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Choosing Media Based on Political Stance

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Please note: This paper was presented at the New Jersey Communications Association's annual conference, 2006.

Abstract

More and more, American audiences are choosing media that matches their political affiliation and personal moral position (Pew Center, 2004). Social Identity Theory (SIT), Selective Exposure Theory (SET), and the closely related Self-Categorization Theory, helps explain the increasing U.S. political viewpoint polarization. According to the theories, both political and ideological stance should influence the media outlets chosen for gathering information on political races. At a time when political messages are prevalent, SIT, SET, and self-categorization theory would suggest that since individuals identify with their specific social groups, the media they choose will reinforce the group's preexisting political beliefs. This study provides statistical evidence that individuals choose media outlets based on their political affiliation. Using a sample collected during the 2004 and 2007 U. S. presidential campaign, respondents demonstrated preferences towards news sources that reflected their current political and ideological views.

American audiences are beginning to choose media that matches their political affiliation and personal moral stance—this splintering of opinion was recently documented in a 2004 study released by the Pew Center of Research where it was reported that 38% of Americans preferred to get their news from sources that reflected their own point of view. Specifically, the Pew Center reported that since 2000, “Fox News Channel’s increases have been greatest among political conservatives and Republicans,” and that “more than half of regular Fox viewers describe themselves as politically conservative” (52%), a 40% increase from four years ago. Simultaneously, Fox’s rival, CNN, has a more “Democrat-leaning audience than in the past.”

As more individuals begin selecting their media based on their partisanship, how information is accessed and interpreted will change, leading to a public that becomes more fervid in their own belief systems without ever regarding contradictory information. Powers (2005) wrote of this growing political polarization and asked, “If everyone tunes in to a different channel, and discourse only happens among like minds, is there any hope for social and political cohesion?” (p. 122). In effect, then, the fact that people selectively expose themselves to some media, but not others may leave gaps in society’s knowledge, possibly altering their ability to participate in a democratic government system. With this as the focus, first this study will look at talk radio as an example of this phenomenon, and continue with a discussion of how such polarization extends into other mediums. Additionally, this section will discuss how individuals select media, and how when people feel politically polarized they may begin to mistrust the media. Next, Social Identity Theory (SIT) as well as Selective Exposure Theory (SET) will be discussed in connection to political affiliation. Lastly, research questions are proposed.

Rationale

One form of media often studied in regard to whether narrowcast media contributes to political and ideological polarization is talk radio. This microcosm offers an interesting perspective regarding this paper's topic since it covers more than 80 years, talk radio began as local informational programs that periodically concentrated on news commentary or political coverage. Today, talk radio ranks as the second most popular radio format in America (Hoyt, 1992). It provides the opportunity for hosts and listeners to look at and interpret local, national, and international issues. While the format attracts all types of listeners, the most popular shows, such as Rush Limbaugh, tend to draw right-leaning audiences with more conservative opinions. Many studies (Barker & Knight 2000; Jones, 2002) show that this type of media does form listener opinions, and even those studies that contend political talk radio fails to have a major influence on attitudes (Yanovitzky & Cappella, 2001) still admit that the medium can affect its audience.

This study contends that "reinforcement of existing attitudes may manifest itself in a stronger attitude trace" (p. 394). The shows then draw in audiences, who listen because the message duplicates their own philosophy. The more they listen to the show, the more "talk radio could have a reinforcing effect on existing views" (Jones, 2002, p.160) over a period of years. Lending support to the notion of political polarization and as documented in the 2004 study released by the Pew Research Center was the finding that audiences for Rush Limbaugh's radio show remain conservative and Republican. Another study suggested that it is the main media source chosen for news information that often leads to these polarized attitudes—and talk radio is a medium some listeners consider a major information source. In fact, there is evidence to

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t that listeners who do use talk radio as their primary news source “are being exposed to content that is somehow increasing extremist views” (Wanta, Craft & Geana, 2005, p. 10).

Talk radio, in essence, may be an indicator of how polarizing information toward one political stance may affect other forms of media such as television, magazines, newspapers, and Internet. Using talk radio in this way, one can see that during the last 15 years, changes in the medium have set conditions in motion for this split. For instance, in 1987, President Ronald Reagan revoked the fairness doctrine, a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) law, which dictated that all broadcast stations had to show editorial balance by offering equal air time to those expressing different viewpoints. As a result of this, some talk radio programs began slanting their coverage to a particular point of view (Starr, 2004). In the 1990s, this type of talk radio, with politically targeted political talk radio (PTR) programs, became popular. In 1995, a radio industry newsletter said that nearly 20% of adults in the United States listened to at least one program in that genre (Hall & Cappella, 2002).

Talk radio, unlike traditional modes of journalism—such as television, newspapers, and Internet new sites, does not operate under the idea of being fair and balanced or objective. Talk radio hosts, such as Limbaugh, however, often interpret the news through their perspective. This is a key difference between these genres—talk radio features personalities offering content filtered through their belief system or agenda. Other news mediums use reporters, who ideally should offer an unbiased and factual account. Commentary or analysis is available, but segregated to sections or segments that are distinguishable from the “news.” This is not always so in talk radio when factual news and opinion blends together in the same broadcast. For example, Limbaugh often starts his show with a 10-minute monologue that indicates his attitudes

on current events, without showing the dimensionality of the issues. In effect, talk radio recalls Colonial America's partisan press when the then political parties, the Whigs and Tories, used newspapers to express their viewpoints, slanting the information shared toward their personal philosophies. This policy changed in the late 1800s as newspapers boomed and reporting veered towards the aforementioned objectivity. Today's new version of talk radio partisanship and its "attempts at persuasion may increase the likelihood of influence, may also induce greater selection bias, further complicating our ability to untangle the causality of media consumption and opinion" (Barker & Knight, 2000, p. 150). It is important to note that although research exists showing that PTR listeners have waned somewhat over the past 10 years for unknown reasons, the format still remains a powerful information source (Bennett, 2002; Holbert, 2004), mostly of conservative viewpoints.

To understand how media selections occur and how those choices affect polarization is a topic that needs further research—especially as new media forms such as MP3 players, high-capacity cable systems, and computer-like cell phones battle for viewer attention. Such technologies emphasize viewer control over the information they digest—more so than traditional means of media consumption, such as television and print where channel surfing and page turning may introduce viewers/readers to other material. If any of these newer media forms eventually match the polarization within the talk radio system as discussed above, how will that effect voting and the process of democracy? It is indeed possible that the consequences may be detrimental. As DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson (1996) show that within political affiliations: "the gap between Republicans and Democrats grew, suggesting that the party system, which has conventionally been expected to moderate social divisions, has been exacerbating them" (p. 739). Additionally, Lee and Cappella (2001) found that when audiences are "exposed to an

intense, one-sided message, their agreement with the positions advocated increases as exposure and reception increase” (p. 389). This could be especially dangerous if individuals are choosing their media based on their political affiliation—entering a cycle of seeking out similar viewpoints that reinforce those viewpoints.

Whatever news source is consumed, individuals who feel politically polarized can begin to mistrust the media. According to a (2002) study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press, it found that 47% of the people questioned felt that the news media are politically biased in their reporting (Kohut, 2002; Lee, 2005). Pew Research (2004) also documented that Republicans have become even more negative about the media’s believability. The same study showed that credibility ratings for the major broadcast and cable television outlets and print news outlets have fallen in recent years, with the ratings for Fox News, a more conservative venue, remaining relatively stable. Interestingly, Jones (2004) reinforced that conservative Republicans, especially ones who listened to talk radio, distrust mainstream media more than other political groups (p. 71) and those that use political talk radio tend to not get their public affairs information from watching mainstream TV or reading newspapers (Bennett, 2002).

While most agree that the media are biased, the challenge of determining which ideological or partisan perspective dominates mainstream media remains unanswered. For the most part, scholars’ efforts to resolve this issue have resulted in mixed findings (Kohut, 2002; Lee, 2005), since the perception of bias among media audiences is inherently a subjective matter. Conservatives believe in a bias toward the liberal position and feel that most journalists are liberal with news coverage reflecting their political preferences (Lee, 2005). In contrast, those more liberal minded feel that conservative voices dominate mainstream media,

such as Fox News, which has come to be seen as the network that provides a conservative point of view (Kohut, 2002), and “dominates the all-news cable market”(Kay, 2005). By 2003, Fox News had more prime-time cable viewers than CNN and MSNBC combined (Kay, 2005).

In fact, according to an analysis using 2005 Pew Center data it was shown that Fox News and CNN audiences have become more and more polarized. Fox News watchers, for instance, are less likely to follow stories critical of the Bush administration but will follow entertainment-based news stories. The study also suggests that Fox News watchers are more right of center, enjoying news that shares their personal views, while the CNN and network news audiences “prefer news featuring more in-depth interviews with public officials” (Morris, 2005).

Interestingly, Pew Research (2004) reported that Republicans voted Fox News as their most trusted source, which did not appear in the top six for either Democrats or Independents.

In Bernard Goldberg’s book *Bias* (2003), he charges his former employer, CBS, and the news media generally, with a liberal bias (see also *Arrogance* by Goldberg). The Center for Media and Public Affairs examined the on-air positive and negative evaluations of a candidate’s behavior on the campaign trail for the 1996 presidential election. Clinton generated 56% good press (measured by the amount of favorable comments garnered) on NBC, 45% on CBS, and 51% on ABC. Dole, by contrast, generated 32% good press on NBC, 36% on CBS, and only 29% on ABC (Kincaid, 1997). While this provides support for the liberal-biased notion of mainstream media, the issue of whether people’s political preference dictates the media they choose remains of central concern.

The Media Research Center, an admitted conservative group, presents third-party research including studies conducted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Pew Research Data, and diverse academic researchers, to defend their position that the media reports with a liberal bias. In a recent article, after controlling for structural bias, the author concludes that there is a slant in favor of democrats [a presumed liberal bias] in “the tone of the coverage” (Schiffer, 2006, p. 23).

Another way to frame this debate is to consider bias apart from a specific “conservative” or “liberal” bias. Although Kuypers (2002) indicates that there is a “norm of liberal bias” (p. 17), he makes the argument that “whether liberal or not, that the press advances its own agenda and beliefs instead of providing information necessary for citizens to make informed political decisions is simply devastating to the free functioning of American democracy” (p. 203). In a recent study conducted in England, Davis (2007) echoes a similar opinion that journalists shape agendas consciously or unconsciously. Is the media facilitating or obfuscating the democratic process? It is hard to predict—especially as media platforms change so quickly. Cooper (2006), for instance, points out that bloggers (and notes that this applies to all media consumers) may all eventually “cocoon” themselves, which “is to say, some users will choose to expose themselves only to content they expect to be congruent with their existing viewpoints” thus inhibiting the democratic process.

Social Identity Perspective

Based on the early work of Festinger (1954), Social identity theory (SIT) and the closely related self-categorization theory suggest an explanation for the increasing polarization of opposing political party positions. Social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978). Social identity is an extension of one’s personal identity (Brewer, 1991). An extension of SIT, self-categorization theory (a) goes beyond the recognition that part of the self-concept is shaped by social identification and recognizes the self as dynamic (Onorato & Turner, 2004), (b) focuses on the cognitive processes that cause an individual to identify with specific groups (Hogg & Reid, 2005), and (c) recognizes “that social identity extends into the private self and that social norms define and shape the activity of the private self and vice versa” (Turner, 1991, p. 155). Social categorization characterizes the environment as consisting of different groups (Tajfel, 1978) and views others as group members rather than individuals (Hogg & Reid, 2005) thereby depersonalizing the individual and highlighting group attributes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Onorato & Turner, 2004). Group membership amplifies the importance and relevance of intragroup characteristics and exaggerates the negatives of intergroup distinctives (Greene, 2004). This process of amplification of differences tends to push groups apart over time.

Group identification and participation influences group norms and individual norms held by group members. These converge over time. Group influence affects the individual along two dimensions. First, information influence is informational in nature and leads to an internal change that demonstrates long-term attitude behavior consistency. Secondly, normative influence

refers to outward conformity to social pressure rather than a cognitive change preceding the new position. In evaluating group influence, Turner (1991) appeals to a dual-process model of influence to account for both information influence and normative influence. He proposes that the dual process model accounts for the literature's findings by offering a "powerful explanation of social conformity: conformity to the group increases with the normative and information dependence of the individual on the group (the relative power of the group over the individual)" (p. 39). This occurs because the need for information creates a dependency on group members for veridical information (information influence) and the desire to comply with the group leads to conformity (normative influence). "One should tend to conform more to the norms of people to whom one feels psychologically attached through relations of interdependence, similarity and mutual attraction" (Turner, p. 40).

To summarize, social identification leads to a co-mingling of one's self identify with group identity. The group attributes become the attributes of the member and collective norms describe and prescribe member behavior. Group influence, both informational and normative, provides justification for collective norms and individual behavior. At any given time an individual can be a part of several groups. One can be a member of a social group, a service organization, a political party, and a business organization. What determines which set of group norms are activated in a given circumstance? Which categorization is utilized to make sense of a situation? Typically, one has quick access to social categorizations such as race and gender; however, these categorizations may not provide a best fit for the circumstances in question and Hogg and Reid (2005) propose that individuals review their available categories and then choose

one psychologically salient for the context and align their actions and responses with that salient identity.

An ever-present issue when considering SIT is the trigger for invoking a particular categorization. It is reasonable to expect that in the midst of a political campaign with speeches and a media blitz, that one's political social identity is activated. Greene (2004) suggests that the:

“nature of partisan social identification during an election campaign, during times of political scandal, when a party is a majority or a minority, when parties are more or less polarized, and so forth, are all issues that could further enlighten our understanding of citizen response to the political world” (p. 150).

Previous research agrees (Hargie, Dickson & Nelson, 2003) that group-based identities seem to dominate in situations where identifiable social categories exist (e.g, Republican versus Democrat) and are often utilized. Onorato and Turner's research (2004) involving conceptions of personal self-schemas and group identity support this theory as well, stating that participants shifted from personal to social identity when defining the self within an “in-group” versus “out-group” context. This resulted in depersonalizing the self-concept from terms such as “me” and “I,” to terms such as “us” and “we” when discussing “them.”

Selective Exposure Theory (SET)

Although Greene (2004) clearly connects SIT with political campaigns, another theoretical perspective has been utilized extensively in looking at identification and political campaigns. Selective exposure theory arises out of the work of Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, which proposes that during the process of acquiring knowledge or assessing new information, a tension arises in the presences of disharmonious elements. This may occur with respect to attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. For example, if we believe that Paul Revere rode through Boston warning of the British and then learn that he was in Miami at the time, we have

mental disharmony. We can choose to change our beliefs, justify our current beliefs, or simply ignore the new information. Rooted in this fundamental system, SET suggests that people tend to appropriate information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs and they also tend to avoid information that conflicts with their pre-existing beliefs.

The research stream on SET has not been monolithic and opinions have differed about whether the motivation to resolve the tension is a function of attitudes or some other series of factors (Sears & Freedman, 1967). In their review article, Sears and Freedman identify three basic operational definitions of selective exposure including (a) “any systematic bias in audience composition,” (p. 195) (b) “unusual agreement about a matter of opinion,” and (c) “preference for supportive, rather than nonsupportive information” (p. 196). The third option is the strongest form of selective exposure and at the conclusion of their review, these authors contend that “in no way can the available evidence be said to support the contention that people generally seek out supportive information and avoid nonsupportive information” (p. 212).

In a review of selective exposure, Cotton (1985) suggests the early research (1957-1965) concludes with a “general perception of selective exposure within social psychology was that of a weak, unreliable phenomenon” (p. 22). He acknowledges that later research (1967-1983) “tended to produce more favorable results” (p. 22). Bolstering his contention is the experiment of Barlet, Drew, Fahle, and Watts (1974), which contrasted the selection process of Republicans and Democrats. Their work strongly supports the selective-exposure hypothesis. In a 1984 article, Sweeney and Gruber’s field study during the Watergate hearings found strong support for “selective avoidance effects” or the idea that people avoid information that does not support their political ideas.

There is an extensive literature on SET and not surprisingly, findings are not always consistent. In an interesting article, Mutz and Martine (2001) found that selective exposure is more prevalent in interpersonal networks and they perceive media as “the main source of exposure to cross-cutting political views” (p. 110). Published the same year, Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, Frey, and Thelen (2001) ran a series of four experiments that showed subjects “preferred articles that supported their previous tentative decision compared with articles that contradicted this decision” (p. 568). They go on to note that “simply avoiding dissonant information would not reduce any experienced dissonance; thus, seeking additional supporting information is a more effective strategy” (p. 569).

In a recent online experiment looking specifically at the consumption of political news via media (Fox News, NPR, and CNN) people preferred “to encounter information that they find supportive or consistent with their existing beliefs” (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 35). These authors suggest that selective exposure might occur because of information overload and warn that selective exposure leads to a reinforcement of existing beliefs and eventuates in a less informed and more polarized electorate.

With SIT and SET as background, this investigation will focus on the extent to which participants’ chosen political affiliation (e.g., Republican, Democrat, Independent) and political ideology (e.g., conservative versus liberal) influence their choice of media consumption and perception of media bias, particularly during the time period leading up to a national election. While alternative contexts for this investigation exist, such as a national crisis (FEMA, war, natural disaster), fundraising, or the appointment of Supreme Court judges (Greene, 2004), a political contest such as a national election functions as the chosen context to investigate the heightened saliency of self-identity regardless of chosen political affiliation (i.e.,

Republican). It is important to study how the public selects media because it allows a glimpse into how media may sculpt people's attitudes over time. If more and more individuals choose media based on their own personal doctrines, how might this impact how information is collected and disseminated, and will it hurt the democratic process?

According to the self-categorization theory, both political and ideological stance should influence the media outlets chosen for gathering information on political races. At a time when political messages are prevalent, the self-categorization theory suggests that since individuals identify with their specific social groups, the media they chose reinforced the group's preexisting political beliefs. The discrepancy between Democratic and Republican beliefs would indicate they would seek different sources for political news. Apart from political party affiliation, based on the same logic, liberals and conservatives selected different sources for political news with moderates choosing a different media choice set than those identified as either liberal or conservative. When people felt the media are biased against their philosophy, they will seek alternative media sources.

Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: Do people choose media outlets for political information that affirms their political stance?

RQ2: Does ideological stance influence the choice of media for political information gathering?

RQ3: Do people who perceive a bias against their political stance in the news from "mainstream media" seek information from alternative sources?

Variables of interest

The independent variable for RQ1 and RQ3 is represented by political stance. Political stance was operationalized as either Democrat, Republican, or Independent as self-identified by the respondent. The independent variable for RQ2 is represented by ideological stance. This was operationalized based on respondents' self-identification as very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, or very conservative. An additional independent variable for RQ3 was bias. Bias was operationalized based on respondents' answers on whether or not the media was biased.

The dependent variable for RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3 was media choice. Media choice was operationalized as a specific media outlet (CNN, Fox, Clear Channel talk radio, etc.) that the respondents identify as their source of news.

We did not seek to establish a causal relationship between the variables identified in this study, since the statistical correlation analysis does not support that claim. Instead we sought confirmation of a strong, positive association between the variable, which we felt would support our hypotheses.

Method

Sample and data collection

The data for this study was obtained by Princeton Survey Research Associations International (PSRAI), and subsequently provided to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press for analysis and public distribution. The authors were not involved with the collection of the data, which was made publicly available by the Pew Research Center. Two data sets were used. The first data set, obtained through telephone interviews, consisted of a nationwide sample of 1,506 voting-age adults in the United States. During the time period of December 19, 2003, through January 4, 2004, PSRAI conducted a telephone opinion survey for leading newspapers

and TV stations around the country. Interviewers first asked to speak with the youngest male, age 18 or over, living in the household. If no male lived in the household, the interviewer asked to speak with the oldest female, age 18 or over, living in the household.

The second data set, “The September Political Survey,” was collected by Princeton Survey Research International using telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Data Source, LLC, between September 12-16th 2007. As with the above survey, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male currently in the home. If a male was unavailable, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest female at home. In total 1,501 respondents were interviewed.

Rationale for use of secondary data

This research uses data that already exists among the wealth of data available in the public realm. Pew Research, the website where the data was obtained, is a well-respected research firm that besides releasing studies itself offers its raw data to other researchers so the information can be further exploited. Using Pew’s data allowed this study to look at the issue on a national during two different time periods—something that would have been out of the researchers means if original data had been collected. The challenge presented after deciding to use this secondary data was to be assured that the data appropriately addressed the research questions herein. This was confirmed through analyzing the appropriateness of the study’s unit of analysis and sampling, the variables and their values, and levels of measurement. The data in raw form was also analyzed for variables of interest. Survey questions involving political affiliation, political ideology, and media bias were selected (see Appendix A). Once a thorough

investigation of the secondary data was completed, the data was cleaned, and statistical tests began. Using data from two different surveys ensures that the results of the data are valid.

Results

Preliminary analysis on our sample indicated minimal outliers. We therefore chose the Chi Squared test for independence to test for interactions between the variables identified. Variables were culled from specific questions on the Pew Center survey, which queried respondents on their choice of media outlet and ideological and political stance (see Appendix A). For our initial analysis we grouped self-described ‘conservative’ and ‘very conservative’ into the category of ‘conservative,’ self-described ‘liberal’ and ‘very liberal’ respondents into the category of ‘liberal.’ The category of ‘moderate’ and ‘don’t know/refused’ was initially ignored. Later analysis combined self-described ‘moderate’ with ‘liberal’ and ‘very liberal’ to examine the possible interactions of these groupings.

Political party affiliations examined were Republican and Democrat. Though other party affiliations exist in the United States and represent distinct ideologies, the Pew Research survey did not collect this information so we were not able to analyze party affiliation beyond Democrat and Republican. Media outlets were grouped as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Media Outlet</i>	<i>Conservative, Mainstream or Liberal</i>
Local News	Mainstream
ABC Network News	Mainstream, liberal
CBS News	Mainstream, liberal
NBC News	Mainstream, liberal
CNN News	Mainstream, liberal
MSNBC News	Mainstream

<i>Media Outlet</i>	<i>Conservative, Mainstream or Liberal</i>
Fox News	Conservative
CNBC Cable News	Mainstream

[The assigning of the above outlets as conservative, mainstream and/or liberal was based on previously cited literature throughout this paper (Bennett, 2002; Jones, 2002; Jones, 2004; Kay, 2005; Kincaid, 1997; Kohut, 2002; Lee, 2005; Morris, 2005)].

Tests for did not find significant associations between self-described liberal or conservatives.

Tests for associations between ideology and media choices however did find significant associations. The relationship between the respondent's identification as conservative and selection of conservative media outlets (see Table 1) was significant using the 2004 data set, $\chi^2(1, N=1,506) = 34.17, p < .01$, and with the 2007 data set $\chi^2(1, N=1500)=89.96 p<.001$. This relationship is further strengthened by examining the respondent's identification as conservative for the opposite, which is whether or not they prefer mainstream media outlets. This analysis performed with the 2007 data set revealed a negative association (using the Phi coefficient to determine directionality), $\chi^2(1, N = 1,506) = 6.9, p < .009$, indicating those who selected conservative as their ideology were more likely not to select mainstream news media as a preferred news source. This association was also found in the 2007 data set, $\chi^2(1, N=1500)=13.18 p<.001$.

In examining the respondent's selection of conservative ideology to the selection of radio as a media choice, analysis demonstrated a significant association, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,506) = 22.73, p <.001$. (This association could not be tested with the 2007 data set since the questions did not

identify conservative talk radio as a media source.)

Exploratory analysis of respondents in the 2004 study who selected liberal as their political view did not indicate a strong, statistically significant preference for the selection of any particular media. However, these respondents did demonstrate a preference for not selecting conservative media choices in the survey, $\chi^2(1, N=1,506)=14.52, p < .001$. Significant results were also found with the 2007 data set, $\chi^2(N=1500)=66.08, p < .001$. The same respondents in the 2004 data set also demonstrated a tendency not to choose radio as a media choice, $\chi^2(1, N=1,506) = 12.37, p < .001$.

When respondents who selected liberal as their political view in the 2004 and 2007 survey are combined with respondents who identified as moderates as their political view, a significant association with mainstream news outlets is found. The same moderate-liberal grouping demonstrated a significant negative association to conservative news choices in the 2004 data set, $\chi^2(1, N=1,506) = 10.60, p < .0001$ and the 2007 data set, $\chi^2(N=1500)=95.38, p < .001$. This indicates a preference for moderate and liberal survey respondents do not choose conservative news outlets. Respondents in the 2004 data set also demonstrated a negative association to the selection of mainstream news choices, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,506) = 6.9, p < .01$.

Responses to questions concerning media bias reveal different aspects of ideological polarization and perceptions of the media. These questions were only examined using the 2004 data set; the 2007 survey did not include questions concerning media bias. Respondents who identified as liberal did not provide statistically significant answers to questions on media bias. There was a statistically significant association between a positive response to the question of media bias and an identification of conservative political views, $\chi^2(1, N=1,506) = 4.56, p < .03$. The combined moderate-liberal political view identification also demonstrated a statistically

significant association with positive responses to the question of media bias, $\chi^2 (1, N=1,506) = 7.0, p < .09$.

When the interaction of party ideology to media bias is examined, the ideological polarization revealed through media choices becomes more defined. Respondents who identified as Republican provided a statistically significant positive response to the question of whether the media have a Democratic bias, $\chi^2 (1, N=1,506) = 154.75, p < .001$, and the respondents who identified as Democrat provided a statistically significant response to the question of whether the media have a Republican bias, $\chi^2 (1, N = 1,506) = 88.27, p < .001$. Democrats also provided a significant positive response for the selection of mainstream news outlets, and Republicans provided a statistically significant positive response for the selection of conservative news outlets, $\chi^2 (1, N=1,506) = 17.72, p < .001$.

Discussion

Our findings provide strong statistical evidence for the support of self-categorization theory along with practical implications for the relationship between political affiliation and media selection. Both the theoretical and practical implications are discussed below. This study demonstrates support for influence of ideological views of individuals within the charged atmosphere of political discourse. Using a sample collected during the heated political U. S. presidential campaign of 2004 as well as a political survey from September 2007, respondents demonstrated preferences towards news sources (media outlets), which reflected their current political and ideological views. This study chose to use two data sets because the 2007 survey used a different set of questions and thus strengthens our position that the effects found are the results of the theories identified, not due to a particular wording of the questions.

Our analysis demonstrated associations between Democrats and mainstream media outlets and Republicans and conservative media outlets. However, with regards to our second research question; there does not seem to be a relationship between political stance and media type choice. Analysis produced what would be considered statistically insignificant results. Given the expansion of “niche” cable television shows, as well as the growing number of topic-specific blogs, it is possible that individuals will be able to seek out sources that they agree with regardless of the type of media they use. This result was demonstrated when answering the first research question. Additionally, the self-reported liberal may tend to be more eclectic in their access to information and less inclined to demonstrate a preference for any particular media outlet (Bennett, 2002; Jones, 2002; Jones, 2004; Kay, 2005; Kincaid, 1997; Kohut, 2002; Lee, 2005; Morris, 2005).

Our third research question, concerning the choice of conservative media outlets by self-described conservatives, was supported by our analysis. Statistically significant negative associations of conservatives with mainstream media outlets was shown. There was a positive statistically significant association between conservative ideology and choice of talk radio as a news source and a negative association of liberal ideology choice to talk radio. Our analysis also revealed a positive association between Democratic respondents and mainstream media choices and Republican respondents and conservative media choices.

Our examination of questions concerning bias reveal a polarization of the electorate and provides additional support for self-categorization theory. Individuals appear to be preserving their internal categorization by seeking positive support for their ideologies through media choices. The responses to the question concerning media biases strengthens this position and indicates a polarization of the electorate, with Democrats considering the media to be biased

towards Republicans and Republicans considering the media to be biased towards Democrats. The conservatives appear to have stronger opinions concerning bias with a statistically significant association between questions of media bias in general and self-described conservatives.

Our results only provide strong statistical evidence of an association or interaction between political view and media choice. Given the potential for the causality suggested by SIT (political view influences media choice), our results provide additional empirical evidence in support of this theory by providing statistical confirmation of the underlying association. Adding to the existing body of research regarding both SIT and SET, the results presented here provide further support for the position that people prefer to get their news from outlets that share their own political viewpoint, contributing to a growing polarization. As demonstrated within this study, this polarization has the ability to influence information-seeking attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that reinforce the growing, and well established, trend toward preserving internal categorization by seeking positive support through media choices.

This phenomenon presents two important implications to both communication scholars and practitioners. Since it is likely that the process of selecting media in alignment with political stance will result in a less informed and more polarized public, communication scholars and practitioners should examine the various forms of media available today. This allows for further examination of both SET and SIT, within an environment comprised of new media forms, such as the internet and blogging.

Further, both communication scholars and practitioners are uniquely positioned to take note of our findings, since they are determined based upon the time period leading up to an

election when media messages regarding political affiliation are most prevalent. It was determined that during this time period, individuals identified, in most cases strongly, with their specific social groups. This may provide rich extensions of these theories for scholars, and translate into important political campaigning decisions for practitioners.

In summary, this study provides support for SIT in that American audiences are choosing media that matches their political affiliation and personal moral position. SIT helps to explain the increasing U. S. political viewpoint polarization, by providing evidence that Americans select and prefer media that reinforces their preexisting political beliefs.

Limitations

This data was a secondary analysis, the researchers were not involved in the data collection procedure. Princeton Survey Research Associates International offered a limited number of media choices, none of which would be considered overtly liberal in the manner that Fox News and talk radio is considered conservative. Therefore, liberals simply did not have a consistent choice on the survey that reflected their actual source of news.

A further limitation could be the overly limiting categorization of the conservative/liberal dichotomy. While this seems to exist in rural/urban settings, we feel it is a bit too general to reflect the more likely subtler political stance choices members of the public often embrace.

Future Research

Future research should examine the role of gender and age as influential variables in the midst of a political campaign comprised of speeches and a media blitz. The researchers recognize that while close investigation of these variables was outside the scope of this study,

these two variables can have very strong implications for media usage, media preferences, and political and ideological stance. These findings could also possibly provide support for or redirect Social Identity Theory. Other media forms, such as magazines, film, and the blogosphere, can be influential in forming political perspectives and studying such genres could provide additional information on the relationship between media choice and political stance.

Also, while SIT provides a reasonable explanation for the decision to consume media that reinforces one's position, it would be useful to actually interview people and ask those that listen to media that supports their viewpoint why they do not choose contrasting media.

Conclusion

This study has offered a Social Identity Perspective in understanding the increasing polarization of U.S. political viewpoints. The data show that Americans select and prefer media that reinforces their preexisting political beliefs. Additionally, this study shows that growing polarization could be a concern. This study contributes to SIT in that individuals are choosing media based on their political affiliation and not what will, ultimately, increase their knowledge base. If this trend continues or even increases, it will affect decision- and policy-making as society becomes more and more fragmented.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Ideology (2004, 2007):

In general, would you describe your political views as:	1. Very Conservative
	2. Conservative
	3. Moderate
	4. Liberal
	5. Very liberal
	9. Don't Know/Refused

Q 5.1 (2004) - Q6 (2007) – How do you get most of your news:

How do you get most of your local news:	1. Local news
	2. ABC Network news
	3. CBS News
	4. NBC News
	5. CNN News
	6. MSNBC Cable News
	7. Fox News
	8. CNBC Cable News
	9. Don't Know/Refused

Q 4.1 (2004) – Q5 (2007) How have you been getting most of your news?

How have you been getting most of your news?	1. Television
	2. Newspapers
	3. Radio
	4. Magazines

How have you been getting most of your news?	1. Television
	5. Internet
	6. Other
	9. Don't Know/Refused

Q 49 (2004) – Q 8 (2007)

Party In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?

- 1 Republican
- 2 Democrat
- 3 Independent
- 4 No Preference
- 5 Other
- 9 Don't know/Refused

(IF ANSWERED 3, 4, 5 OR 9 IN PARTY, ASK:)

As of today do you lean more to the Republican Party or more to the Democratic Party?

- 1 Republican
- 2 Democrat
- 9 Other/Don't know/Refused