

Study: Americans choose media messages that agree with their views

May 28 2009, by Jeff Grabmeier

A new study provides some of the strongest evidence to date that Americans prefer to read political articles that agree with the opinions they already hold.

Researchers found that people spent 36 percent more time reading articles that agreed with their point of view than they did reading text that challenged their opinions.

Even when they did read articles that countered their views, participants almost always balanced that with reading others that confirmed their opinions.

The study is important because it is one of the first to record what people actually read and link these findings to their views on the same topics.

"We found that people generally chose media messages that reinforced their own preexisting views," said Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, co-author of the study and associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"In general, they don't want their views to be challenged by seriously considering other viewpoints."

Knobloch-Westerwick conducted the study with Jingbo Meng, a former master's degree student in communication at Ohio State. Their results

appear in the June 2009 issue of the journal *Communication Research*.

Other studies have tried to examine whether people selectively choose to focus on media messages that agree with their viewpoints, but most of this research had serious shortcomings, she said.

Many studies, for example, have asked people to recall what they read or watched, rather than actually recording their habits. And unlike many other studies, this research examined people's opinions about specific political topics, instead of general party or candidate preferences.

The study involved 156 undergraduate students at an American university. In the first of two sessions conducted for the study, the participants were asked their views concerning four hot-button topics: gun ownership, abortion, health care regulation and the minimum wage. They were also asked about 13 other issues that were simply put in to cover the fact that the researchers were interested in these four issues.

Six weeks later, the students were invited to participate in another study, supposedly unrelated to the first. In this case, they went to a computer lab, where they were asked to give their impressions of a new online magazine. The online magazine had pro and con articles on the four topics that they were questioned about in the first session. All the articles had headlines that clearly indicated what position they were advocating.

Participants were told they did not have time to read all the articles, so they should just choose which articles they found interesting, as they would normally with a magazine. They were also told they didn't have to read whole articles. They were then given five minutes to read.

The key for this portion of the study was that the computers had a software program that unobtrusively recorded which articles they clicked on and how much time they spent with each article.

"We actually observed people's behavior and didn't just ask them what they read," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

The results showed that participants clicked on an average of 1.9 articles that agreed with their views, and 1.4 articles that didn't. The participants had a 58 percent likelihood of picking an article that supported their viewpoint, versus 43 percent likelihood of choosing an article challenging their beliefs.

Participants were most likely to read only articles that were consistent with their views, the study showed. Next most common was reading both views on an issue. Very few people only clicked on articles that opposed their views.

The study found that people with a stronger party affiliation, conservative political views, and greater interest in politics were the ones most likely to click on articles with opposing viewpoints.

"It appears that people with these characteristics are more confident in their views and so they're more inclined to at least take a quick look at the counterarguments," she said. "Even if they click on opposing views, they're not looking for insights that might change their mind."

People who reported that they read news more frequently, on the other hand, were more likely to avoid opposing viewpoints.

"People have more media choices these days, and they can choose to only be exposed to messages that agree with their current beliefs," Knobloch-Westerwick said.

And that has real-world implications, she said.

"If you only pay attention to messages you agree with, that can make you

more extreme in your viewpoints, because you never consider the other side," she said.

Many media outlets today specialize in shrill, harsh commentary that demonizes opposing viewpoints. If that is all that people hear, it can reduce political tolerance and make compromise less likely.

"That may be one reason for the increasing polarization of American voters," she said.

"Citizens really should be weighing and monitoring diverse arguments in order to make informed decisions. Unfortunately, that's not happening as often as it should."

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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