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A Turn Toward Avoidance? Selective Exposure to Online Political Information, 2004–2008

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Abstract Scholars warn that avoidance of attitude-discrepant political information is becoming increasingly common due in part to an ideologically fragmented online news environment that allows individuals to systematically eschew contact with ideas that differ from their own. Data collected over a series of national RDD surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008 challenge this assertion, demonstrating that Americans' use of attitude-consistent political sources is *positively* correlated with use of more attitudinally challenging sources. This pattern holds over time and across different types of online outlets, and applies even among those most strongly committed to their political ideology, although the relationship is weaker for this group. Implications for these findings are discussed.

Keywords Selective exposure · Media · Polarization · Online news · Elections

Introduction

Exposure to a diverse marketplace of ideas is a central tenet of deliberative democracy (Price and Neijens 1997; Mendelberg 2002), and there is growing concern that this practice is under siege. The threat of culture wars (Hunter 1991), characterized by political polarization and increasing party loyalty, is the basis of a robust debate over the empirical evidence that the USA is becoming more fragmented (Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina et al. 2005, 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders

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2008). The controversy over whether changes in public opinion and voting patterns are indicative of increasingly polarized beliefs among citizens or are a reflection of polarization among political elites shows no signs of abating.

This debate extends into the media domain, especially with regard to news consumers' use of the Internet, as scholars ask whether party loyalties and ideological beliefs are playing an increasingly important role in shaping exposure to political information. Some scholars warn that we are witnessing an explosion of ideologically motivated selectivity in exposure to news and political information precipitated by Internet technologies (Sunstein 2001; Galston 2003). Empirical evidence for these predictions, however, has been mixed. Studies that have focused on political blog readership and linking patterns have generally suggested high levels of polarization (Adamic and Glance 2005; Lawrence et al. 2010), but more in-depth analyses of blog content suggest that cross-cutting dialog occurs nonetheless (Benkler et al. 2010; Hargittai et al. 2008). Studies examining use of online news media more broadly demonstrate that, at least in the early years of the twenty-first century, individuals have not tended to shield themselves from all attitude-discrepant information (Garrett 2009a, b; Valentino et al. 2009).

Bennett and Iyengar (2008) are the most recent proponents of politically motivated defensive avoidance, the practice of screening out counter-attitudinal information. They suggest that early studies' failure to find empirical evidence for this phenomenon reflects the fact that the technological and social transformations that are responsible for the contemporary turn toward avoidance had not yet taken root at the start of the millennium. On this view, rapid expansion of the online news environment and fragmentation of the media market have combined to produce the highly insular news consumption practices about which Sunstein warned almost a decade earlier. As a consequence, Bennett and Iyengar (2008, p. 724) conclude, "Most media users will rarely find themselves in the path of attitude-discrepant information".

The object of this paper is to test empirically the assertion that defensive avoidance is an increasingly common practice in the Internet era. Are Americans who seek out partisan sources of information today more likely to do so at the expense of exposure to other viewpoints than they were just a few years ago? We focus in particular on Americans' use of online sources of political information, including both ideologically oriented outlets on the Left and the Right, party websites, and more politically diverse mainstream sources. We argue that individuals do exhibit a confirmation bias, preferring attitude-consistent sources, but that they are not driven to systematically avoid sources of attitude-discrepant information, regardless of how easy that task has become.[1]

This is not the first time scholars have made such a claim. Studies examining individuals' use of Internet-based news media indicate that exposure to cross-cutting political ideas was common during the 2004 US presidential election

[1] We use the terms "partisan outlets" and "ideologically oriented outlets" interchangeably throughout, referring to political information sources that present themselves explicitly as advocates for a particular party or ideology. References to more politically diverse or less partisan "mainstream" outlets generally refer to news sources associated with major news organizations, what Sunstein (2001) calls "general interest intermediaries".

(e.g., Garrett 2009a, b; Hargittai et al. 2008). This finding does not undermine the assertion that the avoidance of attitude-discrepant information is on the rise, but it suggests that the turn, if it exists, must have emerged since 2004. The present study builds on research conducted during that election by examining changes in online political media use that occurred between 2004 and 2008. It focuses specifically on whether use of attitude-consistent news outlets has begun to displace use of other types of outlets, and whether factors promoting selective exposure have become more influential over this time period. Second, this research offers a more nuanced assessment of defensive avoidance by accounting for the frequency of exposure to different sources of political information. Thus, we consider not simply whether attitude-discrepant sources are avoided entirely, but also whether they are used less frequently as attitude-consistent site use increases. Before turning to empirical evidence, we describe the theoretical foundations of our claims.

Confirmation Bias Versus Defensive Avoidance

Festinger's (1957, 1964) work on dissonance theory provides a theoretical foundation for selective exposure. Festinger defined dissonance as a "negative drive state" occurring when undesirable aspects of a decision are inconsistent with having chosen it or when positive aspects of alternatives are inconsistent with passing them up. Festinger argued that moderate levels of dissonance could motivate individuals to change how they search for information once a decision has been made, selectively avoiding exposure to information that is decision-contrary (which we term defensive avoidance) while seeking out information that is decision-consistent (termed confirmation bias).

Although research in this area has been contentious (see Sears and Freedman 1967; Frey 1986), it is clear today that individuals prefer sources that are predominantly attitude-consistent to those that are predominantly attitude-discrepant. Experiments demonstrate that Republicans prefer *FOX News* to *CNN* and *NPR*, while Democrats preferences are the reverse (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Survey research has shown that media markets that allow individuals even a modest degree of choice among partisan outlets are characterized by lower levels of exposure to dissimilar political views than markets that do not (Mutz and Martin 2001). And there is compelling evidence that television viewership, especially cable news, is becoming more fragmented over time (Webster 2005; Stroud 2008). Importantly, however, these studies provide no mechanism for weighing the independent influence of attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant information on exposure decisions.

It is necessary to distinguish between defensive avoidance and confirmation bias because the dissonance-mitigating consequences of these two forms of selective exposure are not equivalent. Exposure to pro-attitudinal information will increase cognitions compatible with the original judgment, affirming the individual's sense of correctness. Thus, its consequences are uniformly positive. Exposure to counter-attitudinal information has a more nuanced set of consequences. The attitude-inconsistent cognitions that result from this exposure initially produce a negative emotional reaction. However, individuals do not passively accept this negative state;

instead, they engage in either counterargument or a search for ways to discount or ignore the offending information (see Taber and Lodge 2006). If the individual is successful in these efforts, and the contradiction between attitude and the discrepant evidence is resolved, areas of the brain associated with pleasure are activated (Westen et al. 2006). Thus, the negative emotional state triggered by counter-attitudinal exposure tends to be short-lived, and successful rejection of the challenge is emotionally rewarding.

The expected utility of attitude-discrepant information can also counteract affective incentives for engaging in defensive avoidance. Utility, or usefulness, of an information good often trumps the influence of attitude-congruence. Even in very simple tests, individuals have been shown to prefer useful dissonant information over less useful consonant information (e.g., Freedman 1965). These effects have also been demonstrated in a political context. Recent experimental work, for example, found that Republicans who were facing an electoral defeat in the 2008 election, and who would therefore find information about the candidate they opposed to be more useful, were more likely to examine counter-attitudinal content than Democrats (Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2011). Furthermore, Valentino et al. (2009) demonstrate that in the face of anxiety, information's utility is contingent on how effective it is at alleviating this unease. Thus, although anxiety does not independently motivate consumption of either attitude-consistent or attitude-discrepant information, it does motivate consumption of attitude-discrepant information by individuals preparing to defend a position. Frey (1986) points out that utility is also contingent on decision reversibility. If a position change is still possible (e.g., if a vote has not been cast) some individuals may consider it more prudent to reexamine their decision than to single-mindedly defend it. For these individuals, counter-attitudinal information can be especially informative. In sum, people will often find themselves in situations in which exposure to dissonant information is desirable.

Weak incentives for avoiding counter-attitudinal information paired with benefits arising from cross-cutting exposure suggest that claims about American society's turn toward defensive avoidance are overstated. As noted at the outset of this article, the proliferation of choice in the news environment has inspired predictions that Americans will increasingly screen out views that differ from their own (e.g., Sunstein 2001; Bennett and Iyengar 2008). On this view, use of like-minded partisan news sources should displace use of less partisan mainstream sources, and use of pro- and counter-attitudinal sources should be inversely related.

Predictions such as these, if correct, would however mark a deviation from the psychological predispositions we describe above. There is no question that changes in the media landscape have altered individuals' ability to shape their political news exposure, and we do not deny that Americans are using this control to craft an information environment more to their liking. But as others have persuasively argued, changes in the information environment rarely produce rapid or far-reaching changes in political psychology or behavior (e.g., Bimber 1998). We suggest that despite the rapid transformation of the information environment, individuals' underlying preferences remain largely unchanged, which implies that predictions of increasing avoidance are wrong. To the contrary, since use of attitude-consistent

outlets reflects an underlying interest in political news, we believe this activity will actually promote consumption of other types of news (see Chaffee et al. 2001; Holbert 2005).

In sum, our review suggests that although pro-attitudinal partisan sources will be preferred to counter-attitudinal sources, there is no reason to expect use of the former to drive down use of the latter. More specifically, it suggests that *individuals who use explicitly partisan online sources will be* more *likely to use more politically diverse mainstream news outlets and, to a lesser extent, partisan outlets representing an opposing ideology, than those who do not.* Furthermore, we anticipate that *these patterns will persist over time*, despite sweeping changes in the news media landscape. Note that we do not intend to imply that use of pro-attitudinal sources is a causal force; rather, we are responding to the argument that in the context of greater choice, increasing pro-attitudinal news consumption will consistently be paired with decreasing counter-attitudinal news consumption. Based on the underlying theoretical mechanisms outlined above, we suggest that exposure to both types of information should be positively correlated.

One might reasonably object that it is a mistake to equate use of mainstream news with politically diverse exposure. Indeed, there is clear empirical evidence that mainstream news outlets exhibit ideological differences. *FOX News* coverage is significantly more likely to use positive words when describing Republicans and negative words when describing Democrats than either *CNN* or the *MSNBC* (Holtzman et al. 2011; and see Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010b). There are also differences in the sources that journalists writing for these outlets cite. For example, the *New York Times* relies more heavily on think tanks and policy groups cited by liberals than does *FOX News*' *Special Report* (Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Holtzman et al. 2011).[2]

The question here, however, is not whether mainstream sources exhibit any bias, but whether they offer *more* political diversity than would be found in an explicitly partisan online outlet. There are at least two reasons to think that they will. First, compare the stated missions of these two types of outlets. *FOX News* promotes itself as "fair and balanced" (e.g., see FOX News Network 2011) and *CNN* states that it aims to provide the "broadest possible range of perspectives" (Turner Broadcasting System 2011). In contrast, the *Daily Kos* says on its website that it is "a Democratic blog, a partisan blog" (Zúniga 2011), and *Town Hall* proclaims itself "the top source for conservative news and political commentary and analysis" (Town Hall 2011). Thus, mainstream news sites purport to be more inclusive than their explicitly ideological counterparts. Second, and more importantly, the ideological agenda of these alternative news outlets are reflected in the news that the sites promote. Content analysis shows that although the web sites of *FOX News*, the *Associated Press*, and the *Daily Kos* each exhibit partisan bias in the content

[2] Groseclose and Miylo's (2005) method for classifying research groups produces some potentially problematic results. For example, according to the scheme, the RAND Corporation is more liberal than the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The media bias estimates that result also sometimes lack face validity. Perhaps most notably, the *Wall Street Journal* is found to be among the most liberal of 20 outlets analyzed, more liberal than the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, or *CBS News*. At the very least, however, their analyses illustrate that news outlets *differ* in terms of the sources they cite.

selected for their front page, the *Daily Kos* was far more biased than either of its mainstream counterparts (Baum and Groeling 2008).[3] Based on this evidence, we conclude that individuals who opt to use mainstream news sources are exposed to *more* diverse views than those who rely on their explicitly partisan alternatives.

The question of whether individuals ever use attitude-discrepant sources is only a part of the story. Individuals who do not avoid sources that include attitude-discrepant information entirely may still limit their frequency of exposure. If this were true, then the more an individual uses an ideologically consistent site, the less he or she would seek political information from other sources. Our argument, however, is that individuals do not commonly engage in defensive avoidance and that the patterns described above will hold when we consider frequency of use. Thus, *the frequency of attitude-consistent site use will positively predict the frequency of attitude-discrepant site use.* We do, however, expect ideological commitment to be an important moderator. According to dissonance theory, strong commitment makes attitude-discrepant ideas more distasteful thereby increasing the incentive to avoid them. This incentive will be kept in check by the benefits of exposure described above, but it will reduce their effects. Thus, *more frequent use of ideologically consistent sites among those with strong ideological commitment will promote use of ideologically discrepant sites* less *than it does among individuals whose ideological commitment is weaker.*

We also expect political interest to moderate the relationship between pro- and counter-attitudinal site use. Highly attentive "political junkies" are most likely to see the utility of political information in general, and counter-attitudinal information in particular. Those who are less politically engaged are probably more concerned with reaching a decision than with understanding the nuances of a political debate (e.g., see Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Zaller 1992). For these individuals, the search for information is likely to be brief, and may be disproportionately influenced by confirmation bias: information foraging is geared toward efficiency and may be terminated once reinforcement is encountered. As a consequence, *more frequent use of ideologically consistent sites will promote use of ideologically discrepant sites among highly attentive individuals* more *than it does among those who are less attentive.*

Methods

We test these claims by comparing online political news consumption habits over a four-year period starting in 2004. During this time, the political media landscape underwent a dramatic transformation, especially in terms of the growth of partisan outlets. The number of blogs, including ideologically oriented political blogs, grew by a factor of 30, from about 4.3 million in 2004 to an astounding 133 million in 2008 (Davis 2009). Notable sites emerging during this period include *The*

[3] For instance, the predicted probability of an anti-Republican story being featured on the *Daily Kos* was 48%, but an anti-Democratic story had a 0% probability of being featured. In contrast, an anti-Democratic story had a 37% probability of being featured on *FOX News*, making its front-page presence only marginally more likely than an anti-Republican story, which had a predicted probability of 29%.

Huffington Post, *Pajamas Media*, *Andrew Breitbart*, and *The Daily Kos*. The increasing prominence of partisan blogs was accompanied by increased blog usage. In 2004 about 5% of Americans reported using "online columns or blogs" to get news at least some of the time (Rainie et al. 2005). Four years later, the proportion who got election news from "blogs that cover news, politics or media" was estimated at 13% (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2008). These changes were consistent with changes in the use of online news more broadly. Between 2004 and 2008 the number of individuals who reported using the Internet for news grew from 24 to 40%, and by 2008 the Internet was the second most popular source of news, after television (Pew Research Center 2008).

In our analyses, we utilize a series of five comparable RDD telephone surveys conducted in election years. Four of the surveys were sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates, while the last was an NSF-funded survey conducted by Abt SRBI, Inc.[4] The first Pew-sponsored survey focused on selective exposure specifically and was conducted in June of 2004 (N = 1,510). The other three were large post-election tracking surveys fielded in Novembers 2004 (N = 2,200), 2006 (N = 2,562), and 2008 (N = 2,254). Response rates for these surveys, calculated using AAPOR method two (RR2) and treating non-English speakers as ineligible (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2008) began at a high of 31.2% in the first survey and dropped with each subsequent study, reaching a low of 23.3% in November 2008. The NSF-funded survey was also conducted in November 2008 (N = 600) and had a response rate of 26.2%.

The surveys provide several measures of Americans' use of online political information. Among these are items tapping individuals' use of Web-delivered news media, including both mainstream outlets and more ideologically homogenous alternatives. To measure mainstream news use, the June Pew 2004 survey asks "In the past 12 months, did you happen to visit… the website of a major news organization, such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com?" (39.6%). Subsequent Pew surveys took a different approach, asking separately about use of sites of television news organizations (the examples given were *CNN*, *ABC*, and *MSNBC*), national newspapers (e.g., *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*), and radio news (e.g., *NPR*) to get information about the election specifically. We combined these items to create an aggregate measure of mainstream news use (2006, 21.8%; 2008, 39.4%). In contrast to the Pew studies, the NSF-funded survey conducted in 2008 referred to sources used "in the months leading up to the election," and added *FOX News* to the list of examples, alongside *CNN* and *MSNBC*. We discuss the consequences of these wording differences for our analyses after describing the other media use measures.

Use of more ideologically oriented outlets is assessed in several ways. First, the Pew surveys ask about respondents' use of "alternative news sites, such as Alternet.org or NewsMax.com" (representing the liberal and conservative

[4] Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) and Abt SRBI are non-partisan public opinion research organizations, and both have been in operation since the 1980s. PSRA administers virtually all of the surveys conducted by Pew Research, while Abt SRBI has handled well known projects such as the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey.

perspectives, respectively; 2004, 7.2%; 2006, 3.2%; 2008, 5.5%). We characterize these as ideologically oriented sites based on the examples given in the question; both sites explicitly embrace a political agenda and acknowledge that it shapes their news coverage.[5] Second, two of the surveys—one conducted in June 2004 and the other in November 2008 (NSF funded)—distinguish between use of ideologically oriented sites on the Left and the Right. The 2004 Pew survey asked about respondents use of websites of "politically liberal organizations, such as *People for the American Way or* MoveOn.org" (6.5%) and of "politically conservative organizations, such as the *Christian Coalition* or the *American Enterprise Institute*" (7.0%). The 2008 NSF-sponsored survey, against which the 2004 data are compared, asks about use of websites of a "politically liberal news organization or blog, such as Alternet.org or DailyKos.com" (7.2%) or a "politically conservative news organization or blog, such as NewsMax.com or Townhall.com" (11.3%). The NSF-funded survey also captures more nuanced exposure data, asking respondents about the frequency with which they used these outlets on a five-point scale anchored by "never" and "every day or almost every day". In analyses using a dichotomous variable based on these items, the conversion treats never using a site as equivalent to no use (coded as zero).

It is clear that the wording differences noted above influence usage estimates. As one might expect, questions framed in terms of election news yield lower estimates than those referring to activities in the previous year. Fortunately changes in how the questions were framed are applied consistently across the relevant items within each survey. In other words, items measuring alternative news use exhibit wording changes that are comparable to changes in items measuring mainstream news use in any one survey. Similarly, wording changes are consistently applied to outlets on the left and right. This within-survey consistency reduces the influence that wording changes have on linkages between exposure to different types of media in any one survey. Furthermore, the 2006 and 2008 Pew surveys use identically worded items, providing unambiguous data against which analyses based on the less consistent items can be compared. Wording differences are noted and discussed as they arise in the analyses throughout.

Respondents' use of Presidential candidate websites provides a second means of assessing changes in selectivity. We recognize that online news sites and candidate web sites are not equivalent and that motivations for using them are distinct, but suggest that both are important sources of political information. Furthermore, we observe that use of candidate-produced information has recently been employed in prominent studies of politically motivated selective exposure (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2008). The Pew post-election surveys in 2004 and 2008 asked respondents if "you ever go to the [*candidate*] campaign website to get news or information about the [2004/2008] election" (Kerry/Edwards 10.4%; Bush/Cheney 8.0%; Obama/Biden 19.2%; McCain/Palin 16.9%).

We constructed indicators of attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant site use by comparing respondents' ideological orientations to the outlets they frequent.

[5] NewsMax (2011) has described itself as, "The #1 conservative news agency online", while AlterNet (2011) refers to itself as "a key player in the echo chamber of progressive ideas and vision".

For example, individuals who identified as "very liberal", "liberal" or "somewhat liberal" are coded as using attitude-consistent sites if they visited liberal sites, and using attitude-discrepant sites if they visited conservative sites. The ideologically oriented site items are by necessity only calculated for individuals who self-identify as either conservative or liberal; news outlets could not be systematically classified as attitude-consistent or -discrepant for moderates. Being constrained to examining individuals on either end of the ideological spectrum is acceptable for our purposes, however, as these are the individuals considered most likely to operate within echo chambers (e.g., see Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Candidate site use was coded comparably, linking respondents' campaign site use to their party affiliation. For instance, a Democrat who visited the Kerry/Edwards campaign site is coded as using a party-consistent site, while visiting the Bush/Cheney site is coded as party-discrepant site use. These items were only computed for respondents supporting one of the two major parties; we have no measure of party-consistent site use for third-party supporters, and have therefore excluded them from this analysis. Although this is a limitation, omitting these individuals does not significantly hinder our ability to detect changes in selectivity over time.

Political interest is a potential confound in our analyses, as it is likely to be a powerful predictor of individuals' consumption of all types of news. Thus, we need to account for its influence in our models. Unfortunately, the Pew survey measures of this concept are highly idiosyncratic, varying substantially from one election to the next. For example, the June 2004 survey asks how closely the respondent has followed "news about the upcoming Presidential election." The NSF-funded post-Election study in 2008 follows this model. In November 2004, and again in 2006, the Pew item referred instead to following "what's going on in government and public affairs." And in November 2008, there was no general measure of political interest. Instead, analyses based on this survey must rely whether the respondent voted, and on the extent to which Internet users engaged in online political talk prior to the election (which requires excluding non-Internet users). For clarity, we only include political interest in the results tables when comparable items are used throughout. When forced to use different measures, the tables report analyses without this control. However, we also ran the models with the control included and in every case the sign, magnitude, and significance of the variables in question were the same. We have reported the coefficients from these alternative models in the text so that readers may assess both sets of results for themselves.

The surveys also include a variety of demographic items used in these studies, such as education and age. Education was measured on a seven-point scale, with higher numbers corresponding to more education (between 17.5 to 21.1% of respondents hold an undergraduate degree). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 97 years. Comparing respondent demographics over the five surveys to census data indicates that the sample composition is reasonably stable and representative of the US population, although there are a few differences worth noting. Whites tend to be over represented (between 80 and 85% across all surveys) and respondents are better educated than the American population at large (about one in five hold an undergraduate degree). Internet users are also slightly over represented (range from 67 and 74% in the surveys vs. between 55 and 69% according to census data)

Table 1 Predicting mainstream news site use by ideologically oriented news site use (logistic regression)

	June 2004 B (SE)	November 2006 B (SE)	November 2008 B (SE)
Use ideologically oriented news site	2.49 (0.35)***	2.47 (0.31)***	2.54 (0.30)***
Age	−0.03 (0.00)***	−0.03 (0.00)***	−0.05 (0.00)***
Education	0.44 (0.04)***	0.56 (0.04)***	0.57 (0.04)***
Constant	−1.09 (0.24)***	−2.83 (0.24)***	−1.08 (0.22)***
−2 Log likelihood	1639.55	2149.25	2138.08
Cox and Snell R^2	0.211	0.169	0.264
N	1,465	2,540	2,115

All data provided by Pew Internet and American Life Project

*** $p < 0.001$

(U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Compared to data from the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), a large and well regarded election-year survey, the samples used here are somewhat more conservative than would be expected (between 40 and 45% conservative vs. 38% in the NAES). Thus, the samples are an adequate representation of the national population given that this study focuses on relationships between attitudes and behaviors.

Results

The first step in assessing the claim that online Americans are increasingly likely to embrace politically motivated defensive avoidance is to consider whether use of ideologically oriented news is displacing use of more heterogeneous news outlets in the online news market over time. We predicted just the opposite, suggesting that ideologically oriented site use would be consistently *positively* correlated with use of more heterogeneous mainstream news sites. As a reminder, we are not asserting that mainstream news consumers are unbiased; to the contrary, we expect them to exhibit confirmation bias. Instead, we argue that using mainstream news is not consistent with defensive avoidance, as this activity does more to promote exposure to counter-attitudinal information than exclusive use of explicitly partisan alternatives. To test our claim, we construct a series of parallel logistic regression models predicting mainstream news use by use of online alternatives in 2004, 2006 and 2008 (see Table 1).[6]

The similarities across the models are striking, despite the wording changes previously noted. As anticipated, use of alternative news outlets is a strong and highly significant predictor of mainstream news use in every case, with coefficients

[6] Several Pew surveys also included measures of blog use, but (a) the items did not specifically concern partisan blogs (e.g., "from blogs that cover news, politics, or media") and (b) item wording was different in each of the three elections. We did, however, estimate models using these measures for comparison. Substituting blogs for partisan alternative news yields nearly identical results.

that are within several hundredths of each other. These more one-sided political outlets are *not* displacing mainstream news; to the contrary, the relationship between use of these two types of sources is consistently positive. We also estimate the models controlling for political interest, and find that the coefficients on this factor are positive (between 0.46 and 0.55) and significant in all three elections. More importantly, the coefficients on partisan alternative news use are substantively unchanged (2004, $B = 2.33$, $p < 0.001$; 2006, $B = 2.40$, $p < 0.001$; 2008, $B = 1.78$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests a distinct role for alternative news site use in predicting mainstream news exposure; it is not simply a proxy for general political interest.

Furthermore, there is evidence against a substantive drop in the relationship between these activities over time. Visual inspection suggests that the magnitude of the coefficients is relatively stable across the three surveys, but a more robust test is possible with the 2006 and 2008 data. Because these two surveys use the same sampling strategy and identical measurement items (excluding the measure of political interest), it is reasonable to pool the datasets, using a dichotomous variable to indicate the year each case was collected.[7] This technique allows us to test the differential impact of individual characteristics on the outcome across the pair of surveys while providing statistical control of between-study heterogeneity. Analyses show that the interaction between attitude-consistent site use, representing the change in the relationship over time, was not significantly different than zero ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.43$). Although statistical tests are not designed to confirm null hypotheses, the large sample (4,750 cases in the merged dataset) mean that even a small effect would likely be detected.

A more nuanced version of this prediction is that individuals who seek *attitude-consistent* sources of information specifically (rather than alternative news sources generally) are more likely to use mainstream news outlets. Only two surveys assessed use of sources according to their ideological slant, and in those the question wording differed. The June 2004 survey referred to websites of politically liberal (conservative) organizations, while the NSF-sponsored 2008 survey focused more specifically on websites of politically liberal (conservative) news organizations or blogs. The surveys also differed slightly in their measurement of mainstream news use: the 2008 survey added *FOX News* to the list of examples of major news organization websites. Although these differences make direct comparisons between the two questions inappropriate, the items do tap conceptually similar behaviors. For example, in both cases the sites are sources of political information where ideological orientation is a salient feature. Thus, if use of attitude-consistent sites were displacing mainstream news use in either year, this activity should be inversely correlated with mainstream news use.

Table 2 presents a pair of logistic regression models examining the influence that attitude-consistent source use has on mainstream source use in the two surveys, controlling for a variety of other factors. Consistent with our predictions, use of attitude-consistent sources is associated with an increasing likelihood of using the sites of major news organizations in both years. This relationship holds after

[7] An application of fixed-effects integrative data analysis or IDA (see Curran and Hussong 2009).

Table 2 Predicting mainstream news site use among liberals and conservatives by ideologically oriented news site use (logistic regression)

	June 2004 B (SE)	November 2008 B (SE)
Use ideologically consistent news site	1.70 (0.32)***	1.26 (0.47)**
Use ideologically discrepant news site	1.61 (0.52)**	1.07 (0.86)
Strong ideological identification	−0.63 (0.18)**	−0.58 (0.33)†
Campaign attention	0.45 (0.10)***	0.20 (0.17)
Age	−0.04 (0.01)***	−0.04 (0.01)***
Education	0.46 (0.05)***	0.47 (0.09)***
Constant	−1.68 (0.44)***	−0.04 (0.85)
−2 Log likelihood	981.05	373.45
Cox and Snell R^2	0.267	0.252
N	936	341

2004 Data provided by Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) data from NSF-sponsored survey

† $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

controlling for campaign attention, so this is not simply a by-product of the politically interested consuming more news. One might worry that the tendency to substitute ideologically consistent sources for less explicitly partisan mainstream sources, if it exists, would be limited to strong ideologues. There is no evidence of this, however, as the interaction between strength of ideology and use of attitude-consistent sources was non-significant. This interaction is omitted from the table for the sake of clarity, but note that when it is included all other coefficients are in the same direction, are of the same magnitude, and achieve the same level of significance.[8] We recognize that non-significance is difficult to interpret—perhaps there is simply insufficient power to detect the effect—but tentatively conclude that this behavior, if it does occur, is limited in scope. We return to the influence of ideological commitment when considering the data on usage frequency below. Also, use of discrepant sites is positively associated with mainstream media use in 2004, reaffirming our expectation that using ideologically oriented sites is strongly associated with generalized interest in political news.

There is a potentially troubling decline in the size of the coefficient on consistent site use between 2004 and 2008, which could be explained in at least two ways. On one hand, it might be a product of the change in question wording. Perhaps use of *political organizations*' sites differ from use of *ideologically oriented news and blogs* in its relation to use of mainstream news outlets. This seems highly plausible; though both sites provide partisan political information, they do so in different ways. Or perhaps it results from the inclusion of *Fox News* in the list of major news websites in 2008 (in addition to *CNN* and *MSNBC*), although it is less clear why this would *weaken* the relationship between using ideologically oriented sites and major news sites. On the other hand, it could indicate that consistent site use is having a less positive influence on mainstream site use over time, potentially challenging our

[8] The coefficient on the interaction term is −0.89 (0.66), $p = 0.174$.

claim that relative usage levels remain stable. We cannot be certain of the cause of this fluctuation, but note that in both cases the relationship is positive, confirming that there is still no displacement.

It can be difficult to interpret the substantive meaning of the coefficients in a logistic regression model beyond assessing the direction of the relationships. Predicted probabilities that represent the likelihood that an individual will exhibit the behavior can help. In order to generate these estimates, we set other variables to their mean (e.g., age is set at 49 years) or mode (e.g., use of discrepant sites is set at zero), and manipulate key predictors. Doing so, we find that in 2004 the probability that a typical individual who does not use an ideologically consistent news site will use a major news organization's site is 38%; for an individual who uses an ideologically consistent site, that number increases to 78%. The predicted probability of using mainstream outlets decreased modestly between 2004 and 2008, but the influence of partisan media use remains positive: the probability of mainstream news use increases from 48 to 74% when individuals reported using ideologically consistent sites in 2008.

Attitude-Consistent Site Use Promotes Attitude-Discrepant Site Use

As we acknowledge above, use of mainstream news websites is not equivalent to avoiding bias, as some networks have been shown to exhibit an ideological orientation in their online coverage (Baum and Groeling 2008). It may also be that people rely on these at least modestly more diverse outlets for reasons unrelated to their political predispositions. For example, the major news networks have significant advantages in terms of name recognition and reputation. On this view, people might turn to CNN not because it offers a desirable diversity of views, but because they trust the network more than they trust a comparatively obscure, though ideologically more consistent, partisan news site. Or perhaps individuals use larger outlets because of the topical diversity that they offer: CNN does not just cover politics, but also sports and entertainment. Smaller outlets provide narrower coverage.

Another way to evaluate displacement in light of these concerns is to compare respondents' use of attitude-consistent sites to their use of *explicitly attitude-discrepant sources of political information*. This may be a more apt comparison since alternative news sites on the Left and the Right are both relatively new and have audiences that are small in comparison to those of the major news organizations. The question, then, is whether individuals who use ideologically consistent news sites are more likely to avoid ideologically discrepant alternatives. Our prediction is that they are not, but that instead attitude-consistent site use will promote use of attitude-discrepant sites in 2004 and 2008.

We test this assertion by examining individuals' use of two popular sources of information about the US Presidential elections: political news sites and candidates' sites. First, consider news site use. The models in Table 3 predict individuals' use of ideologically oriented online news outlets in 2004 and 2008. The first column under each year lists the coefficients for a logistic regression predicting attitude-consistent site use, while the second column identifies factors that influence individuals'

Table 3 Predicting ideologically oriented news site use among liberals and conservatives (logistic regression)

	June 2004		November 2008	
	Use ideologically consistent site B (SE)	Use ideologically discrepant site B (SE)	Use ideologically consistent site B (SE)	Use ideologically discrepant site B (SE)
Use ideologically consistent site	–	2.52 (0.33)***	–	3.81 (0.70)***
Strong ideological identification	0.58 (0.22)**	−0.19 (0.34)	0.69 (0.37)†	−0.74 (0.71)
Campaign attention	0.63 (0.15)***	0.59 (0.24)*	0.44 (0.26)†	0.84 (0.60)
Age	−0.03 (0.01)***	−0.02 (0.01)†	−0.03 (0.01)**	−0.04 (0.02)*
Education	0.51 (0.08)***	0.34 (0.12)**	0.29 (0.11)**	−0.13 (0.19)
Constant	−5.99 (0.72)***	−6.10 (1.05)***	−3.94 (1.22)**	−3.95 (0.70)†
−2 Log likelihood	573.65	296.72	257.00	89.03
Cox and Snell R^2	0.098	0.111	0.067	0.155
N	938	936	341	341

2004 Data provided by Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) data from NSF-sponsored survey

† $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$ **; $p < 0.10$; *** $p < 0.001$

attitude-discrepant site use. As noted above, these behaviors are measured differently in 2004 and 2008, but if our predictions are correct then the direction of the relationship should remain the same. The results indicate that most factors have a comparable influence when predicting use of the two types of outlets. More importantly, use of ideologically consistent sites is a very strong positive predictor of discrepant site use, far larger than any other factor. Again, we are cautious about reading much into the difference in magnitude of the coefficients as the influence of the wording change cannot be known.

Individuals' use of political candidate websites in 2004 and 2008 provides a second opportunity for examining selectivity, following the example set in other selective exposure research (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2008). Although conceptually quite similar, this test is empirically cleaner because item wording is nearly identical across the two surveys (except for the names of the candidates identified). The results parallel those concerning news site use: using a party-consistent site is a strong positive predictor of party-discrepant site use in both years (see Table 4). Here again, we reran the models controlling for political interest using the measures available (not shown). Attending to public affairs news is a positive significant predictor for both criterion variables in 2004, and in 2008 political talk is a positive significant predictor of using party-consistent, but not party-discrepant, sites. The influence of party-consistent site use of party-discrepant site use remains the same after introducing these additional controls (2004, $B = 4.26$, $p < 0.001$; 2008, $B = 3.70$, $p < 0.001$).

The influence of consistent site use on discrepant site use is smaller in 2008 than 2004, but the decline is not statistically significant. As with the model of mainstream news use, we tested this by constructing a pooled dataset comprised of

Table 4 Predicting Presidential candidate site use among Democrats and Republicans (logistic regression)

	November 2004		November 2008	
	Use party-consistent site B (SE)	Use party-discrepant site B (SE)	Use party-consistent site B (SE)	Use party-discrepant site B (SE)
Use party-consistent site	–	4.27 (0.36)***	–	4.08 (0.32)***
Voted in election	0.76 (0.30)*	0.23 (0.50)	1.49 (0.34)***	0.21 (0.54)
Age	−0.04 (0.01)***	−0.04 (0.01)**	−0.05 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.01)*
Education	0.45 (0.06)***	0.04 (0.11)	0.26 (0.05)***	0.01 (0.08)
Republican[a]	−0.43 (0.17)*	0.95 (0.29)**	−0.37 (0.14)**	1.00 (0.22)***
Constant	−2.66 (0.43)***	−4.02 (0.73)***	−1.26 (0.41)***	−4.24 (0.70)***
−2 Log likelihood	935.38	347.80	1294.91	554.51
Cox and Snell R^2	0.098	0.196	0.138	0.256
N	1,384	1,383	1,374	1,374

All data provided by Pew Internet and American Life Project

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.10$; *** $p < 0.001$

[a] Democrats are reference category

both surveys (but excluding political interest) and using a dummy variable to indicate the year of the study. Logistic regression results indicate that the influence of party-consistent site use did not vary by year because the interaction between these two factors was non-significant (B = −0.30, SE = 0.46). Again, it is possible that the difference would have been statistically significant with a larger sample (2,765 cases were included in this analysis), but even if this were the case we observe that the change is substantively small.

Usage Frequencies are Positively Correlated

A weakness of the preceding analyses is that they do not take frequency of use into account. It is possible that individuals who rely on ideologically consistent news sites today engage in only token use of more mainstream or exclusively discrepant sites. It is also conceivable that there is a tradeoff between the two types of ideologically oriented sites. That is, the more frequently someone uses ideologically consistent sites, the less frequently he or she will use ideologically discrepant sites. This would suggest that although people are encountering sites that include other viewpoints, they are in fact systematically limiting their exposure. Based on our argument that avoiding dissonant information is a relatively uncommon strategy, we predicted the opposite: use of pro-attitudinal sites and counter-attitudinal sites will increase together. Because the other surveys did not include frequency measures, we rely solely on the 2008 data to evaluate this possibility.

The data support these predictions. Unsurprisingly, most Americans use major news organizations' sites more frequently than they use ideologically oriented alternatives. Limiting our attention to the 14% of Americans who use ideologically

Table 5 Predicting frequency of ideologically discrepant news site use among liberals and conservatives in 2008 (linear regression)

	Stage 1		Stage 2		Stage 3	
	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β
Freq. of ideologically consistent site use	0.27 (0.03)***	0.50	0.33 (0.03)***	0.62	0.19 (0.05)***	0.36
Age	0.00 (0.00)*	−0.10	0.00 (0.00)*	−0.11	0.00 (0.00)*	−0.11
Education	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.08	−0.03 (0.02)†	−0.08	−0.03 (0.02)†	−0.08
Strong ideological identification	−0.11 (0.07)†	−0.08	0.15 (0.10)	0.12	0.24 (0.10)*	0.18
High campaign attention	0.07 (0.05)	0.06	0.08 (0.05)	0.07	−0.22 (0.09)*	−0.19
Consistent site use × strong ideology	–		−0.18 (0.05)**	−0.30	−0.25 (0.05)***	−0.42
Consistent site use × campaign attention	–		–		0.23 (0.06)***	0.47
Constant	1.04 (0.13)***		0.97 (0.13)***		1.56 (0.23)***	
R^2 (%)	26.6		29.0		32.2	
ΔR^2	–		2.4%*		3.1%***	
N	341		341		341	

All data from NSF-sponsored survey

† $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

consistent sites, we find that these individuals use major news organizations' web sites and ideologically consonant sites with comparable frequency ($M = 3.6$ for both source types). Furthermore, two out of three (67.3%) people use sources that include at least some discrepant information, such as mainstream news outlets, more often than they use narrower, more ideologically consistent sites. Even more strikingly, 16.3% use exclusively discrepant sites (e.g., partisan blogs representing the opposing ideology) *more often* than they use exclusively consistent sites.

A regression model confirms the relationship between the frequencies of consistent site use and discrepant site use under conditions of multivariate control (see Table 5). The coefficient is positive and highly significant, though it is only modest in size. For each unit increase in consistent site use frequency, there is a quarter unit increase in discrepant site use frequency. Hence, although people exhibit a confirmation bias, there is no evidence of a tradeoff between consonant and dissonant sources of information.

We also examine the influence of strong ideological commitment in this context. Although this attribute is associated with increased likelihood that an individual will use attitude-consistent sites, and thus it indirectly promotes attitude-discrepant site use, such individuals are expected to find discrepant information more objectionable. As a consequence, we anticipate that the increase in discrepant site use associated with consistent site use will be smaller among members of this group. This is exactly what we find. To test the prediction, we add an interaction between strong ideological identification and consistent site use in the second stage of the

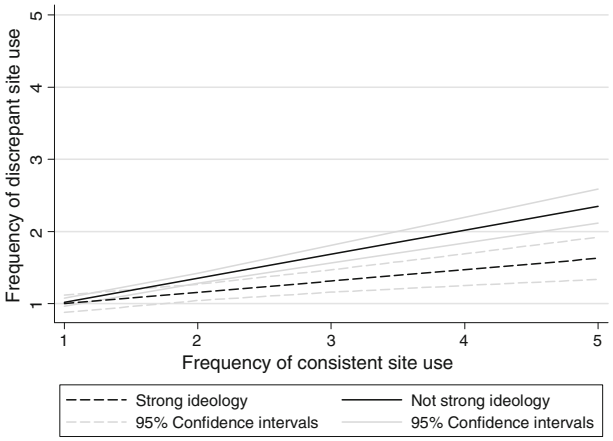

Fig. 1 Predicted frequency of ideologically discrepant news site use by frequency of ideologically consistent news site use, classified by strength of ideology identification. *Note*: All other variable held constant at their mean

regression model predicting discrepant site use frequency (see Table 5, stage 2).[9] The addition of the interaction term produces a significant increase in the explanatory power of the model, and the coefficient on the term is significant and negative. This does not, however, mean that individuals holding a strong ideology are avoiding discrepant information. As Fig. 1 illustrates, it reflects the fact that these individuals' use of discrepant sites increases less quickly as a function of consistent site use relative to individuals whose ideological commitment is weaker.

Finally, we consider our prediction that attitude-consistent site use should produce a larger increase in discrepant site use among individuals who are highly political attentive than among those who are less engaged. The data are consistent with this assertion. Adding a second interaction to the regression model described above (see Table 5, stage 3), we see that individuals with above-average political interest (who followed news about the election "very closely") exhibit a significantly larger increase in discrepant site use for each unit increase in consistent site use than those who are less attentive. The relationship between use of the two types of sites is still positive among those who are less engaged, though its magnitude is smaller. In other words, even individuals who pay only modest

[9] In studies of polarization, partisanship is sometimes considered a cleaner measure of political predispositions. In this study, however, ideology proved more effective. Strength of partisanship was not a significant predictor of attitude-discrepant site use on its own, or in interaction with attitude-consistent site use. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the survey asked about "conservative" and "liberal" news sites, not party-affiliated sites. Or perhaps it reflects the fact that strong ideology is a more direct measure of attitude extremity than partisanship. After all, ideology is only one of a variety of factors contributing to party affiliation (albeit an increasingly important one, see Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Finally, it may be that, compared to partisanship, strong ideology simply sets a higher bar: for more than 30 years, the proportion of citizens identifying themselves as strong ideologues has been much smaller than the number who identify as strong partisans (see Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Whatever the cause, we have opted to focus on ideology in these analyses.

attention to politics exhibit a propensity to engage with counter-attitudinal information.

Adding the second interaction also reveals a previously hidden aspect of the influence of ideological strength, a minor exception to the pattern observed earlier. Strong ideologues *with below-average political attention* demonstrate no significant change in their use of ideologically discrepant sites in response to changes in their use of consistent sites. For everyone else—i.e., those who report weaker ideological commitment and/or greater political attention—consistent site use continues to be positively linked to discrepant site use.

Discussion

Deliberative theorists and communication scholars have lamented the potential for the contemporary mass media landscape to create a citizenry composed of isolated, polarized individuals. A turn towards defensive avoidance online, the argument proceeds, allows information seekers to insulate themselves within homogenous information networks with little or no exposure to diverse viewpoints. This study, however, provides evidence that these concerns may be exaggerated, at least with regards to the behaviors of information seekers on the Internet. Based on our empirical results, we are confident that individuals who seek ideologically consistent news sites are not systematically avoiding other news sites.

National RDD survey data collected between 2004 and 2008 offer no evidence of a turn toward defensive avoidance. Use of ideologically oriented sites had a consistently positive influence on use of mainstream news sites in 2004, 2006, and 2008. Furthermore, use of sites that are explicitly attitude-consistent, whether in terms of ideology in the case of news outlets or of party in the case of candidate campaign sites, promotes use of explicitly attitude-discrepant sites. And all these relationships persist after controlling for political interest, which suggests that the correlation between use of pro-attitudinal outlets and other more diverse sources is not purely an expression of attentiveness. To the extent that this pattern of behavior does reflect general political interest—we recognize that the measures of this construct are imperfect—it still reinforces our broader argument. The observation that politically interested individuals consume more news regardless of the position espoused is incompatible with the assertion that citizens, especially those who are most engaged, are more likely than ever to screen out other opinions.

Finally, the evidence suggests that individuals are not engaged in mere token exposure to ideologically discrepant sites. Analyses of frequency data collected in 2008 reveal that the more often individuals use consonant sites, the more often they use discrepant sites, although the relationship is slightly smaller among those who are most ideologically committed and those who are least politically interested. The only individuals for whom the relationship between pro- and counter-attitudinal site use was not significantly greater than zero were those who identified as strong ideologues but who paid less-than-average attention to the campaign. Although this is a troubling pattern, these individuals only constituted around 3% of the sample.

These results are consistent with other evidence that seeking out attitude-consistent information is not equivalent to avoiding attitude-discrepant information (e.g., Frey 1986; Garrett 2009b), and they have implications for the nature of attitude formation, reinforcement, and change in the contemporary information environment. The first lesson we take away from these results is that confirmation bias continues to be a stronger form of selective exposure than defensive avoidance, despite changes in the news industry. Attitude has an undeniable influence on which sources of political information people choose to use, but those individuals who are interested enough to seek reinforcing evidence are also somewhat more inclined to examine other points of view as well.

The tendency of a significant minority of Americans to seek out sources that are largely consistent with their prior worldviews (e.g., likeminded political blogs) suggests that political news media are more likely than ever to serve a reinforcing function, enabling individuals to accumulate evidence that their beliefs are correct and to gain access to others with whom they agree. But this is not the same as political balkanization. A substantial number of individuals who seek out reinforcing information also look for information representing the other side of the political spectrum, both from the somewhat less biased mainstream media and from explicitly discrepant partisan sites. This is a modestly encouraging finding, as it suggests that those who rely on the most partisan media do so in a way that exposes them to competing perspectives. As we noted at the start of this paper, these individuals may well be motivated by the potential benefits of understanding arguments advanced by the political opposition in order to defend against them. Yet in this strategy lies the possibility of change. Individuals who are confident in their positions may be more willing to engage counter-attitudinal information, but they are still susceptible to attitude change as a consequence of this exposure (Albarracín and Mitchell 2004). This is not to say that every liberal who visits *Free Republic* or every conservative reading the *Daily Kos* will be persuaded. Obviously this is not the case. However, it does suggest that it is inaccurate to claim that the new media environment spells the end of substantive attitude change (see Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

The data used here are limited, most notably in their reliance on self-reported media usage, which is susceptible to bias. Prior (2009) has carefully documented the ways in which individuals misreport their media consumption, and has shown that these errors are systematically related to attributes of interest to scholars of political communication, such as education and political interest. These errors pose a challenge to this project (and the field at large) because they raise important questions about the validity of survey data. However, we note that Prior is careful not to dismiss self-reports out of hand; rather, he notes their limitations so that scholars can be mindful of them moving forward. There is no evidence to date that individuals systematically misrepresent their media consumption according to ideology, over reporting their use of sites with one political orientation while underreporting sites with another. It is possible: American citizens may feel normative pressure to claim that their media consumption is balanced, leading them to over-report their use of ideologically discrepant sites. One might counter, however, that by cuing respondents to think about their media consumption in ideological terms (i.e., asking about their use of "conservative" or "liberal" outlets), these survey items could prime negative

cognitions toward cross-cutting sources, depressing usage estimates and exaggerating defensive avoidance. Consider, for instance, how many people publicly condemn viewing partisan outlets with which they disagree. Nevertheless, more scholarship examining media exposure using longitudinal behavioral data would be an invaluable complement to this work.

Despite questions about the trustworthiness of media use self-reports, recent empirical work utilizing experimental and behavioral data appears consistent with the finding reported here. For instance, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010a) have analyzed web usage by a panel of more than a million Americans, finding that individuals' exposure to outlets that are visited by those who share their ideology is comparable to their exposure to sites favored by those holding an opposing ideology. These authors conclude that, "exposure across ideological lines is common even for individuals with strongly-held political ideologies" (p. 16). Thus, although survey data are limited, they can complement other scholarship in this area.

Many open questions remain. Future scholarship should examine the motivations for exposure to other perspectives, the specific form this exposure takes, and its attitudinal consequences. The benefits of using a heterogeneous mix of political information sources may be undermined if individuals seek attitude-discrepant sources primarily as a means of attitude reinforcement. If Democrats only view a Republican candidate's website in order to confirm prior negative attitudes, then the opportunities for learning and deliberation are lessened. More nuanced measures of exposure would also help us to understand such behavior. Are individuals' cherry-picking among the content of counter-attitudinal sources, attending only to the most easily dismissed claims or, alternatively, to those they find most palatable? And to what extend can these widespread practices produce substantive shifts in attitude?

The future of ideologically motivated selective exposure is inexorably linked to the evolving political news landscape. It is, however, not accurate to characterize these changes as precipitating an *entirely* homogeneous information environment. The Internet is associated with exposure to highly partisan political information, but this exposure does not come at the expense of contact with other viewpoints. Thus, for a politically interested segment of the population, using online news means having greater access to information supporting their position, continued exposure to information that is less supportive (via mainstream outlets), and, at least for some, a unique opportunity to learn what the other side is thinking. These are important changes, but this is not simply a story of balkanization.

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