selective exposure, which predict that individual try to avoid other viewpoints, would lead us to expect the coefficient to be negative. Instead, we find no evidence that individuals with more control over their information environment limit contact with opinion challenges. This is a more serious challenge to the notion that individuals avoid other viewpoints than anticipated at the outset of this article. The hypothesis (H2b) predicted that exposure control would be associated with a *decrease* in exposure to opinion-challenging information that was small compared to the increase in exposure to opinion-reinforcing information. Instead, we find that Kerry supporters use their expanding influence to *increase* their exposure to other points of view, and that Bush supporters' exposure is not significantly reduced. In sum, these analyses provide strong evidence that control over the information environment promotes exposure to opinion-reinforcing information, and that the tendency to avoid opinion challenges in comparatively weak.

Discussion

Politically motivated selective exposure has been a topic of debate for more than half a century, and the explosive growth of specialized news media and high-control news environments, such as those available online, have brought renewed interest in this question. Americans' preferences regarding exposure to political information will profoundly shape the political environment in the years to come. Understanding

whether people have a preference for opinion reinforcement and/or an aversion to opinion challenges is important because the implications of these preferences are strikingly different. One form of selective exposure poses a greater threat to democratic deliberation than the other. Although seeking out reinforcement may produce deeper convictions and more passionate beliefs, such behavior does not necessarily reduce exposure to other perspectives. Avoiding other perspectives, on the other hand, presents a number of threats. Exposure to other opinions is important because it fosters political tolerance and can improve group deliberation processes. As this exposure drops, the evidence suggests that our society will become more polarized and politically fragmented, that political tolerance will drop, and that citizens will be less able to effectively deliberate over important political problems.

The research described here suggests that individuals' political attitudes do influence their attention to relevant news and information. However, contrary to prior interpretations of selective exposure theory, the data demonstrate that seeking opinion-reinforcing and avoiding opinion-challenging information are not equivalent. The results support the hypotheses that individuals are using control over their political information environment to increase their exposure to opinion-reinforcing information, but that they are not using this control to systematically screen out other opinions. On one hand, individuals seeking political information in an online environment that facilitates politically motivated selectivity seek out sources that support their political opinions, and have a larger repertoire of arguments with which to justify their opinions. On the other hand, individuals who get their news online are not avoiding sources with which they disagree, and they are no less familiar with arguments justifying other perspectives. To the contrary, Kerry-supporting online news users were more aware of the rationales for supporting Bush than Kerry supporters who tend not to use online outlets.

One interpretation of the argument exposure results among Kerry supporters would be to echo the claim made by (Chaffee et al. 2001) that selective exposure does not occur, and that it is more important to focus on the factors that promote exposure to both opinion-reinforcing and opinion-challenging information. In this case, it appears that given more control, many people are simply exposed to more information about the election. To arrive at such a conclusion, however, would be to disregard the strong evidence that people know more about the candidate they prefer than the other candidate, and they are more likely to use a website promoting this preference. I suggest that to explain these contrasting results, we should view opinion-reinforcing information as a more powerful predictor of exposure than opinion-challenging information. This explanation simultaneously accounts for the fact that there is no evidence that people systematically avoid exposure to other viewpoints, and that they still tend to know more supporting their own.

The context of this study, a highly contentious U.S. presidential election, affords a robust test of the prediction that people do not filter out opinion challenges.

Situations that evoke a sense of threat tend to promote selective exposure among authoritarians (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). In 2004, supporters on both sides regularly argued that electing the other candidate would put U.S. interests at greater risk both at home and abroad, claims which suggest that many people viewed the outcome of the election as potentially threatening. In the face of these fears, people are particularly prone to avoiding opinion-challenging information, which makes the lack of evidence for this behavior all the more noteworthy.

The observed difference between the two groups of supporters, both in terms of their political website use and opinion statement exposure is provocative. Table 2 suggests that strong Kerry supporters may be slightly more likely to use a website representing the opposing political ideology than strong Bush supporters (although Table 3 shows that the influence of support strength in this sample was not significant). More importantly, Table 5 indicates that Kerry supporters see an increase in exposure to opinion challenges when getting news online, but Bush supporters do not. One interpretation of these results is that Kerry supporters, who tend to lean to the political left, are more attentive to opinion-challenging information than Bush supporters, who lean to the right.

The idea that conservatives are less likely than liberals to seek out other opinions has precedent in the research literature. A number of previous studies have revealed similar patterns, dating as far back the Erie County study data. Sears and Freedman (1967, p. 199) note, for example, that when broken down in terms of political affiliation, Republicans tended to encounter more information favoring the Republican candidate than favoring the Democratic candidate, though Democrats encountered a balanced mix of political information. Mutz (2006, p. 33) notes a similar trend in her analyses of interpersonal discussion, finding that conservatives and Republicans tend to engage in less cross-cutting discussion than liberals or Democrats. And Iyengar et al. (2008) only find evidence of selective exposure among Bush supporters in their study of the 2000 U.S. presidential election. These results can be situated within the broader debate over the rigidity-of-the-Right hypothesis, which asserts that conservatives (especially right-wing authoritarians) tend to be less receptive to attitude challenges and more resistant to attitude change (Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Tetlock, 1989). A thorough test of these claims is beyond the scope of this paper, but the results reported here suggest that further examination of the role of political ideology on the selective exposure phenomenon is merited.

These results paint a moderately encouraging portrait of individual exposure preferences. They suggest that people's use of the news media, although selective, is not as strongly driven by a desire to avoid political difference as some scholars have argued (e.g., Mutz & Martin, 2001; Sunstein, 2001). Instead, these results suggest that individuals are primarily motivated by a desire to encounter information that justifies their opinion when using the news media. It should be noted, however, that this preference could be unique to mediated communication. The debate over whether people systematically avoid political disagreement in their interpersonal relationships

is an important complement to the issues raised here (see Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006).

The more limited form of selectivity described in this article also raises important questions about Sunstein's assertion that the Internet fundamentally promotes isolation from political disagreement. People have not abandoned the mainstream media for more partisan alternatives, as Sunstein suggests they might, and a continued awareness of competing ideas, attitudes, and opinions would appear to run counter to the notion of echo chambers. Concerns about polarization are not entirely inconsistent with the finding reported here: When people must choose among one-sided partisan sources, seeking opinion reinforcement will be equivalent to avoiding challenges. Nevertheless, Sunstein's prediction that people will take any opportunity to screen out other perspectives seems unnecessarily grave.

Several unanswered questions remain. One of these pertains to the individual exposure decisions that, in aggregate, result in these overall exposure patterns. The finding that people who get their news online exhibit no less familiarity with opinions that differ from their own can be explained in at least two ways. On one hand, it might simply be that individuals do not tend to avoid opinion-challenging information. In this case, individual decisions about which content (e.g., news stories) to examine will be uninfluenced by the presence of other opinions. On the other hand, individuals might seek ways to minimize the frequency of exposure to opinion-challenging information without sacrificing their breadth of exposure. On this view, news consumers might avoid some content as long as they could preserve contact with a range of other perspectives via other sources.

A limitation of this study is that it does not address the possibility that preferences are influenced by individual characteristics and social contexts. For example, there is significant evidence that attention to attitude-discrepant information is greater when such exposure is anticipated to be useful (Frey, 1986; Valentino et al., 2009). To the extent that politically active individuals are invested in being able to respond to criticism of their position, we might expect political engagement to be associated with cross-cutting exposure. This would suggest that individuals with limited political interest and weak preferences avoid opinion challenges, though those with stronger beliefs or greater interest levels seek challenge out. Future work should address this shortcoming.

The emphasis on opinion statements is another potential limitation of this study. These statements may disproportionately represent information featured in campaign ads, and thus may be less prone to selective exposure effects. Other exposure measures might produce stronger effects. Nevertheless, the relationship between the forms of selective exposure should remain the same.

Finally, it should be noted that the data used here say nothing about individuals' comprehension or evaluation of political information. It seems reasonable to think that many people encounter ideas with which they disagree in an opinion-reinforcing setting. For example, both liberal viewers of the *Daily Show* and conservative listeners of the *Rush Limbaugh Show* may hear a bit about how the other side defends its

position without ever seriously considering the merit of those arguments. In other words, recalling exposure to opinion statements does not mean that the individual has critically engaged the content. Exposure is necessary but not sufficient to ensure that an individual integrates the arguments into his or her broader political understanding. Still, other research suggests that recognizing that other viewpoints exist, even when such views are readily dismissed, can have a positive influence on decision making (e.g., Nemeth, 1986).

The lessons learned here are important despite the questions that remain. This article has argued that a desire for exposure to opinion-reinforcing information is not synonymous with an aversion to other opinions. Although individuals are likely to use the information resources available to them to expand their familiarity with the arguments that support their position, there is no reason to expect that they will systematically screen out exposure to other opinions. In a media landscape characterized by the presence of highly partisan outlets alongside those that are more balanced, most people will not abandon contact with other perspectives. Although strongly motivated to seek out information consistent with their opinions, individuals may simultaneously act to maintain familiarity with a range of counterarguments. Thus, a news environment that facilitates exposure choices will not necessarily lead to political intolerance or a breakdown of deliberative democracy.

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Appendix

Candidate preferences, opinion statements, and campaign interest

“Suppose the election for president were being held today and the candidates were George W. Bush, the Republican; John Kerry, the Democrat; and Ralph Nader, an Independent candidate. Who would you vote for?” (40% Bush, 37% Kerry, 6% Nader, 17% undecided/other). “As of today, do you lean more toward Bush, the Republican; Kerry, the Democrat; or Nader, the Independent?” (44% Bush, 39% Kerry, 7% Nader, 10% undecided/other). “Suppose there were only two presidential candidates on the ballot and you had to choose between George W. Bush, the Republican; and John Kerry, the Democrat? If the election were held today, who would you vote for?” (46% Bush, 45% Kerry, 9% undecided/other).

“I’m going to read different arguments people make about the Presidential candidates and their policies. Please tell me how often you have heard or read each

argument—frequently, just once in a while, or never.” “The Bush administration’s policies have helped the economy begin to recover” (76% heard at least once in a while); “George Bush is a stronger leader than John Kerry in the war on terrorism” (70%); “John Kerry changes his positions on the issues when he thinks it will help him win the election” (70%); “John Kerry has a history of accepting money from special interest groups” (51%); “The Bush administration misled the American public about the reasons for going to war about Iraq” (93%); “Some Bush administration policies are a threat to basic civil rights and civil liberties” (61%); “John Kerry has a better strategy than George Bush for creating peace in Iraq” (53%); “John Kerry will end special treatment for corporations and wealthy Americans” (51%). Statements about the preferred candidate were read first, and were rotated within blocks.

“How closely have you been following news about the upcoming Presidential election? Very closely (1), somewhat closely, not too closely, or not at all closely (4)?” ($M = 2.0$, $SD = .9$).

Sources of information

“Please tell me if you ever get news or information from each of the following sources.” If yes, then ask “Did you happen to get news or information from [source] yesterday, or not?” before proceeding to next source. Sources: newspapers (51%), television (74%), magazines (21%), radio (54%), friends and family (41%). Respondents who used either a newspaper or television news are said to have used a mainstream news outlet (82%). The number offline sources used was calculated by counting the number of affirmative answers to the second question. ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.3$).

“Do you ever go online to access the Internet or World Wide Web or to send and receive e-mail?” (67% Yes) If so, “Do you ever get news or information about the candidates and the campaign on the Internet or through e-mail?” (28% Yes) If so, “How often do you get news or information about the candidates and the campaign on the Internet or through e-mail—everyday or almost everyday (1), several times a week, several times a month, or less often (4)?” ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.0$).

Internet users were also asked, “In the past 12 months, did you happen to visit any of the following websites?” “The website of an international news organization, such as the BBC or Aljazeera?” (18%); “The website of an alternative news organization, such as Altnet.org or NewsMax.com?” (11%); “The website of a politically liberal organization, such as People for the American Way or Moveon.org” (10%); “The website of a politically conservative organization, such as the Christian Coalition or the American Enterprise Institute” (10%). For questions about the candidate’s sites, the sample was evenly split between two forms. *Form A*: “GeorgeWBush.com, the President’s official reelection website” (9%); “JohnKerry.com, the official website of the Kerry campaign” (10%). *Form B*: “RNC.com, the official website of the Republican National Committee” (7%); “DNC.com, the official website of the Democratic National Committee” (6%).

Notes

- 1 This study of attitude-based selectivity is situated in the political domain, which is reflected in the use of the theory and concepts throughout the article. This decision reflects the focus of this work, and in no way diminishes the importance of other types of selective exposure research (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1985).
- 2 One concern regarding this approach is that Internet use has historically been correlated with other characteristics might also influence political information seeking behavior. For example, the earliest Internet adopters tended to be male and well educated, though older Americans have been comparatively slow to adopt the new communication technology. It is, therefore, necessary to control for these potential confounds in the analyses.
- 3 This study does not include a control for political knowledge. Although correlated with education and political interest, political knowledge is a distinct characteristic and could have a unique influence on information exposure. This measure should be included in future studies of this topic.
- 4 This prediction is tempered somewhat by the fact that the sites under consideration tend to be one-sided. As a consequence, the absence of opinion-reinforcing information (and not the presence of opinion challenges) on opinion-challenging sites could motivate people to go elsewhere for political information. Nevertheless, we still expect a larger change in the use of reinforcing sources than in challenging sources if individuals are not averse to opinion challenges.

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