

# Media deregulation and the online news market

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*The preservation of a diverse news market has been one of the longstanding motivations behind media ownership limitations. Without the checks and balances provided by competition, owner interests may unduly influence the news. The vibrant online news community, which includes thousands of news sites representing a wide range of political viewpoints, has recently been cited as one of the reasons that government regulation of the traditional news market is becoming less important. With so many viewpoints online, why would we worry about news diversity?*

*This argument raises two important sets of empirical questions. First, what is the relationship between people's use of online and traditional news media? Are new sources replacing traditional media institutions, making the older organizations less relevant, or is something else going on? To address this question I examine news media usage patterns using data collected in a national random-digit-dial telephone survey (n=1,510). This analysis will show that the major news organizations continue to define the news landscape for most Americans, online and off. Though a significant minority uses alternative news sources online, these sources compliment, rather than replace, the mainstream media.*

*Second, what will happen if reduced competition among major news outlets leads them to be increasingly aligned with the interests of a few organizations, producing a more partisan news market? To answer this question, I will focus on understanding people's preferences regarding political information. Research suggests that when seeking information in general, people desire viewpoint reinforcement but are not averse to challenging information. If this holds for news use, then people will expose themselves to partisan sources that align with their own political views, but they will not shy away from sources that offer a more balanced set of views. To assess people's preferences, I use data collected in the survey described above to examine how people are using the control afforded by online news to shape their exposure to political information. I supplement this analysis with data from a web-administered experiment conducted with a national sample of partisan news service readers (n=994). The*

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*experiment looks specifically at the types of information people examine when presented with a diverse pool of political news. The results confirm that in their search for political news people do seek viewpoint reinforcement, but comparatively few act to limit their exposure to other perspectives. This implies that a news market that prominently includes balanced news sources will help to encourage awareness of a full spectrum of political viewpoints, while a more partisan news market will lead to a significant drop in that individuals' exposure to political viewpoints other than their own, even if a wide range of viewpoints are available.*

*Taken together, these results suggest that ownership regulation continues to play an important role. The finding regarding news preferences underscores the importance of a news market that contains balanced news outlets, while the data on contemporary uses of the Internet suggest that we cannot yet look to online news to ensure that such a market exists.*

## **Introduction**

During the biennial media ownership regulation review in June 2003, FCC chairman Michael Powell suggested that ownership regulations, which were created to encourage and protect viewpoints diversity in the media, were no longer necessary (Powell 2003). The contemporary news market, he said, provides an “abundance of diverse sources available to citizens to rely on for their news consumption” (7), rendering ownership regulations irrelevant. He pointed to the Internet as evidence of this abundance, noting, for example, that Google’s news service “brings information from 4,500 news sources to one's finger tips from around the world, all with the touch of a button” (5). The idea that we no longer need to worry about preserving public exposure to a diverse range of viewpoints because there are so many sources available to the public was a recurring theme in Powell’s statements.

The claim articulated here by Powell raises two important sets of empirical questions. *First*, what is the relationship between people’s use of alternative news outlets

available online and their use of traditional media organizations news products? Are online sources directly challenging traditional media institutions by providing comparable alternatives? Or are these online alternatives being used in some other fashion?

It is possible for online news sources to help preserve news consumers' diversity of exposure even if, as I argue, alternative online news outlets do not pose a challenge the dominant media organizations. Whether this is the case or not depends on news consumer practices. If news consumers respond to biased partisan news media by seeking exposure to other viewpoints, the online news market provides ample opportunity to find such perspectives. If, on the other hand, consumers do not object to news partisanship—as long as the views expressed reflect their own—then online news service do little to ensure exposure diversity. Thus, the *second* research question is, what are individuals' preferences regarding news diversity. Will they actively seek out a mix of viewpoints, or will they be satisfied using viewpoint-reinforcing news sources?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, I review several relevant research areas. I start by briefly describing arguments and data linking media deregulation with news bias. Next, I review evidence suggesting that the major news organizations will continue to dominate the news landscape. Then I summarize research on individuals' preferences regarding political information exposure in general. This scholarship suggests that people are motivated to seek out viewpoint reinforcement, but that viewpoint-challenging information does not significantly influence their behavior. In the following section, I outline the methods used in the project for collecting the data. Moving to the findings, I describe two sets of results. First, I present survey data

demonstrating that, as anticipated, people's use of alternative online news sources does not compare with their use of products of the mainstream media, online or off. Second, I use survey and experimental data to argue that people's use of the news media is *not* strongly influenced by the presences of other viewpoints. They exhibit neither a strong aversion to, nor a strong desire for, exposure to other perspectives. News consumers driving motivation is to identify a source of information that offers reinforcement for their own views, irrelevant of the other opinions the source includes. Thus, consumers operating in a news market in which dominate news organizations engage in biased reporting practices will be less aware of viewpoints that differ from their own. I conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of these results for our understanding of reducing media ownership limits.

## **Deregulation, consolidation, and bias**

Before turning our attention to the research questions, it is necessary to make one assumption explicit. This work is premised on the expectation that relaxing ownership regulations will precipitate changes in current news media ownership structures, and that this will have consequences for the types of news coverage that will be available to consumers.

Historical evidence suggests that when ownership limitations are reduced, media organizations increase the number of outlets within their control (Cooper *et al.* 2003). Deregulation of the radio industry in 1996 provides a recent example. The deregulation of that market was followed by a rapid succession of merges and acquisitions, producing a highly consolidated market (McChesney 2003; Fairchild 1999).

In itself, consolidation is not the topic of concern here. The question is whether media ownership consolidation will precipitate media politicization. The answer is a tentative yes. Several scholars have suggested mechanisms by which media outlet consolidation makes partisan bias more likely. First, scholars have noted that media owners are self-interested actors with political intentions (Balan *et al.* 2005; Bennett 2003; Leanza and Feld 2003). To the extent that media owners are interested using their properties to influence public opinion, mergers will often (though not always) reduce ideological diversity.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2005) suggest that a second mechanism linking consolidation with biased coverage is the importance of reputation in the news market paired with news consumers' tendency to perceive viewpoint-consistent sources as more reliable. As a result, news organizations have an incentive to present politically biased accounts because such coverage can have positive reputation effects. The benefits of biased coverage must, however, be weighed against reputation risks: if factual errors are brought to light, significant reputation harm may result. In such an environment, competition provides a check against biased reporting. The fewer competitors the less the likelihood that factual errors will be identified. Thus, in a consolidated media market, news outlets have less incentive to keep bias in check than in a diverse market (33).

The starting assumption of this paper is that deregulation will be followed by media ownership consolidation, and that consolidation will ultimately increase the tendency of news organizations to produce biased coverage. Given this assumption, the implications of deregulation for individuals' exposure to political information are heavily influenced by which news sources they choose to use.

### **Online news use**

Many scholars have remarked on the potential significance of the Internet as a source of news <Neuman;Negroponte;Sunstein /pt "e.g., ">. Usage trends also speak to the importance of this new medium, as online news use has grown considerably over the past decade. For example, in 2000 Pew estimated that about 30 million Americans were getting news online on a typical day. By the year 2004 that number had more than doubled to 64 million, or about 34% of adult Americans.

There are some early indications that users may be substituting online news for more traditional news media. For example, though television is one of the most popular sources of campaign information for Internet users and non-users alike, the number of individuals who rank it among the most important sources of information drops as Internet access speeds increase. Similarly, broadband users, the group most likely to get their news online, are also least likely to use older media (Horrigan *et al.* 2004).

Most research, however, has suggested that people are not using online sources as a replacement for traditional news products. To the contrary, using Web-based news sources is positively correlated with using newspapers (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000), and most scholars believe that web news will continue as a supplement to, not a substitute for, older news media for most audiences <Davis 1999><Pew 1999><Robinson>.

Though Internet news is an increasingly important part of the news landscape, there is little reason to expect that news outlets will draw significant numbers of news consumers away from traditional media organizations. Thus, the competitive pressures introduced by the online news media are very limited.

### ***News exposure selectivity***

Even if online news outlets do not compete directly for audience share, they could provide a corrective to biased news coverage. If individuals actively desire exposure to a range of viewpoints, then the alternative media online could effectively supplement deficiencies of the mainstream news media. News consumers could turn to Internet sources in order to familiarize themselves with otherwise-absent viewpoints. Thus, a secondary news media composed of small outlets with limited audiences could help preserve diversity in the news market.

There is, however, very little evidence that people will exert effort to encounter viewpoints that differ from their own. The influence of viewpoint on individuals' information exposure decisions has a long research history. Ideologically-motivated selective exposure, the tendency to craft an information environment that reflects one's political beliefs, has been a topic of debate for several decades (Sears and Freedman 1967; Frey 1986). On one side, scholars argue that individuals seek exposure to arguments supporting their position, while avoiding those with which they disagree (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944), which leads them to prefer information *sources* that are more supportive of their opinions over less supportive alternatives (Mutz and Martin 2001; Lowin 1967). For example, recent empirical investigations indicate that readers of conservative political books rarely read liberal books (Krebs 2004), and that popular political blogs tend to interlink with other blogs expressing similar viewpoints (Hindman *et al.* 2003).

Critics of the theory of ideological selective exposure question the existence of an underlying psychological tendency to seek support and avoid challenge. According to

these scholars, the data do not support the claim that citizens are disproportionately aware of viewpoint-supporting information (Sears and Freedman 1967; Chaffee *et al.* 2001). Furthermore, they offer evidence that individual exposure choices are largely uninfluenced by ideology: when asked to choose among political information options, citizens do not systematically avoid challenge (DiMaggio and Sato 2003; Iyengar *et al.* 2003). The theory's detractors also argue that choices that do yield exposure to mostly viewpoint-reinforcing information are not necessarily motivated by viewpoint selectivity *per se*, but may instead be secondary consequences of decisions unrelated to ideology (Sears and Freedman 1967).

Both sets of predictions have important implications for individuals' use of the news. If people want to avoid viewpoint-challenging information, then the range of viewpoints available on the Internet may spell the death-knell of exposure diversity, irrelevant of the mainstream media. In this case, we would expect that people would eventually abandon the mainstream because the alternative media better reflect their preferences. On the other hand, if people are indifferent to viewpoint-challenging information, then a balanced mainstream news media is crucial. In this case, the character of the news landscape will profoundly shape individuals news exposure.

Neither side, however, has suggested that individuals will demonstrate a strong or consistent preference for exposure to a mix of viewpoints. If this is correct, then online news can do little to preserve exposure diversity in the face of a biased mainstream media.

## Methodology

The analyses presented here are based on two sources of data. First, to address the question regarding the relative use of the various news media, I use data collected through a national random-digit-dial telephone survey (n=1,510). The survey was sponsored by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and administered by Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) between June 14 and July 3 2004, shortly before the party conventions. The overall response rate was 31.2% (77% contact, 43% cooperation, and 94% completion).

I supplement this analysis with data from a web-administered experiment conducted with a national sample of partisan news service readers (n=994) that was conducted in early 2005. Subjects were recruited with the aid of two partisan online news organizations, one on the political left (AlterNet—A Project of the Independent Media Institute), the other on the right (WorldNet Daily). The experiment was automatically administered over the Internet using custom-build software that subjects interacted with via a web-interface. Among those who responded to the recruitment materials, the completion rate was 50%.

The experiment looked specifically at the types of information individuals examine when presented with political news. Participants were presented with a diverse collection of news items, they had a variety of cues to help them identify the ideological orientation of each item (a headline, source, and synopsis), and they had complete control over which items they used, in what order they looked at them, and how long they spent reading. Subjects use of these items and their self-reported attitudes toward the political

views expressed in them were logged by the software responsible for administering the experiment.

## **Mainstream sources dominate**

In order to identify sources of political information, interviewers asked all respondents to indicate which of several types of media they used, and asked Internet users about their use of online political news generally and several types of political web sites in particular.

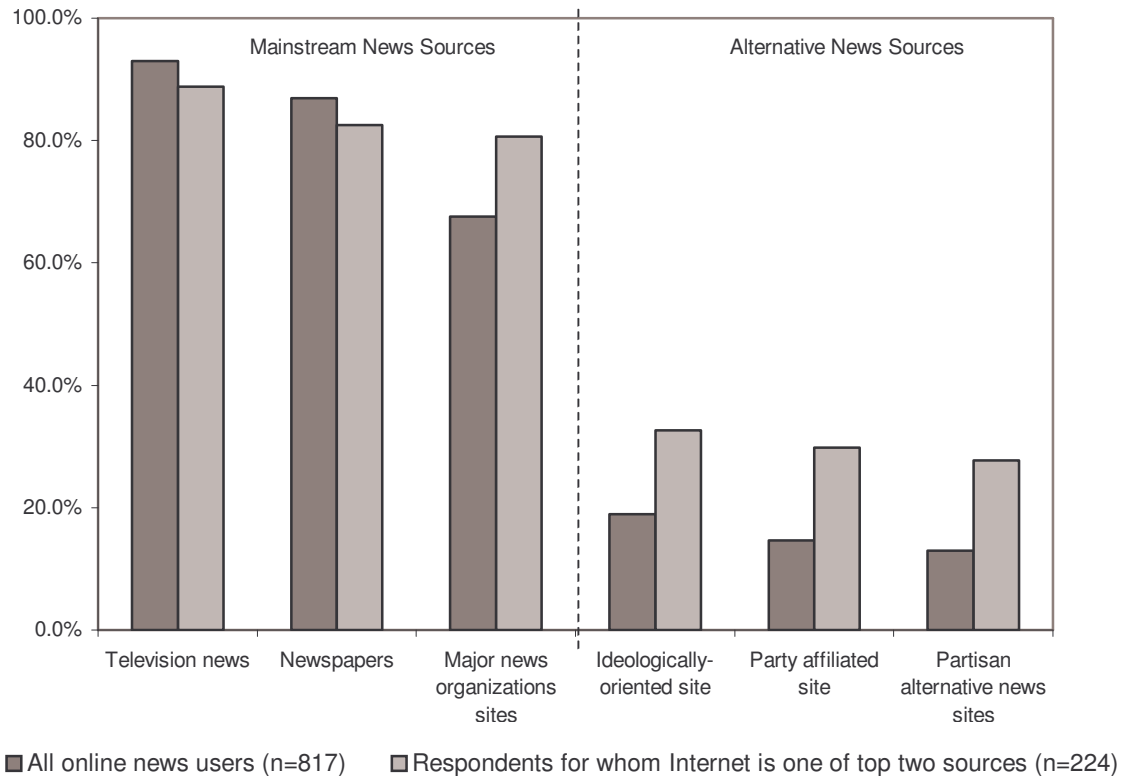
Though online news use appears to be growing at the expense of older news *media*, there is no evidence that people are abandoning mainstream news *products*. Among sources of online news, the sites of the major news organizations are by far the most popular (Table 1). Fully 81% of those who count the Internet as one of their top sources of campaign news indicate that they use these sites; only 28% report using the partisan alternatives available online. Including those who consider online news a less prominent source of information, the difference is even more pronounced: 68% get news from major news organizations online versus only 13% who use the partisan alternatives.

**Table 1. Percentage using each type of online news outlet for campaign information**

	All Respondents	Online news users	Online news a primary source
Unweighted base	1510	842	223
(n)	1510	817	214
Web site of major news organizations, such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com	40%	68%	81%
Web site of an international news site such as the BBC or al Jazeera	12	21	33
Web site of alternative news site like AlterNet.org or NewsMax.com	7	13	28
Web site of politically liberal group such as People for the American Way or MoveOn.org	7	12	25
Web site of a politically conservative group such as the American Enterprise Institute or the Christian Coalition	7	12	21
JohnKerry.com, the Democratic nominee's official site	4	6	25
GeorgeWBush.com, the president's official re-election site	3	5	24
RNC.com, the official site of the Republican National Committee	2	4	20
DNC.com, the official site of the Democratic National Committee	2	3	15

**Source:** Pew Internet & American Life Project survey 2004

Figure 1 presents this web-usage data visually, and shows how usage of online news compares to more traditional media. The figure includes mainstream sources, including television, newspapers, and major new organization web sites, and the more partisan online news media, including alternative news organizations' sites, political party-affiliated sites, and the ideologically-oriented sites of liberal or conservative-leaning organizations. The bars represent the percentage of respondents who indicated using the specified source at least occasionally.

**Figure 1. Comparing use of mainstream and alternative news outlets**

**Source:** Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, June 2004.

Results for two groups of individuals are shown. The first group includes those who answered in the affirmative when asked if they ever got political information online. The second group is defined by a more stringent requirement for inclusion; these individuals reported that the Internet was one of their top two sources of news. The usage trends are the same for the two groups, although, unsurprisingly, Internet-based news sources are more popular among members of the second group.

We can see from this figure that more online news users get their news from nonpartisan sources than from partisan alternatives available online. For example, about 93% of those who get news online watch television news and 87% read newspapers. In contrast, only 19% use ideologically-oriented sites, the most popular of the partisan

information sources. Though use of offline sources is lower among those who say the Internet is a primary news source, the shift online is not a shift away from the mainstream news products. Eighty-one percent of these individuals say that they get news online from the sites of the major news organizations, up from 68% among online news users, while only 33% of these respondents reported using the sites of partisan organizations.

Though comparatively small, the number of individuals using partisan sources is nontrivial. About one third of respondents for whom the Internet was a primary news source reported using each of the three sources about which we asked. The question, then, is whether individuals are substituting these more partisan outlets for the mainstream news media, or if the two types of sources are complementary. To assess this question, I examine the extent to which partisan news users also reported obtaining news from mainstream news media. These individuals have successfully identified a source of partisan political information, and could therefore more easily abandon use of the more balanced mainstream.

**Table 2. Use of mainstream news outlets by alternative news users**

Source used	(n)	Newspaper	Television	Web site of a major news organization	At least one mainstream source
Alternative news site	(109)	78% – 92%	78% – 92%	85% – 96%	97% – 100%
Ideologically-oriented site	(164)	80 – 91	85 – 94	78 – 90	96 – 100
Party-affiliated site	(128)	85 – 96	85 – 96	74 – 88	95 – 100

**Source:** Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, June 2004.

**Note:** 95% confidence interval shown.

The results are shown in Table 2. Proportions are reported using 95% confidence intervals instead of sample statistics in order to estimate the prevalence of use within the overall population of American adults. The data are consistent with the hypothesis that those who use partisan sources also use mainstream sources; this holds true in almost

every case. The vast majority of individuals who use online partisan news sources also use less partisan sources such as newspapers, television, or web sites of the major news organizations. Nearly every one of these individuals had used at least one of these three sources.

These results call into question the suggestion that alternative news media available online are a serious source of competition for the major news organizations in the contemporary news landscape. Though the popularity of online news is growing, the audience for online news is still relatively small. Furthermore, the web sites of the major news organizations web sites are used much more extensively than those of their smaller competitors.

### **Seeking reinforcement, not rejecting bias**

The survey also provides data that can be used to assess individuals' exposure preferences. Interviewers asked respondents about their familiarity with a series of arguments about the candidates in the 2004 presidential election, providing effective measures of the number of opinion-reinforcing and opinion-challenging arguments the respondents had encountered. The viewpoint-reinforcement score was a summative scale based on individuals' familiarity with the statements favoring their preferred candidate or criticizing the opponent, with respondents receiving one point for each argument they heard at least once in a while. The viewpoint-challenge score was computed using the other four items.

To the extent that people desire exposure to viewpoint-reinforcing information, use and familiarity with online news, which affords users more choice and more control over what information they encounter, should be associated with an increase in this type

of exposure. Similarly, if people wish to avoid contact with viewpoint-challenging information, then online news use should be inversely related to such exposure. On the other hand, if people do not exhibit an aversion to other perspectives, then we would anticipate no significant relationship. In order to test these relationships, I specified regression models predicting exposure to the various types of arguments

For each group of supporters (Bush and Kerry supporters were treated separately because the distribution of argument familiarity varied depending on which candidate a voter supported) there were two types of models, one predicting familiarity with viewpoint-supporting arguments, and the other predicting familiarity with viewpoint-challenging arguments.<sup>1</sup> Each of these four models (two supporter groups by two types of exposure) was constructed in two stages. First, I regressed exposure on several potentially influential variables that were unrelated to respondents' control over their information environment. Second, I added the Internet factors, which I expected to enhance information exposure control.

The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4. Notably, adding the Internet factors produced a statistically significant improvement in three of the four models, with the expanded models explaining up to 27% of the variation. Only Bush supporters' exposure to dissonant information was unaffected. As the positive significant coefficients indicate, online news use is broadly associated with increasing exposure to both types of information. Among Bush supporters, the number of years a user has been

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<sup>1</sup> Although OLS regression assumes that the dependent variable is continuous and unbounded, the exposure scores used here range from one to four. There are several reasons that linear regression is employed despite this. First, the residual diagnostics suggest that the relevant regression assumptions have been met. Second, though there is a cut off on the dependent variable, it is not right-censored data in the traditional sense. Had the scale been based on more items, individuals who did not receive the maximum score might also have scored higher. Finally, tobit analyses, which would be appropriate if the data were right-censored, yield comparable results; most importantly, the overall effect of Internet use was the same in the OLS and tobit models.

online is positively correlated with familiarity with viewpoint-reinforcing arguments. For Kerry supporters, the frequency of use is the significant predictor, and it is associated with an increasing familiarity with both viewpoint-reinforcing and viewpoint-challenging arguments.

In sum, this suggests that individuals are using technology-afforded control to increase their exposure to viewpoint-reinforcing information, but they do not consistently seek or avoid viewpoint-challenging information.

**Table 3. Influence of Internet use on exposure – Bush supporters**

	Bush supporters					
	Consonant Exposure Model			Dissonant Exposure Model		
	Coefficient (s.e.)		$\beta$	Coefficient (s.e.)		$\beta$
Decides quickly	-.037	(.046)	-.029	.027	(.054)	.019
Reads a lot	.087	(.046)	.071	-.015	(.054)	-.011
Information causes indecision	-.005	(.035)	-.005	.039	(.042)	.037
Seldom changes mind	.075	(.041)	.066	-.046	(.048)	-.036
Enjoys politics	.192***	(.043)	.177	.146**	(.051)	.120
Education	.056	(.050)	.043	.208***	(.059)	.143
Age	.014***	(.002)	.215	.011***	(.003)	.158
Sex	.135	(.075)	.063	.149	(.088)	.062
Hispanic	-.086	(.148)	-.021	-.110	(.173)	-.024
Black, not Hispanic	-.788**	(.235)	-.116	-.234	(.276)	-.031
Number of offline news sources used	.057	(.031)	.066	.081*	(.037)	.084
Following campaign closely	.311***	(.087)	.140	.536***	(.103)	.215
Strong candidate support	.178*	(.079)	.081	.067	(.093)	.027
Internet experience	<b>.032**</b>	(.010)	.133	.007	(.012)	.024
Frequency of online news use	.036	(.029)	.048	.038	(.034)	.045
Constant	.790**	(.284)		.719*	(.334)	
R <sup>2</sup>		.271			.202	
$\Delta R^2$ after adding Internet factors		<b>.017**</b>			.003	
		(F=7.523, df1=2, df2=631)			(F=1.023, df1=2, df2=631)	
(n)				(648)		

**Source:** Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, June 2004.  
\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

**Table 4. Influence of Internet use on exposure – Kerry supporters**

	Kerry supporters					
	Consonant Exposure Model			Dissonant Exposure Model		
	Coefficient (s.e.)		$\beta$	Coefficient (s.e.)		$\beta$
Decides quickly	.042	(.046)	.034	.115***	(.058)	.072
Reads a lot	.118*	(.050)	.094	.085*	(.063)	.053
Information causes indecision	.020	(.035)	.021	.058	(.045)	.048
Seldom changes mind	-.013	(.037)	-.014	-.070	(.047)	-.054
Enjoys politics	.051	(.042)	-.053	.215	(.053)	.170
Education	.149**	(.053)	.121	.141***	(.067)	.088
Age	.010***	(.002)	.163	.020*	(.003)	.258
Sex	.202*	(.079)	.096	.080***	(.101)	.029
Hispanic	.320**	(.117)	.107	.140	(.149)	.036
Black, not Hispanic	-.341**	(.104)	-.125	-.474	(.132)	-.134
Number of offline news sources used	.046	(.030)	.058	.043***	(.038)	.042
Following campaign closely	.311**	(.097)	.135	.335	(.123)	.112
Strong candidate support	.098	(.087)	.044	-.078**	(.110)	-.027
Internet experience	-.006	(.011)	-.027	-.013	(.013)	-.043
Frequency of online news use	<b>.094**</b>	(.032)	.124	<b>.117**</b>	(.040)	.117
Constant	1.251***	(.282)		-.048	(.358)	
R <sup>2</sup>		.213			.246	
$\Delta R^2$ after adding Internet factors		<b>.011*</b>			<b>.010*</b>	
		(F=4.477, df1=2, df2=615)			(F=4.287, df1=2, df2=615)	
(n)				(632)		

**Source:** Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, June 2004.  
\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

### ***Experimental results***

The experiment provided a second data source for evaluating individuals' selective exposure practices. The experiment provided two means of assessing individuals' interest in specific news items. First, subjects were asked to indicate which of five news items they were interested in reading. (Subjects made this decision prior to assessing the items' political content.) Second, the system automatically recorded how

much time a subject spent accessing each item (in seconds), measured from when a subject opened an item in a new browser window to when the window was closed.

The variable of primary theoretical interest was the perceived level of viewpoint-reinforcing and viewpoint-challenging information included in a news item. These perceptions were measured twice during the study: immediately following the initial selection decision (anticipated or prospective perception), and after viewing the full news item (experienced or retrospective perception). Subjects based their decision to select a news item on the *anticipated* information content, while both *anticipated and experienced* content could influence how long subjects spent looking at a news item

To assess the presence of viewpoint-reinforcing information, subjects were asked about the extent to which the news item (1) describes arguments supporting their position, and (2) provides evidence that other people agree with them based on the brief synopsis provided. Expectations regarding viewpoint-challenging information were measured in a similar fashion. Responses were summed to create reinforcement and challenge scores that fell between two and ten (Cronbach alpha of .88 and .87 respectively).

To assess which factors influence item selection I constructed a logistic regression model, clustering the data by subject ID to account for the fact that there were repeated non-independent observations (each subject could select up to five news items). Subjects expressed interest in about half (52%) of the 3635 news items presented (727 subjects each selecting up to five news items). Several types of predictors were represented in the model. First, it included subjects' perceptions of the political content so that I could evaluate their influence. The model also controlled for subjects' political ideology,

political and religious activity, their familiarity with the events reported in each news item and the personal relevance or salience of the events, as well as the issue selected, the stability of subjects' position on the issue, and subjects' prior exposure to the issue.

Finally, there were demographic controls for age, education, and gender. I had complete data for 2,833 news items for this analysis.

**Table 5. Factors influencing probability of item selection (logistic regression with clustering)**

	Coefficient	(s.e.)
<b>Expected reinforcement</b>	<b>0.142 ***</b>	(0.026)
<b>Expected challenge</b>	<b>-0.083 **</b>	(0.030)
<b>Conservative? (dummy) <sup>a</sup></b>	<b>-0.410 **</b>	(0.135)
Issue-related political activity	0.033	(0.038)
Religious activity	0.057	(0.060)
Issue = civil rights? (dummy) <sup>b</sup>	0.124	(0.124)
Issue = gay marriage? (dummy) <sup>b</sup>	0.286	(0.149)
Familiarity with events reported	0.065	(0.038)
<b>Salience</b>	<b>0.147 **</b>	(0.049)
<b>Prior exposure to news about this issue</b>	<b>0.255 *</b>	(0.110)
Stable issue position	-0.148	(0.108)
Male (dummy)	0.032	(0.109)
Age	-0.007	(0.004)
Education	-0.014	(0.046)
Constant	-1.098	(0.591)
Observations	2833	
Wald Chi-square	97.96 (p<0.001)	
Pseudo R-square	.0407	

\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001  
a. Includes weak and strong conservatives  
b. Reference category is social security reform

Table 5 presents the model coefficients, which correspond to the effect of each independent variable on the probability that a subject will select a news item. Several factors unrelated to the views expressed in an item exert a significant influence on selection. Conservative subjects were less likely to select a news item on average, while those who had been following the issue most closely and who had been most active in

issue-related politics were more likely to select it. It is also worth noting that individuals interested in the gay marriage issue were more likely to read a relevant story than those interested in other topics ( $p=0.05$ ). This may reflect the high media profile of this topic at the time of the study. News related to this topic made the headlines more often than the other topics during the time that the research was conducted. As a result, familiarity with these stories may have been perceived as important both in relation to the specific topic and to news surveillance more generally.

Controlling for these factors, the perception that a news item will contain political information significantly influences the likelihood that it will be selected. As described, perceptions of consonant and dissonant information were measured using a summative scale that ranged from two to ten points. The higher the score, the more supportive or challenging the subject considered the article to be. The analysis reveals that subjects were more likely to select items with higher reinforcement scores. For example, the probability that a typical non-conservative subject would select a news item with neutral support and challenge scores of six was 67%. If the item provided strong viewpoint reinforcement, with a score of ten, the probability increased to 78%. Challenge scores, on the other hand, were negatively correlated to selection probability. The less challenging information a subject detected in a news story, the more likely s/he was to express interest in reading it, but the effect was smaller. For example, if the challenge score *dropped* by four points, to a score of two, the probability only increased to 74%. These results suggest that the anticipated presence of viewpoint-reinforcing information is positively correlated with article selection, while viewpoint-challenging information is *negatively* correlated with selection, though this effect is much smaller.

To assess which factors influence news item read time I utilized linear regression, again employing clustering to account for the repeated measures contained within the dataset. Subjects read 1442 news items, about three-quarters (76%) of those they expressed interest in reading, and spent between 1 second and 76 minutes (4,554 seconds) reading individual news items.<sup>2</sup> The mean time reading each story was a little over two minutes (134 seconds), and the median was about a minute and a half (100 seconds). A total of 1,069 read times were included in the analysis, representing the behavior of 488 subjects who assessed all the news items presented. The coefficients shown in Table 6 correspond to the magnitude of the change in the dependent variable, the natural log of item read time.

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<sup>2</sup> The single highest outlier, with a read time of over 75 minutes, was excluded from this analysis. Excluding items with read times greater than 15 minutes (11 items) yields comparable results.

**Table 6. Factors influencing natural log of item read time (linear regression with clustering)**

	Coefficient	(s.e.)
Expected reinforcement	0.023	(0.020)
Expected challenge	0.020	(0.018)
<b>Experienced reinforcement</b>	<b>0.039 **</b>	(0.014)
<b>Experienced challenge</b>	<b>0.072 ***</b>	(0.014)
<b>Expected reinforcement X conservative</b>	<b>-0.065 *</b>	(0.026)
<b>Expected challenge X conservative</b>	<b>-0.080 **</b>	(0.027)
Experienced reinforcement X conservative	0.000	(0.021)
Experienced challenge X conservative	0.041	(0.025)
Conservative? (dummy)	0.573	(0.366)
Frequency of issue activity	0.016	(0.019)
Frequency of religious activity	-0.004	(0.029)
Issue = Civil right?	-0.103	(0.064)
<b>Issue = Gay marriage?</b>	<b>-0.195 *</b>	(0.078)
Seen news elsewhere?	-0.022	(0.020)
Saliency	0.017	(0.022)
<b>How much learned from news item?</b>	<b>0.047 *</b>	(0.022)
<b>Number of news items read prior</b>	<b>0.059 *</b>	(0.023)
<b>Total number of news items read</b>	<b>-0.109 ***</b>	(0.024)
Prior exposure to issue news	-0.071	(0.076)
<b>Stable issue position (dummy)</b>	<b>-0.137 **</b>	(0.052)
Male (dummy)	-0.096	(0.051)
<b>Age</b>	<b>0.004 *</b>	(0.002)
<b>Education</b>	<b>-0.062 **</b>	(0.022)
<b>Constant</b>	<b>4.302 ***</b>	(0.399)
Observations (subjects)	1,069 (488)	
F-statistic	F( 23, 487) = 6.86 (p<0.001)	
R-square	.1307	

\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

a. Includes weak and strong conservatives

b. Reference category is social security reform

As with the selection model, I included many of the same theoretically interesting variables, including subjects' perceptions of views expressed in a news items, their political ideology, their political and religious activity, and relevant interactions. The controls that were used in the model of selection were included as well. One key difference is that in this model, there were separate measures for anticipated perceptions of political content, based on the item synopses, and experience perceptions, which subjects provided after view the news items. These items were included separately

because they could not be reliably combined, and eliminating either of the assessments pairs significantly reduced the explanatory power of the model.

Many control factors were again found to be significant. Age and the perception that the subject had learned something from the news item were both correlated with greater read times. These findings are consistent with the tentative explanations regarding overall read time offered above. That older Americans spend more time on individual articles may reflect a difference in their approach to news reading. Similarly, the effect of learning on read time lines up well with the earlier finding that individuals who have read more, and who therefore have less to learn, spend less time. It also supports the interpretation that individuals who are politically active read for longer because they are more invested in retaining the information they encounter. The number of stories read prior to the current item was also associated with increased read time, though the overall number had a negative influence. That is, individuals who chose to read more stories spent less time on each, but the later they read the item, the more time they spent on it. Fatigue would seem to be a likely explanation for this phenomenon. Individuals whose attitudes regarding the issue had not changed in the past year tended to spend less time reading, as did men and those with more education. Finally, those interested in gay marriage tended to spend less time on each article they chose to read. The high media profile of this topic, noted above, would suggest that these subjects were generally more familiar with the relevant issues, and therefore required less effort to process the news.

For liberal and moderate subjects, political information was an unqualified incentive to read. The more viewpoint-reinforcing *or* viewpoint-challenging information

they encountered, the more time they spent reading on average. It is also interesting to note that among these individuals, the presence of challenging information had a larger influence than supporting information on read times. For a typical non-conservative, an increase in support from average (seven) to high (ten) was associated with a 13% increase in read time (from 108 seconds to 122 seconds); a similar increase in the amount of challenging information produced a 24% increase, almost twice as large (to 134 seconds).

These results are consistent with the prediction that the more viewpoint-supportive information an individual encountered, the longer s/he would spend reading it. Unlike the findings regarding item selection, which suggested that individuals exhibit an aversion to challenge, the read time analysis implies no tendency for avoidance. To the contrary, individuals are willing to engage with challenging information even if it requires additional time and attention.

Though the main effects of expected viewpoint reinforcement or viewpoint challenge were insignificant, there were significant interactions with these factors. Specifically, this relationship seems to be different for conservatives and non-conservatives. For conservative subjects, *expecting* viewpoint-relevant information of either type was *negatively* correlated with read time, which appears to partially counteract the *positive* correlation between *encountered* viewpoint-relevant information and read time. For example, a typical conservative who anticipated and experienced a story to have consonant and dissonant content scores of seven would spend about 92 seconds reading. If both *viewpoint-support* scores increased by three points while holding all other factors constant, the read time would stay the same. The positive correlation between viewpoint-challenging information and read time is not completely absent for

conservatives, but it is much smaller. A three-point increase in both *viewpoint-challenging* scores yields an estimated read time of about 108 seconds, a 17% increase. Though still an increase, this effect is not as large as it was for nonconservatives. On the whole, the more challenging information an article contains, the more conservative read times drop relative to that of nonconservatives.

Viewpoint-challenging information is sometimes an incentive to read, sometimes a disincentive, but is never a defining characteristic. The overarching point to take away from these analyses is that news consumers are motivated to seek out sources containing viewpoint-reinforcing information, but there is no evidence that they will engage in an effortful search to discover viewpoints that differ from their own.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In his remarks during the biannual review of media ownership regulation review, then-chairman Powell repeatedly suggested that Internet news had transformed the way Americans get their news, affording them exposure to an unprecedented range of “diverse and antagonistic voices”. Such an information environment, Powell argued, meant that we need no longer worry about the diversity of ideas represented in the news media.

Such a claim raises two important empirical questions. *First*, are online news outlets a viable alternative to the traditional news media, contributing to a competitive news market? The data show that though online sources are an important source of news for a large and growing number of individuals, major news organization continue to dominate the news landscape, online and off. Furthermore, when they these sources are used, they are used to supplement mainstream sources. Online outlets are not at this point a serious competitive threat to the mainstream players.

This brings us to the *second* question: What implications do a more consolidated, and less competitive, mainstream media have for people's exposure to political diversity? More pointedly, does a news market dominated by biased news sources make biased exposure more likely? Or will news consumers avail themselves on the wider universe of news in order to ensure that they encounter a range of viewpoints?

The results confirm that in their search for political news people are unlikely to reject biased news sources. In a news market offering both biased and unbiased news services, many people will choose the unbiased option. In the absence of unbiased mainstream news sources, however, most people will choose an outlet that consistently supports their own viewpoint over one that is a consistent source of challenge. Very few people are likely to seek other supplemental sources solely for the purpose of encountering other perspectives. The findings regarding news preferences underscore the importance of a news market that contains balanced news outlets, while the data on contemporary uses of Internet news suggest that we cannot yet look to online news to ensure that such a market exists.

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