

Getting news from the Internet not as divisive as many assume

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Many Internet news consumers are getting a broad cross-section of news, not just celebrity gossip and sports, says David Tewksbury, head of the department of communication at the University of Illinois and co-author of a new book that looks at current research on the subject. Credit: By L. Brian Stauffer

The Internet is changing the way people get their news, but there's little proof that it is fragmenting or polarizing the news audience the way many assume, says professor David Tewksbury, the head of the University of Illinois department of communication.

"Many things that we thought were going to be really horrible have not yet happened," Tewksbury said.

Five years ago he was very worried. He feared the wide-open choice the Internet provided would encourage people to put on "intellectual blinders."

They would personalize their news habits and pay attention only to what they cared about, ignoring other news, especially about government and [public affairs](#), he thought. They would be shaped by highly segmented and opinionated [news sources](#).

But that was before he reviewed the research to co-write "News on the Internet: Information and [Citizenship](#) in the [21st Century](#)," with former Illinois [doctoral student](#) Jason Rittenberg. The book was published recently by Oxford University Press.

The research does suggest that maybe half of online news [consumers](#) are very selective in what they follow, with more than half of those focused on sports, Tewksbury said. But the other half are seeking out a broad cross-section of news, which is better than what he and other researchers believed and feared, and in keeping with how people read newspapers.

"We don't have a lot of evidence that public affairs knowledge is going down because of audience fragmentation," Tewksbury said. "Many people know quite a bit about what's going on. They are attending to news in a relatively uniform fashion. It's not as if everyone has suddenly become more ignorant than they used to be."

Many previous books have looked at how online journalism gets done, and others at how audiences consume online news, Tewksbury said, but he and Rittenberg tried to bring the two together and look at the larger picture.

"We're trying to cover a large territory with this book," Tewksbury said. "We integrate huge areas of research, where we're trying to talk about content and audiences and how they fit together."

The book also plays out a tension between the co-authors' perspectives, Tewksbury said. Rittenberg, in his late 20s, was focused more on the possibilities of the technology, including its benefits for democracy. Tewksbury, in his late 40s, was more concerned with how people interact with the technology. He was worried about factors that might be segmenting, fragmenting and polarizing the news audience and society.

One of his goals in the book, in fact, was trying to describe how those factors and trends might interact, Tewksbury said.

Most researchers "are taking just a bite out of what is really a big picture," rather than "nailing down all the parts of that picture," he said. They are jumping to conclusions, for instance, about how news preferences connect with or influence news consumers' views (that is, people who watch Fox News will believe A, and those who watch CNN will believe B).

Tewksbury instead sees it as a process. "We can talk about fragmentation and polarization as being sort of steps," he said.

"If you attend to a particular kind of content in a consistent fashion, you'll learn different facts than others in that consistent fashion, and you'll form opinions that are based on that difference in the facts," he said.

The problem in connecting the dots, however, is that it's usually not that clean and straightforward, Tewksbury said.

"The biggest problem here is that people choose, and the Internet is an environment that lets people choose, actively and all the time," he said. That makes determining how people might be polarized by their news choices a tough assignment.

Someone can watch a partisan news source and have opinions that match with its [news](#), he said, "but we really have a hard time pinning down which came first. That is exactly where future research needs to go."

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