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Media Participation in Selective Exposure

The Increase of Polarization

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BACKGROUND

Journalism is not the independent business it wishes to be. Its very existence depends on the events that occur in every other field – politics, international relations, economics, finances, travel, medical work. Journalists form connections with sources of different backgrounds, work, and status – relationships meant to be held to an ethics code. Journalists are meant to report and write by this code of ethics, some even live their personal lives by it; many news organizations do not allow their journalists to contribute to political campaigns according to Helen Aguirre Ferré in “Ethics Should Be Measured in Proper Context.” However, when it comes to political journalism, the lines seem to blur. Richard Kaplan in “The News About New Institutionalism: Journalism’s Ethic of Objectivity and Its Political Origins” says news organizations and journalists are embedded in “broader fields of news producers and also politics.” Operating within a larger institution, like politics, seems to challenge the American journalism ideal of objectivity and of operating independently. According to Kaplan, no matter how hard journalists try to be objective, the press is permanently entangled in broader political culture, and because they *report* on the public domain, they are *part* of the public domain. After the Progressive Era, objectivity, professional expertise, “factuality, independence, impartiality, and public service” became the goal (Kaplan). The Progressive Era changes encouraged “segmentation of society into specialized domains for technical decision making,” instead of a marriage between journalism and politics (Kaplan).

ARGUMENT

No matter how progressive this era claimed to be, journalism is still ingrained into the political sphere because partisan politics is polarizing, and mass media can capitalize off of polarization because conflict sells. Newspapers get involved in the conflict, comment on it,

become a part of it, and it follows that they become part of politics. This paper argues that selective exposure to slanted media promotes political polarization and was utilized as a tool in the 2020 presidential election.

WHAT IS SELECTIVE EXPOSURE IS

People tend to seek out information that matches their preexisting attitudes and beliefs and avoid information that contradicts their perceptions: this is called selective exposure. Situations of selective exposure in politics include consuming news media that lines up with your political preferences. Individuals choose to watch or read news that is attitudinally congruent with their beliefs. Political parties themselves, not just the media, participate in selective exposure with the way they select candidates for Congress and presidential nominations. Moderate candidates are less likely to run for congress than those further left or right according to Danielle Thomsen in “Ideological Moderates Won’t Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress.” Candidates assess their future policy impact and influence on legislature by the party’s reputation to estimate their likelihood of winning; Thomsen’s party fit hypothesis suggests ideological conformity with party reputation influences potential candidates’ ability to achieve their electoral and policy goals, so those with preferences that conform to the party reputation are more likely to run for office. Those at ideological poles are less likely to be cross pressured by parties than moderate because their preferences are closer to their party’s position (Thomsen). Running candidates self-select if they will run or not based on how polarized their preferences are, and the party will pressure moderate candidates, squeezing the middle ground out of politics. The very nature of America’s party system polarizes who is in office because ideological extremism has discouraged moderates from running. Citizens that are party members and those who consider themselves Democrat or Republican are led by the more

ideologue congressmen. The very nature of people in politics journalists report on today sets up opportunities for conflict and bias in writing. The nature of the candidates in our most recent election has made it all too easy to write about polarization in a polarizing way.

HOW SELECTIVE EXPOSURE IS INCREASING POLARIZATION

Readers of larger papers already have diminished exposure. National media unintentionally starts and ends with polarization; national news doesn't have the time to cover local offices and governments, so they focus on the president and national government institutions. Joshua Darr and his co-authors of "Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior" say local coverage is comparatively positive, more personal, and more about voter issues than national media. Larger news outlets are more polarized because they do not have the time, space, resources, or interest to report on the numerous local elections or offices because what draws an audience is controversy and national government institutions. This gives a little bit of background on why larger news organizations report upon polarizing, contentious news to begin with. In areas where local news is declining, there is less available information about local politics and "candidate visibility at the local level" is reduced, with replacement sources being at the national level with more partisan and contentious news options (Darr, et al.). Readers become more aware of "national, polarized political elites, encouraging greater reliance upon partisanship in voting decisions." Partisanship can help voters identify with candidates, but also encourages "team-mindedness and social polarization" (Darr, et al.). If there is less knowledge about local candidates, voters are less likely to stray from Party ID. Party ID simplifies elections and allows voters to make judgements on candidates.

Selective exposure to confirming information leads to polarization about controversial issues, such as the ones broadcast in national news media. In a simplified example, if a person

who believed Trump was the best presidential candidate in 2016 sought out an article about why Trump was the best presidential candidate in 2016, this is selective exposure and confirmation bias. When seeking out information that aligns with your preferences, and upon reading that information your preexisting beliefs are confirmed, you have learned nothing new. You now more deeply believe in what you already thought and are less inclined to believe anything to the contrary. Beliefs are centered around opinions and ideas not necessarily backed by evidence, and Yonghwan Kim says in “Knowledge Versus Beliefs: How Knowledge and Beliefs Mediate The Influence of Likeminded Media Use on Political Polarization and Participation” that beliefs influence attitudes, opinions, and social and political behavior even if they are not necessarily true or correct. They serve as a reference point when processing other information; individuals may use political ideology beliefs to fill in the gaps and make shortcuts when arriving at a political decision. On a more positive note, likeminded media can also increase levels of participation in politics through “explicit instructions and mobilizing information,” but in a polarizing way because individuals are seeking out and listening to only the perspectives they prefer (Kim). One can learn more about candidate’s issue stances and become a prepared voter from likeminded media use, but is that really a win for politics if they don’t do the same for the other side? This is where concerns about extreme polarization enter the conversation. Based on data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), Kim found likeminded media use indirectly influences attitudinal polarization and political participation. For example, conservatives were more likely than liberals to perceive McCain is *not* too old to be president and that the U.S. is *not* ready to elect a black president. Liberals were more likely to believe McCain *is* too old to be president and the U.S. *is* ready for a black president. Kim’s findings show individuals who consume politically likeminded news “tend to develop more polarized

attitudes and are motivated to participate in political activities by forming biased beliefs associated with candidates rather than by gaining factual issue knowledge.” This trend hasn’t disappeared in more recent years. Matthew Levendusky and Neil Malhotra’s 2016 “Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?” study found that press coverage suggesting the electorate is polarized increases perceptions of partisan issue polarization. If the media covers candidates and issues that are presented as dividing and uncompromising, the public will see them as divided and uncompromising. Levendusky and Malhotra find polarized persons are depicted by media as immoderate, uncompromising, and uncivil, thus are seen negatively, so people reject polarized issue positions and dislike them on a personal level. It causes the public to moderate their polarization, but increases dislike of the other party, thus increasing polarization (Levendusky, Malhotra). It is a vicious circle of perception. Emphasizing different candidates’ traits in a positive or negative way – attribute agenda setting – polarizes audiences by causing attitudes to lean positively or negatively based on the news source they have selectively exposed themselves to.

THE MEDIA’S ROLE IN POLARIZATION

When people seek news sources that align with their political orientations, news sources cater to that by aligning their content with a particular partisan slant, depending on the source. In order to prove selective exposure is increasing polarization, there must be a news source individuals choose to be selectively exposed *to*. In other words, there must be a way to prove there is partisan slanted media. Ki Deuk Hyun and Soo Jung Moon investigate different emphases of candidate attributes in agenda setting by TV news outlets in “Agenda Setting in the Partisan TV News Context” (in this study, NBC Nightly News, CNN’s Anderson Cooper 360, and Fox News’ Special Report with Brett Baier). Republican and conservative viewers turn to

Fox News, Democrats and liberals to CNN and MSNBC. Individuals who are more susceptible to agenda setting are more likely to watch certain programs, favor one candidate more strongly, and have greater negative feelings toward the other (Hyun, Moon). Respondents “partisanship was the strongest predictor of the match between each program’s attribute agenda and respondents’ attribute perceptions in the expected direction” (Hyun, Moon). Regarding the 2008 election, Fox had nearly one-sided coverage favorable to Romney rather than Obama when it came to affective attributes. CNN showed an imbalance in the opposite direction, but to a lesser degree. NBC was relatively balanced. “At the affective level, the three TV news programs clearly diverged in their emphasis of candidates’ attributes.... Although viewers’ partisanship tended to correspond to the news agenda of the individual program that reflected their political orientations, each program still had a unique agenda-setting influence at the individual level” (Hyun, Moon). A partisan imbalance does exist in the portrayal of candidate’s attributes, furthering confirmation bias and polarization of viewers. This occurred around the 2020 election as well. “Fake news” has skyrocketed, and become a term used frequently by Donald Trump in particular. Bence Bago and his co-authors 2020 study of “Fake News, Fast and Slow: Deliberation Reduces Belief in False (but Not True) News Headlines” showed individuals believe false headlines in initial responses, but deliberation fixed partisan bias and led to accurate beliefs. This can be a problem because it is not uncommon for people to read only a headline or skim and article. Even more problematic is when readers are participating in selective exposure, they are reading something that already matches their confirmation bias, and they are more likely to believe a headline initially even if it is inaccurate. In late 2016 as election day approached, there was a concerning lack of honesty in political communication that led to “fake news” or, scientifically, misinformation; information that is presented as accurate but later found to be false

as defined by Michael Hameleers and Toni G. L. A. van der Meer in “Misinformation and Polarization in a High-Choice Media Environment: How Effective Are Political Fact-Checkers?” Hameleers and van der Meer wished to see how effective fact checkers really were in refuting partisan political news – fake news – because “individuals tend to reject corrections that run counter to their views.” Fact checkers were more likely to be selected when they confirm prior attitudes and avoided when they don’t match political attitudes (indicating a confirmation bias), and they decreased political polarization to a degree depending on the issue.

New media (internet news providers) choose news in a different way from traditional news media. In “New Media and the Polarization of American Political Discourse,” Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling collected stories from Reuters and AP’s top political sections (neutral news wires) and compare other wires editorial choices to those of partisan blogs and cable outlets. Stories chosen indicates perception of newsworthiness and attempt to address how partisan political versus nonpartisan websites editorial decisions skew content of news they report upon. Sites like DailyKos.com (pro-Democratic/liberal), FreeRepublic.com (pro-Republican/conservative), and FoxNews.com (favoring Republican/conservatives) are known for niche-targeting smaller audiences (Baum, Groeling). Daily Kos, a left-leaning site, was more likely to feature stories harmful to Republicans or helpful to Democrats, and Fox, a right-leaning site, was more likely to feature stories harmful to Democrats or helpful to Republicans (Baum, Groeling). Reuters demonstrates no preference for stories with political skews – where stories are pulled from – so the ideological slant can be mostly attributed to a politically biased editorial judgement in the media and is not representative of a balanced sampling of stories. In *Hate Inc.*, Matt Taibbi also experienced corporations’ editorial decisions “skewed by a toxic mix of political and financial considerations” (Taibbi).

WHY THE MEDIA PLAYS THIS ROLE

Catering to readers preconceived notions, opinions and beliefs draws a loyal readership. Conflict also draws readers in; it's "why we spend less time on the water in Flint than body-language analyses of Ivanka Trump. You can't "love to hate" the Flint water crisis. But you can love a good heel act. Character sells. Reality, not so much" (*Hate Inc.*). To set up the explanation of why the media plays a role in increasing polarization, the 2016 going into 2020 incumbent presidential candidate needs to be understood. Trump's personality gave media outlets something to sell. Trump is somewhat populist compared to the Republican party, but he became a symbol for GOP voters. Trump's performance in the primaries was a blow to conventional wisdom. Other candidates were more politically versed, but Trump's campaign is the Trump brand; he differentiated himself from other Republican candidates in 2016 on the basis of personality. He did not have detailed policy plans, but everyone knew his policy slogans – build the wall, make American great again, they knew he was for building the economy – because they were a part of his brand. Trump's personality was on display during his campaign, and similarities in personality profiles between voters and candidates can create interpersonal affinity. He was drawing on a different pool of voters which different characteristics because his personality aided voters in perceiving differentiation among candidates. Voters who saw something of themselves in Trump would be more likely to support him. Trump was more extraverted, more disagreeable, more confident, and it set him apart (**Fortunato et. al**). Voters with opposite dispositions divided support among T's major opponents, so he had one portion of the electorate to himself. He ran a charismatic campaign with personality front and center, not ideological clarity, policy precision, or political experience. He seemed to brush aside expertise and collaborative effort, mocked political correctness and his opponents, and "where others sought to be the voice of reason,

Trump sought merely to be the loudest voice” (**Fortunato et. al**). Just as Trump divided the electorate, politically and financially focused corporation-centered media divides readers to gain viewers with a specific set of beliefs – and audience who would want to spend money on selective exposure and confirmation bias. Political reporting seems to function differently than other sections because instead of adapting to the context of 2020, the political news industry has started shaping that context. The media repeats Trump’s inflammatory language, his tweets designed to get good reporters to repeat his polarizing rhetoric for him (Taibbi). Taibbi says Trump turned papers into “dirt sheets” of wrestling world, pamphlets keeping up with taunts, smears, and gossip. Its not that polarization shouldn’t be covered, but context and perspective need to be provided along with fact checks (Taibbi). It is a journalist’s job to report on what is going on in the world, not get involved in it themselves – be political reporters, not political players. Taibbi discusses a “fake outrage” in papers, claiming to hate Trump but repeating his divisive speech, when in reality the drama means survival and newspapers sold.

CONCLUSION

Journalism historically transitioned into a business meant to be defined by objectivity and independence. However, certain media caters to selective exposure and confirmation bias by writing with a partisan slant to attract a loyal, paying reader/viewership. In writing this way, it further polarizes the electorate. Media took advantage of the opposite candidate personalities in 2016 and 2020 to capitalize upon the divisive content. People seek out information that matches their political preferences and confirms their previously held beliefs, and they find it in slanted media. Trump ran a campaign centered around his personality when presented many opportunities for polarizing reporting, and some publications succumbed to the conflict,

repeating it over and over to gain readers and viewers instead of presenting it in context. Ethics of political reporting need to be measured in context.

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