

Partisans not locked in media 'echo chambers,' study finds

January 31 2012, by Jeff Grabmeier

Despite the fears of some scholars and pundits, most political partisans don't avoid news and opinion sources that contradict their own beliefs, according to a new study.

In fact, the more that self-described liberals and conservatives visited online sources supportive of their beliefs, the more likely they were to also view opposition websites, as well as general news sites.

"People aren't systematically avoiding websites that challenge their [political views](#)," said R. Kelly Garrett, co-author of the new study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"They certainly are inclined to seek out sources that reinforce their views, but the more they do that, the more likely they are to at least sample sources that challenge their opinion."

Garrett conducted the study with Dustin Carnahan and Emily Lynch, graduate students in political science at Ohio State. Their results appear online in the journal [Political Behavior](#) and will be published in a future print edition.

While the internet has given users the opportunity to consume only information that they already agree with, this research suggests people aren't doing that.

"A conservative who uses conservative news sites like Newsmax is more

likely to also view liberal news sites like Daily Kos," Lynch said.

For this study, the researchers used data from five different surveys of Americans taken from 2004 to 2008. Four of the surveys were sponsored by the [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#), while the last was a survey funded by the National Science Foundation, which Garrett helped lead. Each of the surveys interviewed between about 600 and 2,500 randomly selected Americans.

The surveys asked respondents about their own [political beliefs](#), and how often they visited ideologically oriented news websites. While the surveys differed in their wording, they generally asked respondents about their use of websites of politically liberal news organizations or blogs such as Alnet.org or DailyKos.com or politically conservative news organizations or blogs such as Newsmax.com or Townhall.com.

Respondents were also asked about their use of websites of major mainstream [news organizations](#) such as CNN.com and newspapers such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal.

The surveys suggest that about 14 percent of the Americans use ideologically consistent websites -- in other words, either conservative or liberal news sites or blogs that tend to support the readers' political worldview.

These users do not visit partisan websites at the expense of the mainstream media -- in fact they are more likely to use the mainstream media than are those who don't visit partisan sites.

Based on their analysis, the researchers predicted that the probability that the typical individual in the 2004 survey who visited partisan sites will use a major news organization's site is 78 percent -- 40 percentage points higher than the typical person who doesn't use partisan sites.

But partisans don't just visit the mainstream media sites -- results from the 2008 data showed that the more often that people visited websites that conformed to their views, the more likely they were to visit sites that opposed their views.

Furthermore, partisan [website](#) users don't typically count these sites as their main source of political content. Results from the 2008 survey showed that two out of three (67.3 percent) partisan news users also visited sources that included at least some attitude-challenging information -- such as mainstream news outlets -- more often than they used the more supportive partisan sites.

Garrett emphasized that he and his colleagues took into account the effects of political interest on news use. In other words, the results found in this study don't simply reflect the fact that politically interested people tend to visit more [news](#) websites overall than do non-interested people.

"Whether you're very interested in politics or only casually interested, if you visit websites supporting one political view, you're more likely to visit sites supporting the opposing view," he said.

Carnahan said the results give reason for some optimism about the public's use of media in regards to politics.

"On the whole, these findings suggest a more positive outlook for how citizens engage with politics through their media habits," he said.

"The public may be more open to seeking out and considering a variety of political perspectives than we previously thought."

Garrett added: "Looking at all sides of an issue is the first step by which people come to form or change their opinion. If people never look at the arguments of the other side, we have a problem -- we can't overcome

differences, we can't compromise.

"Of course, it is not enough to simply look at what the other side has to say. But it is at least a start."

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Partisans not locked in media 'echo chambers,' study finds (2012, January 31) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-partisans-media-echo-chambers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.