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Two sides to every story

Causes and consequences of selective exposure to balanced political information

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

Scholars, political observers, and media pundits have worried that citizens prefer mostly pro-attitudinal information about politics and public affairs (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2008), which in turn may influence the public to make uninformed decisions (Kull, Ramsay & Lewis, 2003), develop extreme political opinions (e.g., Stroud, 2010), and be less tolerant towards opposing perspectives (e.g., Sunstein, 2009). The majority of the selective exposure scholarship has focused on studying the selection and effects of one-sided political content (i.e., pro- or counter-attitudinal), and has paid little attention to balanced content, even though it is available in the media environment (e.g., Prior, 2013) and consumed by citizens (e.g., Metzger et al., 2015).

The findings of this dissertation contribute significantly to the selective exposure literature by identifying the factors driving balanced exposure, in addition to its consequences for information processing and attitude polarization. In a nut-shell, this dissertation shows that balanced exposure matters in several ways, namely, 1) diverse groups of citizens prefer balanced political messages that contrast both pro- and counter-attitudinal perspectives; 2) balanced messages play a crucial role in determining how citizens with different motivations interpret political information; and 3) the availability, selection and processing of balanced information is not a sufficient antidote to correct political polarization. This chapter summarizes the findings of this dissertation, draws broad conclusions about the role of balanced information in shaping selective exposure and its cognitive and attitudinal outcomes, and finally, addresses limitations and suggestions for future research.

Summary of findings

Most of the extant scholarship on the causes and consequences of selective exposure has studied exposure to pro- or counter-attitudinal information. This dissertation explored a different approach and examines the factors that explain balanced information exposure, in addition to studying its consequences for information processing and attitude polarization. The experiment in chapter 2 examined whether selection of balanced, pro- and counter-attitudinal information depends on whether an individual is an issue public member, in addition to whether a message presents numerical or narrative evidence. The findings showed that individuals who care and have strong opinions about climate change and health care reform, as well as those who are less personally invested, preferred balanced messages over those that contain only pro- or counter-attitudinal information. Additional findings showed that the type of evidence for a message claim also influences the selection of balanced content. We learn that issue publics preferred balanced information that used numbers and statistics to support claims, compared to balanced information with personal stories.

The experiment in chapter 3 studied the psychological underpinnings of balanced selection on issues such as climate change and refugees. These results further showed that individuals with different motivations also select balanced content. Specifically, those motivated to reinforce desired opinions and who hold strong and certain opinions were equally likely to select pro-attitudinal and balanced messages. Moreover, balanced selection was the preferred information choice for people motivated to reach accurate conclusions, regardless of the strength and certainty of their issue attitudes.

The experiment in chapter 4 studied the impact of balanced exposure on information processing and attitude polarization. The findings showed that both defensive and accuracy motivated individuals processed balanced messages about climate change and refugees in a more unbiased fashion, compared to one-sided messages. Finally, individuals with different motivations polarized in response to pro-attitudinal content, but not if exposed to balanced content.

All these findings together extend our understanding of selective exposure and its cognitive and attitudinal effects. I discuss each conclusion in the next sections.

1. The prevalence of selective exposure is overestimated

Some research has suggested that individuals only expose themselves to pro-attitudinal information in the media (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2008), while other scholars have argued that most people prefer pro-attitudinal messages but also attend to counter-attitudinal ones (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015; Stroud, 2011). In line with several studies, the first conclusion of this dissertation is that selective exposure is not a prevalent phenomenon among citizens (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman et al., 2014; Garret, 2013; Prior, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Most individuals do not want messages that only contain pro-attitudinal information, but instead, they prefer balanced messages that present arguments confirming their opinions, alongside arguments that run counter to their priors.

2. Most citizens prefer balanced political content over one-sided content

Related to this first conclusion, this dissertation extends prior research by showing that it is not only a handful of people who prefer balanced information diets on contested socio-political issues. Rather, exposure to balanced media content is the preferred choice for different groups of citizens. I argued in the introduction chapter that differences in information selection patterns reported in the extant literature depended on psychological characteristics that varied across individuals (e.g., Arceneaux & Johnson,

2013; Hart et.al, 2009). It is likely that different individuals make different choices of pro- and counter-attitudinal information when they are exposed to one-sided messages. But this dissertation shows that important drivers of self-selection (i.e., individual motivations and attributes of issue attitudes) do not matter much when people are given the choice of balanced information.

More specifically, results supported my expectations in chapter 2 that issue publics would prefer balanced messages as they provide useful information to acquire an in-depth understanding about issues they care about. Also as expected, accuracy motivated individuals in chapter 3 chose mostly balanced information as exposure to this content is ideal to reach an objective and accurate conclusion about a certain issue. Surprisingly, I also observed a substantial selection of balanced information among individuals that are not personally invested in certain political issues – as is the case of non-issue publics. The fact that both issue and non-issue publics are drawn towards balanced content suggests that having strong opinions or caring personally about an issue, are not requisites for citizens to seek diverse perspectives on politics and public affairs.

Also surprisingly, I expected in chapter 3 that individuals motivated by a defensive goal and with strong opinions would prefer pro-attitudinal information to defend their prior opinions (see Hart et al., 2009), and might not be interested in counter-attitudinal information that could threaten their desired conclusions. But, these individuals are equally drawn towards pro-attitudinal and balanced exposure. The fact that both accuracy and defensive motivated individuals select balanced content suggests that individuals with different motivations may choose the same content but for different aspirations. Those motivated by accuracy seek balanced content to reach correct conclusions, whereas defensive motivated people find balanced information useful to learn what the “the enemy” is thinking and how to better argue their positions (see Valentino et al., 2009).

3. The type of evidence for a message claim also influences information selection

Although this dissertation studied mostly individual factors that drive balanced exposure, another conclusion is that the type of evidence for a message claim also shapes the type of political information that different citizens seek. In chapter 2, I present novel evidence showing that issue publics and average citizens prefer political messages which contain numerical over narrative evidence. Also I show that the preferred form of political information for issue publics is that which uses numbers and statistics to argue two sides of a story. The fact that evidence type influences information selection on political issues

is relevant for media producers. Although the effects found in my experiment are small, my findings suggests that both individuals that aspire to become issue specialists, as well as average citizens, want political media content that is backed up by reliable and credible evidence.

4. Balanced exposure reduces the influence of motivated reasoning on information processing

In addition to the fact that different individuals select balanced media content, a fourth conclusion is that exposure to such content plays a crucial role in shaping how people process political information. Chapter 4 teaches us that individual motivations matter less than the type of information read. Specifically, my findings support prior evidence that balanced exposure encourages more unbiased processing, relative to one-sided messages (e.g., Metzger et al., 2015). But I extend this evidence by showing that, whether individuals want to reinforce their opinions or reach accurate conclusions, they interpret balanced content in a similar manner.

Specifically, I show that defensive motivated citizens interpret one-sided content in biased terms (see also, e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, we learn that balanced exposure reduces the extent to which these citizens accept pro-attitudinal arguments uncritically and refute counter-attitudinal ones. A plausible explanation is that a contrast of pro- and counter-attitudinal arguments side-by-side triggers a need among those defensive motivated to appear objective, which limits their capacity to interpret information in a biased fashion.

I also show that accuracy motivated citizens are less critical towards counter-attitudinal arguments in one-sided messages – as shown in previous research (Druckman, 2012). Chapter 4 extends this finding by showing these individuals also treat counter-attitudinal information in an objective manner when this information is presented in a balanced message. Furthermore, they are less likely to bolster pro-attitudinal arguments in balanced messages, compared to in messages that contain only pro-attitudinal information.

These findings alter our understanding of motivated reasoning in the context of political information processing. Motivated reasoning theory posits that individual motivations influence the cognitive strategies people use to process information (Kunda, 1990). However, this theory also argues that reasoning goals are desired end states, and the extent to which individuals can achieve these outcomes is constricted by their information environment (see Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Extending this argument to the context of political information processing, it is likely that motivation dominates the reasoning of

one-sided political information, but motivated reasoning is trumped to a certain extent if individuals are exposed to a balanced information environment.

5. Balanced exposure encourages unbiased thinking but does not reduce political polarization

Balanced messages are available in the media environment (e.g., Prior, 2013), and this dissertation has shown that different individuals select these messages and interpret them in an unbiased manner. However, the availability, selection and unbiased processing of balanced political information is not enough to promote moderate political views on contested socio-political issues. The findings from Chapter 4 refute the hope by some scholars that exposure to balanced (e.g., Matthes & Valenzuela, 2012) or counter-attitudinal information (Garret et al., 2014) can depolarize political opinions. On the bright side, my findings reinforce prior research showing that exposure to balanced political content reduces the risk that people's attitudes become more extreme (e.g., Levendusky, 2013). However, if citizens are already polarized across partisan divides, balanced exposure might not moderate individual political views, or help bring different social groups closer to each other.

Limitations and directions for future research

To what extent do the aforementioned conclusions accurately reflect what is happening in the real world? Additionally, are these conclusions generalizable to other samples and to other countries aside from the U.S. context? This section exposes some limitations in my dissertation and offers suggestions for future research.

As a first limitation, the experimental designs in chapters 2 and 3 did not fully reproduce the selection environments that people have at their daily disposal. Not only can individuals in the real world choose from a substantial and diverse number of media sources and political issues, but they can also tune out from political news altogether by preferring entertainment content (see Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). Although it is not feasible for any experiment on selective exposure to account for the plethora of choices available in the media environment, future experimental research can study whether balanced exposure varies for individuals with different entertainment and political issue preferences. Additionally, developing studies that use web-tracking technology can address a number of shortcomings of experimental research. For example, they can observe selection behavior of balanced content as it occurs in real world information environments. Second, they can study the influence of the homogeneity level of media audiences and of online user-generated features (i.e., user comments and social plugins) on balanced information selection (see Dvir-Gvirsman, 2016).

A second limitation involves two issues about the types of balanced messages tested in this dissertation. One issue is that there are different ways in which political content can be balanced, but I used only one in my stimulus material. The balanced messages I developed had two characteristics. They presented pro- and counter-attitudinal arguments side-by-side, and they also were neutral – both sets of arguments were presented in an even-handed manner. However, another way in which content can be balanced is by presenting two sides of a story without treating both perspectives in a neutral manner. This second type of balanced content may be more common in American media reporting, in which major news outlets can be categorized as being liberal or conservative (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2014). These outlets may report two sides of an issue, but depending on their partisan leaning, their reporting may favor one side more than the other. A second issue with the balanced stimuli used here is that they did not contain any partisanship cues that are common features in American news stories (i.e., mentions of specific political parties or logos of some partisan media). Future research can account for both issues, and test whether the findings reported here would be different with different types of balanced news stories, and with balanced stories accompanied by source cues.

A third limitation is that the results of the dissertation could be partially due characteristics of Mechanical Turk samples, and therefore, cannot be generalized to other populations. First, the *MTurk* samples recruited here were more educated than the general U.S. population. Second, *MTurkers* are disproportionately liberal (see Berinsky et al., 2012), and prior evidence has shown they avoid less counter-attitudinal content than conservatives (Garret & Stroud, 2009). Third, *MTurk* participants tend to exhibit a strong social desirability bias (Behrend, Sharek, Meade & Wiebe, 2011). These characteristics of *MTurk* participants could explain several of my findings. For example, why issue and non-issue publics preferred balanced messages in chapter 2, and both defensive and accuracy motivated participants sought these messages in chapter 3. Social desirability could explain in chapter 3 why control participants appeared to be motivated by an accuracy goal. Finally, these characteristics of *MTurkers* could explain why participants in chapter 4 were unbiased in response to balanced content, and why I found no evidence to support the notion that biased processing predicts attitude polarization. In sum, perhaps experiments that rely on representative sampling methods would arrive to different results, compared to those reported in this dissertation.

Despite this shortcoming, the findings here could accurately reflect how my population of interest – those likely to seek online news about contested political issues – select and respond to balanced media messages. Moreover, this limitation should not dissuade researchers in political communication from recruiting *MTurk* samples. After all, compared

with other convenience samples, *MTurk* samples are more representative of the general population, more geographically diverse, and more attentive to experimental tasks (Berinsky et al., 2012; Hauser & Schwarz, 2015; Paolacci et al., 2010). Also, compared to nationally representative samples, the same results on identical studies in political communication have been found with *MTurk* samples (Mullinix et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the research questions examined throughout this dissertation have not been studied in the extant literature with *MTurk* samples. Therefore, I do not have sufficient information to know whether the findings here can be generalized to other populations. To address this issue, future research should replicate these findings with other convenience and representative samples.

As a fourth limitation, this dissertation studied the drivers and effects of balanced information exposure in a U.S. context. But, it is uncertain whether the findings can be generalized to other Western democracies. Although this question must be answered empirically with replication studies, I speculate that the findings reported here could be similar in some European contexts. This dissertation showed that different groups of Americans preferred balanced content, which can be somewhat unexpected in a country that suffers from mass polarization (e.g., George, 2016; Jacobson, 2006), and has a political climate and media environment that facilitate selective exposure (Van Aelst, 2017). It is reasonable to expect that citizens in less polarized societies are also attracted to balanced political information, and process it in an unbiased fashion. Although the available evidence is scarce, some research has shown that Europeans are exposed to moderate views in the media environment (e.g., Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015), and select balanced information in experimental settings (Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017).

Taking all these shortcomings together, future research should examine whether the findings of this dissertation provide an accurate reflection of what is happening in the real world. I show that most citizens select balanced political content and they react to it in a more open-minded fashion, compared to one-sided information. However, what we learn in this dissertation is limited to controlled information environments with limited content choices, and to certain convenience samples within a single country. The fact is that media exposure in the real world occurs in a fragmented and personalized news landscape that offers citizens an unprecedented opportunity to consume information that matches their ideological predispositions, and on the contrary, may offer less incentives to attend balanced political content. This raises the question of whether citizens in such a media landscape would exhibit a similar preference for balanced information exposure as observed in this dissertation. To explore this question, future research agendas should combine experimental methods with behavioral-tracking, content analysis and survey

approaches, and study selective exposure to balanced information and its effects among diverse populations and across different information environments.

Implications

Despite shortcomings, this dissertation has important implications for political communication scholars, journalists and citizens. First, when it comes to information selection in the media, most citizens prefer balanced information about politics and public affairs. In addition, some citizens seek balanced content that is backed up by factual and truthful evidence. This in itself is a good reminder for media institutions and journalists advocating the notion that political media coverage should be balanced, objective and fair.

Second, this dissertation raises normative implications about the role of the media environment in shaping how citizens interpret contested political issues. Even though the media landscape offers unprecedented opportunities for exposure to pro-attitudinal information – via echo chambers, filter bubbles and partisan news sources – we know that some citizens seek both pro and counter-attitudinal content for different reasons. But, even if citizens consume counter-attitudinal messages, we cannot expect them to become more open-minded about contested issues because their motivations can color how they interpret political information. However, this dissertation suggests that the media environment can encourage more unbiased thinking by offering balanced and neutral reporting. If journalists cover political issues in a balanced manner, different citizens would attend these messages, which in turn could encourage them to interpret contested issues more open-mindedly.

As a third implication, this dissertation did not find evidence to support the aspiration that exposure to balanced information can reduce political polarization. However, balanced exposure could benefit democratic well-being in other ways that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. For example, it is plausible that exposure to balanced media information can protect democracies in several ways from the dangerous epidemic of *alternative facts* and *fake news*, which has become a pressing concern for some political elites, journalists and civil society actors. For one, if media consumers prefer political media coverage that is balanced and uses credible evidence to back up claims, journalists may be encouraged to defend standards that meet core principles of journalism, such as truth, fairness and impartiality. Moreover, exposure to a balanced political information could counter the spread of falsehoods among media audiences. Finally, the availability and consumption of balanced information could protect the public from elites that rely on misinformation to advocate political agendas.

In conclusion, although a fragmented and personalized media environment can facilitate selective exposure on pressing but divisive political issues, this dissertation shows that most citizens seek balanced media messages and react to these in an open-minded fashion. Even though we cannot hope that coming in contact with balanced information is a solution to correct attitude polarization, the availability and exposure to such an information environment may benefit democracy in other ways. To explore these possibilities, future scholarship on selective exposure should shift its traditional focus on studying mostly one-sided political messages, and instead, extend our understanding of the causes and consequences of balanced information exposure.