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### Following the news: Patterns of online and offline news consumption

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## **Chapter 5**

Challenging selective exposure:

Do people expose themselves only to online content  
that fits their interests and preferences?



## **Challenging selective exposure:**

# **Do people expose themselves only to online content that fits their interests and preferences?**

### **Introduction**

Since the advent of the Internet, a wide range of different online news outlets has been available for free. Never before, even the most specialized outlets have been as accessible as they are now. The increasing possibilities to find news exactly on topics one is interested in first have been praised as a liberation (e.g., Negroponte, 1995). But it did not take long before others started to warn about the consequences of the ensuing fragmented media use (see, e.g., Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). Specifically, people might avoid politics completely.

A second fear concerns people who are interested in political news, but might turn only to sources that fit their pre-existing opinions (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Pariser, 2011; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). Left-leaning people could consume left-wing news, right-leaning people right-wing news, and thus fuel a process of increasing polarization (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011). As a consequence, 'issue publics', 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' might be emerging. An explanation for this behavior is provided by the concept of selective exposure, originating from Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance: Whenever possible, people expose themselves to standpoints they agree with and avoid anything that might be in conflict with what they think.

Yet, although there is evidence that news site visitors often pursue their very own interests – which may be in sports or celebrities – and are not that much exposed to political news content any more (Tewksbury, 2003), pessimists' positions that fear an extensive fragmentation of the audience along lines of thematic interests and political viewpoints might exaggerate matters: A number of studies suggest more complex relationships (e.g., Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). Yes, there are hints that people seem to select information

according to their political predispositions (Frey, 1986; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). But newer studies have nuanced this and provided evidence that conflicting sources are not eschewed completely (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2011; Kobayashi & Ikeda, 2009; Stroud, 2008; Webster, 2011).

For example, those who expose themselves to partisan websites indeed are mainly supporters of the respective candidate, party, or policy. But partisans *also* use an above-average level of general-interest news (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Garrett et al., 2011; Zaller, 1992). And virtually all users of specialized low-reach online outlets in the so-called ‘long tail’ use mainstream online and TV outlets as well (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). In other words, audiences of very small outlets are usually found *within* the audiences of larger ones and use specialized outlets on top of their mainstream media diet.

Most studies in the tradition of selective exposure and fragmentation implicitly or explicitly explain a user’s choice for a specific online outlet by the *content* that fits the users expectations. But of course, one could also think of a number of other reasons for selecting a specific source – such as its reputation, presentation style or user-friendliness, for instance. Surprisingly, only a few studies that claimed to find selective exposure investigated empirically whether the content is really there that should guide people’s media choices. In other words, are the outlets that are used by liberals really liberal? And do outlets that are used by people who are more interested in celebrities than in institutional politics really cover more celebrities than other channels do?

This study investigates if the alleged link between content differences and user interests exists. It first investigates in how far the content of selected online news sources really differs and then investigates whether it actually fits the audiences’ interests and preferences. For the purpose of our study, we analyze the Austrian online news landscape. Of course, selection processes also occur offline. But given the far greater offer of online news sources, those processes should become more visible online. For example, the availability of Austrian offline news outlets – such as local print dailies, local radio or freesheets – depends heavily on the region of residence (Chapter 4), while all online news outlets are equally accessible to all citizens regardless of their place of residence. Similarly, as all outlets that we study can be used free of charge, affordability can be eliminated as a reason to choose for a specific outlet – at least for those who have an Internet connection.

## **Content fragmentation and audience fragmentation**

Increasing political polarization because partisans can now much more easily find partisan channels (e.g., Slater, 2007) requires two conditions:

(1) There are outlets that really differ from others in topics covered and political viewpoints supported.

(2) People clearly prefer the outlets that cater more than others to their own thematic interests and political viewpoints.

As to the evidence for the first condition, online news outlets seem to depend heavily on copy from press agencies (Paterson, 2005). For instance, in French online media, coverage centers around a small number of topics that receive huge attention across all outlets (Smyrnaio, Marty, & Rebillard, 2010), and also the rank order of topics covered in different types of American online outlets is similar (Lee, 2007). But one cannot assume too quickly that *all* online news sites are just different outlets for the same stories: Although the topics may be similar, the share of articles written exclusively for the website of online media seems to vary greatly in Austria between outlets and over time (Brantner, Lojka, & Wippersberg, 2009).

The vast majority of research on selective exposure and fragmentation has been conducted in the United States (for an extensive overview, see Stroud, 2011). However, North and Central European media systems differ from the United States in terms of the political structure and how extensively media are partisan (Bakker & Paterson, 2011; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Perlmutter, 2008; Tenschler, 2008; Van der Meer, Lubbe, Van Elsas, Elff, & Van der Brug, 2012). Thus, the extent to which people expose themselves to divergent viewpoints differs per country, which is caused by more or less party-aligned sources (Goldman & Mutz, 2011).

Our study sets out to test selective exposure to news in a non-US context, in Austria. Austria is commonly placed into Hallin and Mancini's typology of politics-journalism relationships into the category of Northern and Central European (democratic-corporatist) media systems. But Austrian journalism seems to be characterized more strongly by political parallelism and therefore is said to be more partisan than in other countries of this group (Karmasin, Kraus, Kaltenbrunner, & Bichler, 2011; Seethaler & Melischek, 2006). This should make selective exposure more likely to occur (Goldman & Mutz, 2011).

## Hypotheses

This study aims to systematically test the argument that selective exposure takes place because of (1) the thematic and ideological diversity of online news that (2) is then used by those whose interests they fit the most. So, our first set of hypotheses addresses content specialization and the second set in how far people match their content preferences with their patterns of exposure. If both sets receive support, the fragmentation hypothesis as a whole – stating that people use media based on their content characteristics (e.g., Tewksbury, 2005) – is supported as well. So, first, we examine if all requirements for such a selective behavior indeed are met. Then, we test if people indeed avoid outlets the way the fragmentation hypothesis suggests, i.e. based on content differences.

*H1a: Online news outlets differ significantly in terms of the topics they cover.*

*H1b: Online news outlets differ significantly in terms of political bias of their coverage.*

If these hypotheses receive support, preconditions for a fragmented audience are met – there is content to choose from. Thus, after having established thematic and political differences between outlets, we can test the following hypotheses:

*H2a: People prefer those outlets that serve their thematic interests.*

*H2b: People prefer those outlets that share their political viewpoints.*

## Method

### Content analysis

We test our hypotheses with nine news outlets of different types (Table 5-1). As our study aims to investigate the general mechanism of audience selectivity, they mainly serve as examples on which we test the hypotheses. To ensure that the hypothesized differences are possible, we aimed to maximize the diversity of these examples beforehand and included both journalistic and not primarily journalistic sources, conservative and progressive media: A portal hosted by an email-provider, an automated news aggregator, the website of regional, tabloid popular national, conservative and progressive national newspapers, the website of a weekly magazine and the website of a public service broadcaster. All of these outlets are widely used sources for Austrians to keep up with news and current affairs (Chapter 4) and therefore belong to those sources that potentially can shape public discourse.

From these outlets, we retrieved all news items published in the week from 9 to 15 November 2011 via the website’s RSS-feeds – a week in which no unusual news events took place. From these feeds, we generated a database of URLs, article titles and teasers. Subsequently, all articles were downloaded automatically. Coding was performed by four trained coders based on a random sample of  $n=250$  articles per outlet.

Table 5-1

Overview of news outlets included in the sample

Medium	Type	Articles published
gmx.at	Portal hosted my email-provider	734
news.google.at	Automated news aggregator	164
kleine.at	Website of regional newspaper	520
krone.at	Website of tabloid newspaper	384
kurier.at	Website of popular national daily	125
news.at	Website of weekly magazine	64
orf.at	Website of public service broadcaster	644
presse.at	Website of conservative national newspaper	546
standard.at	Website of progressive national newspaper	426
Total N		3,607

The *main topic* (intercoder reliability test with  $n=75$ : Krippendorff’s  $\alpha=.95$ ) of the article was coded with 37 categories. If a *second topic* was present, it was coded in a separate variable as well ( $\alpha=.74$ ). The second topic was defined as the topic to which less space was devoted in the article. These fine-grained topics measures were later aggregated to broader categories to match them with the categories available in the survey dataset (see below). For an overview of the categories and the sub-categories that form the merged categories, see the appendix.

*Political bias, i.e. positivity/negativity towards the major Austrian political parties*, was coded as coder estimates on a five-point scale from extremely negative to extremely positive for each political party. The coders were in-

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<sup>8</sup> We used the websites’ main RSS feed and not special-interest feeds that some websites additionally offer, like feeds focused on economic issues for example. By this approach, we grab the front page items that users of the outlets are most likely to be exposed to.



structed to base their coding on the question whether the party would perceive the coverage as good for them. It was not necessary that the author made an explicit judgment – rather, clearly negative topics like scandals and clearly positive topics like overwhelming victories in elections were coded as such. To maximize reliability, a number of examples were provided. Therefore, and although one could fear that the conceptualization might lead to arbitrary coder decisions (see also Goldman & Mutz, 2011), the measurement delivered alphas between .93 and 1.0.

The descriptive statistics of all variables are presented in the appendix.

## **Survey**

The audience data draws on a secondary analysis of data collected for the study presented in Chapter 4. This web-based survey draws on a large sample representative for the Austrian population aged 14 years and older with Internet access. From a panel with about 201.000 members, research bureau Marketagent drew a sample. Quota were used to match age and place of residence with the Austrian population. The survey was in the field in November 2010 and a response rate of 17% was achieved, resulting in a sample size of 2,954 after removal of invalid cases. While the response rate is lower than desired, we feel confident to assume that it will not affect our results greatly, as we do not aim to provide an accurate estimate about, for instance, total levels of exposure in the population, but want to test the occurrence of a media effect among media users; i.e., internal validity was more important than external validity. For the purpose of this paper, we further removed 125 respondents under the age of 18 years, as adolescents' media behavior was not the focus of our study. Therefore, our analyses are based on a sample of  $N=2,829$ .

*Exposure* to news outlets was measured as the number of days in a typical week. For this paper, we use the variables measuring exposure to those online outlets that were included in the content analysis. Everyone using an outlet at least two days per week was regarded as a regular user.

*Interest* in 16 different news topics was measured on a seven-point scale. For analytic purposes and to match with the content analysis data, categories were grouped into politics, economics, social affairs and policy, crime, sports, culture, and human interest news – each variable ranging from 1 to 7.

*Political orientation* was measured on an 11-point scale ranging from left to right.

The descriptive statistics and question wordings of all variables are presented in the appendix.

## **Results**

### **Content fragmentation**

The content of the news outlets in our sample differs in terms of topics covered, especially with regard to the coverage of politics (Table 5-2). A general pattern can be observed: websites of quality papers seem to cover hard topics like politics and economy extensively. However, this does not necessarily mean that other outlets focus on soft(er) topics only: Especially the automated news content Google News even does not include any sports or soft news topics in the main news feed.

The outlet with the last amount of politics is gmx.at. Krone.at also has a remarkably low share of political content, significantly less than standard.at and presse.at, which have 1/2 and 2/3 more political articles, respectively. Similarly, there are differences in the coverage of economics (standard.at and presse.at offer much coverage, krone.at, kleine.at, and gmx.at do not), societal issues (more often in standard.at and kurier.at), crime (prevalent in krone.at and news.at), human interest news (rather neglected on google.at, krone.at, standard.at; but covered substantially by gmx.at and news.at), sports (not covered at all by the GoogleNews frontpage, but extensively by kleine.at and gmx.at).

H1a thus is supported: As the analysis of the topics covered revealed, outlets seem to have different profiles, especially with regard to the share of articles devoted to hard politics as opposed to human interest news. While it is of course to a certain extent arbitrary when one can speak of content differences large enough to support the hypothesis, in our case, differences are not only significant, but so large (with, for example, the percentage of articles on politics ranging between 12 and 50%) that we feel safe to say: With regard to news topics, the content requirement for fragmented use is met.

Table 5-2

## Topics of content

Topic	gmx.at	google.at	kleine.at	kron.e.at	kurier.at	news.at	orf.at	presse.at	stand-ard.at	average	ANOVA F(8, 1816) <sup>9</sup>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	F
	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	p
Politics	12 <sub>c</sub> (2)	40 <sub>ab</sub> (4)	32 <sub>b</sub> (3)	30 <sub>b</sub> (3)	50 <sub>a</sub> (4)	35 <sub>ab</sub> (7)	35 <sub>ab</sub> (3)	28 <sub>b</sub> (3)	44 <sub>a</sub> (3)	33 (1)	11.45 <.001
Eco-nomics	18 <sub>a</sub> (2)	30 <sub>abc</sub> (4)	18 <sub>a</sub> (2)	16 <sub>a</sub> (2)	30 <sub>abc</sub> (4)	17 <sub>ab</sub> (5)	27 <sub>ab</sub> (3)	40 <sub>c</sub> (3)	31 <sub>bc</sub> (3)	26 (1)	8.23 <.001
Social	17 <sub>a</sub> (2)	22 <sub>a</sub> (3)	14 <sub>a</sub> (2)	24 <sub>a</sub> (3)	39 <sub>c</sub> (4)	7 <sub>a</sub> (4)	21 <sub>a</sub> (3)	18 <sub>a</sub> (2)	36 <sub>bc</sub> (3)	22 (1)	9.08 <.001
Crime	15 <sub>ab</sub> (2)	23 <sub>abc</sub> (3)	12 <sub>ad</sub> (2)	30 <sub>b</sub> (3)	22 <sub>abc</sub> (4)	31 <sub>bc</sub> (6)	19 <sub>a</sub> (2)	18 <sub>a</sub> (2)	7 <sub>d</sub> (2)	18 (1)	7.92 <.001
Sport	28 <sub>c</sub> (3)	1 <sub>a</sub> (1)	32 <sub>c</sub> (3)	17 <sub>b</sub> (2)	3 <sub>a</sub> (2)	6 <sub>ab</sub> (3)	8 <sub>ab</sub> (2)	6 <sub>a</sub> (1)	6 <sub>a</sub> (1)	14 (1)	26.01 <.001
Culture	10 <sub>b</sub> (2)	0 <sub>a</sub> (0)	8 <sub>b</sub> (2)	1 <sub>a</sub> (1)	1 <sub>a</sub> (1)	0 <sub>a</sub> (0)	10 <sub>b</sub> (2)	6 <sub>ab</sub> (2)	5 <sub>ab</sub> (1)	6 (1)	6.40 <.001
Human interest	36 <sub>c</sub> (3)	11 <sub>a</sub> (3)	19 <sub>ab</sub> (2)	14 <sub>a</sub> (2)	14 <sub>ab</sub> (3)	33 <sub>bc</sub> (6)	23 <sub>ab</sub> (3)	25 <sub>b</sub> (3)	13 <sub>a</sub> (2)	21 (1)	9.40 <.001

*Note.* Percentages of articles on different topics per outlet. Columns can add up to more than 100% as both mentioning as main and secondary topic qualified for inclusion in the table. At the same time, the category 'disasters' is not shown in the table, as interest in disasters was not gauged in the survey. Different subscripts indicate significant differences according to Bonferroni post-hoc tests,  $p < .05$ .

However, for none of the outlets, we were able to detect a statistically significant political bias towards a specific party. As Table 5-4 shows, political parties are treated roughly the same, but above all were not mentioned too often. One-way ANOVAs did not show a significant relationship between source and support for a party. Only in the case of the right-wing populist party

<sup>9</sup> We are aware that strictly speaking, an ANOVA requires a continuous dependent variable. However, as for example Lunney (1970) showed, this type of analysis is in many cases also acceptable for dichotomous outcome variables. For the sake of presentation clarity, we therefore chose to report ANOVAs and post-hoc tests. Additional  $\chi^2$ -tests were run to double-check the interpretation; they yielded similar results.

FPÖ, the model was significant.  $F(8, 59) = 2.32, p < .05$ . But in spite of the overall significance, post-hoc Bonferroni tests did not find any significant differences between specific outlets. This means that no meaningful interpretation can be given to the analysis: For none of the outlets, we can say that it was more positive or negative towards the FPÖ than another one.

H1b is not supported: There is no evidence for a bias towards political parties in our sample.

Table 5-3

Positivity/Negativity of coverage of political parties

		SPÖ	ÖVP	FPÖ	Grüne
news.google.at	M (SE)	-.10 (.17)	-.06 (.17)	.00 (.21)	.25 (.18)
	n	29	32	14	12
kleine.at	M (SE)	-.33 (.20)	-.62 (.17)	-.15 (.10)	.30 (.15)
	n	21	32	13	10
krone.at	M (SE)	.21 (.21)	-.16 (.18)	.00 (.41)	.25 (.25)
	n	19	19	4	8
kurier.at	M (SE)	-.27 (.13)	-.24 (.15)	-.57 (.30)	-.11 (.20)
	n	22	21	7	9
news.at	M (SE)	-.33 (.88)	-.88 (.35)	2.00 (.)	1.50 (.50)
	n	3	8	1	2
orf.at	M (SE)	.13 (.38)	-.15 (.22)	.33 (.33)	.75 (.48)
	n	15	20	6	4
presse.at	M (SE)	-.47 (.27)	-.62 (.20)	.00 (.00)	.29 (.18)
	n	17	16	4	7
standard.at	M (SE)	-.07 (.16)	-.36 (.16)	-.07 (.23)	.50 (.22)
	n	43	42	15	20
gmx.at	M (SE)	-.33 (.42)	-.60 (.40)	.75 (.25)	.80 (.49)
	n	6	10	4	5
Total	M (SE)	-.14 (.08)	-.35 (.07)	.00 (.09)	.38 (.09)
	n	175	200	68	77

Note. Negativity/positivity of coverage of political parties. Scale ranging from -2 to +2. The party BZÖ was excluded due to too small cell sizes.

### Audience exposure

We identified outlets the content of which is rather specialized regarding the share of topics covered. Now we examine whether audiences are fragmented along the lines of their thematic interests. Our hypotheses would predict that as,

for instance, gmx.at publishes few political and much human interest content, and sports is not part of GoogleNews main news feed, people with these interests would rather not use these outlets. The other way round, we expect someone who is highly interested in politics to turn to standard.at or presse.at.<sup>10</sup>

But the evidence of people with different interests using different sources is ambivalent. Sometimes this is the case (Table 5-4): Those who are interested in politics, economics and societal issues more often read standard.at than gmx.at – and indeed the readers of the latter are significantly less interested in these topics<sup>11</sup>. Who is interested in crime is quite often a reader of krone.at. The other way round, those who are interested in human interest news are less likely to read presse.at. In fact, this is in line with what these sources offer – and therefore, as suggested by H2a, indicates fragmentation along the lines of the content.

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<sup>10</sup> One might object that some highbrow outlets are only accessible for specific groups and that directly linking user interests to media choices is too simplistic. To put it bluntly, someone with a high interest in politics, but a bad education simply may have difficulties to use some of the sources. We tested this by a logistic regression of interest in politics, education and the interaction term on usage of standard.at and presse.at. Although the effect of interest in politics on the choice to use these outlets was slightly reduced by inserting the education variable, the interaction term remained clearly insignificant. This means that the relationship between interest in politics and the decision to use a specific outlet is not moderated by education, or, in other words, a lower education does not hinder those who are interested in politics to use one of these sources.

<sup>11</sup> In the analysis of content differences presented in Table 5-2, the outlets were exclusive, i.e. each article could be attributed to one and only one outlet. This is not the case with the analysis of users presented here: The users of one outlet can use another outlet as well. This means we cannot conduct the same ANOVA as in Table 5-2. However, we still can test if the thematic preferences between the users of different outlets differ significantly with a simple formula: Assuming normal distributions, two means differ significantly ( $p < .05$ ) if the difference between the means is larger than 1.96 times the square root of the sum of the squares of the standard errors. If we insert the values from Table 5-4 in this formula, we see that 4.44 [which is the mean interest of the readers of standard.at] minus 3.95 [the mean interest of the readers of gmx.at] equals 0.49, which is larger than  $1.96 \cdot \sqrt{(.06^2 [\text{square SE standard.at}] + .07^2 [\text{square SE gmx.at}])} = 0.18$ .

However, the differences concerning thematic interests between the users of different outlets should not be overemphasized: Overall, they are very limited. For those interested in politics, for example, the majority of outlets seem to be a fairly equal choice. For most other topics, differences are even smaller, as Table 5-4 shows. Major clear-cut differences cannot be detected. H2a is only partially supported.

In some cases, political orientation influences media choices: There is some evidence that right-wing readers chose other news outlets than left-wing readers. This is interesting, because at least in our analysis, the outlets do not differ in terms of the political bias. While the most left-wing person (i.e., someone who answered 1 on the political orientation scale ranging from left to right) has a chance of 14% of reading *krone.at*, the most right-wing person (someone answering 11) has a chance of 24% – age, gender, and education being equal ( $b = .07, SE = .02, p < .00$ ). At the same time, the most left-wing person has a chance of 19% of reading *standard.at*, compared to only 3% for the most right-wing person ( $b = -.19, SE = .03, p < .001$ ). Still, as political orientation follows a normal distribution (see also the descriptives in the appendix), most people are situated somewhere in the middle of the scale, which puts these probabilities to chose a certain outlet into perspective.

Differences also seem to be limited to using these two newspaper sites: Exposure to other newspaper sites, the public broadcast website *orf.at*, or the online-only outlets *gmx.at* and *google.at* is not related to political orientation. As we did not find any differences in the bias of the only two outlets whose readers are significantly more right- respectively left-wing than average, we have no evidence for fragmentation along the lines of political content. H2b is not supported.

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<sup>12</sup> Percentages were calculated with Montecarlo simulations using the Clarify-package in combination with Stata's logit-command (King, Tomz, & Jason Wittenberg, 2000). This procedure estimates the probability of a binary outcome (in this case, reading *krone.at*) for different values of one independent variable (in this case, political orientation being 1 (most left) vs. 11 (most right), while all other independent variables are set to their mean.

Table 5-4

Thematic interest of the users of different news sites

Topic	gmx.at	google.at	kleine.at	kronen.at	kurier.at	news.at	orf.at	presse.at	standard.at
	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)
Politics	3.95 (.06)	4.33 (.07)	4.20 (.08)	4.11 (.06)	4.54 (.08)	4.35 (.08)	4.19 (.05)	4.62 (.10)	4.44 (.07)
Eco- nomics	4.08 (.06)	4.43 (.08)	4.44 (.08)	4.29 (.06)	4.84 (.08)	4.53 (.08)	4.45 (.05)	4.85 (.10)	4.57 (.08)
Social	4.50 (.05)	4.84 (.06)	4.76 (.07)	4.62 (.05)	5.05 (.07)	4.85 (.07)	4.76 (.04)	5.05 (.09)	4.99 (.06)
Crime	4.70 (.07)	4.96 (.06)	4.87 (.09)	5.06 (.06)	4.86 (.10)	4.97 (.10)	4.67 (.05)	4.75 (.12)	4.49 (.09)
Sport	3.83 (.09)	4.18 (.11)	4.30 (.12)	4.15 (.09)	4.16 (.12)	4.56 (.12)	4.23 (.07)	4.01 (.16)	3.75 (.12)
Culture	3.74 (.07)	3.95 (.09)	3.85 (.11)	3.76 (.07)	4.15 (.10)	3.95 (.10)	3.88 (.06)	4.23 (.13)	4.26 (.10)
Human int.	3.65 (.08)	3.55 (.10)	3.40 (.11)	3.64 (.08)	3.20 (.11)	3.80 (.12)	3.37 (.06)	3.09 (.14)	3.02 (.10)
N=	530	324	273	568	261	264	807	155	292

### Conclusions and Discussion

This study aimed to test the notion that an increasingly diverse, easily accessible news offer would be used to be selective in terms of interests and political viewpoints. Although content differences turned out to exist, our results cast doubt on the assumed consequences this is said to have: People often do not seem to use the content differences as a yardstick for their decisions on which outlets they use. Only in relatively few cases, people matched their content preferences with the content that was actually published. This study therefore offers evidence that even if content differences exist, and even if people have access to a source that fits their personal interests best, they often do not do so. We argue that this shows that people actually appreciate a diversity of topics in news outlets and are not as keen on reading primarily about their pet subjects as the fragmentation thesis assumes. News per definition has to be diverse and

an overview (Schoenbach, 2007). Selectivity may take place as far as context, background, or explanation are concerned instead. Of course, based on our data, we cannot tell if they also use some small long-tail outlets that match their preferences exactly – but in any case, this does not keep them from using mainstream-oriented news outlets as well in a rather unselective way.

Building on arguments by Goldman and Mutz (2011), Webster (2011), and Schoenbach (2007), we argue that notwithstanding their personal preferences, people tend to use the media that are used by a lot of other people as well – making media use ultimately not fragmented too much. Thus, the function of news persists as a source offering potentially surprising topics and facts to the majority of citizens and in doing so acts as glue for public discourse.

We furthermore could find no substantive evidence that people select a medium that reflects their political orientation. Yes, it can be shown that readers of *standard.at* are more left-wing than readers of *presse.at*. But this does not seem to be based on the actual content of these outlets. After all, the content does not seem to differ much on this dimension. Of course, our analysis also cannot capture fine-grained differences in political coverage. An extensive frame analysis might find some differences between outlets in how political parties are framed, or how coverage of specific policies might suffer from a partisan bias.

The question remains why political orientation as we measured it influences media choice in these two cases. One explanation might be that the media choices are guided by the reputation or image of a medium rather than by content characteristics at a specific time period. Probably, some differences that we found rather reflect the image of the online outlets, which in turn is based on their offline counterparts' image – and not the actual content: The print edition of *Der Standard* is commonly regarded as more left wing and *Kronen Zeitung* as more right wing. Or maybe only in our time period, content did not differ. During election times or political campaigns, “critical events,” in other words, outlets might be more favorable towards left- or right-wing parties. It also should be noted that political attitudes are more complex than the simple left-right scale we used can capture. Thus, measuring political attitudes in a more detailed way on both the audience and the content side might yield different results.

But if it is not content differences, what else could explain media choices and potentially stimulate selectivity? Answering these questions will get us a bit closer to an understanding of how audience selectivity works and what it en-



tails. But at least for now, our results suggest that audience selectivity seems to be a smaller problem than often assumed – and people seem to be more curious to at least hear or read about different perspectives than pessimistic positions assume. Rather than actively avoiding sources as soon as they offer some content that does not fit their pre-existing beliefs and interests, people seem not to bother much being confronted with them. Instead of assigning a high priority to the avoidance of cognitive dissonance, their media choices therefore might be guided by factors like the ease of use, layout, reputation, the choices of friends, colleagues, and familiar, the regional context, or even by just the fact that a source offers a more diverse content than others.

Our study of course can only serve as one small step towards a better understanding of audience selectivity. But it has become clear that reducing exposure to news media to a single explanation falls short of the complexity of the problem – and this is why an argument stating that increasing number of media choices does inevitably corrupts democracy does not seem to hold. Of course, this all also depends on how dramatic differences have to be before we call the media landscape fragmented. But in any case, alarmism seems to be inadequate.