

Partisan media driving a wedge between citizens, study finds

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Viewing partisan news reports from both the conservative and liberal viewpoints doesn't make people more accepting of citizens on the other side of the political fence, new research finds.

A study of people in the United States and Israel examined citizens' media consumption: specifically, how often they viewed liberal and conservative news outlets and how often they viewed mainstream, relatively neutral news sites.

Results showed that people who consumed a greater amount of partisan media content were more polarized – even if they viewed partisan content from both sides.

That finding is worrisome, said R. Kelly Garrett, lead author of the international study and associate professor of communication at The Ohio State University.

"It means that getting your news from two partisan outlets on opposite sides of an issue is not the same as getting your news from one relatively neutral news outlet that tries to present both sides," Garrett said.

Rather than seeking truth, people who visit both liberal and conservative news sites may be seeking an opportunity to see how wrong the other side is, he said.

"These results really underscore the importance of preserving a

nonpartisan news media."

The study appears online in the journal *Human Communication Research*.

The findings are important because they were essentially replicated in two countries (the United States and Israel) where the political culture and the news media are both very different from each other, Garrett said.

The U.S. data came from a survey of more than 600 citizens taken in the fall of 2012, before the presidential election. The Israeli data came from a survey of about 400 citizens just before and after the 2013 Israel national election.

In both countries, respondents were asked to describe their political leanings. There were then several measures designed to assess polarization. In the United States, for example, people were asked to rate how favorably they felt about political figures like Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

In another measure of polarization, the Americans were asked how they would feel about having one of their children marry someone from the opposing [political party](#), and whether they thought people from the opposing party were patriotic, intelligent, selfish and/or mean, among other traits.

The question for the researchers was: How much were these measures of polarization affected by the media that participants consumed?

American respondents were asked how often they went to online liberal news sites (such as Huffington Post, Daily Kos) or major news organizations that are frequently characterized as favoring liberal positions (New York Times, MSNBC). They were also asked about their

visits to conservative online news sites (such as Drudge Report, TownHall) or major news organizations frequently characterized as favoring conservative positions (Wall Street Journal, FOX News.)

Respondents also reported their use of mainstream, relatively neutral online [news sites](#), including USA Today, CBS News and Yahoo! News.

The results showed that the more people visited partisan sites associated with their own views, the more polarized they were. In other words, they liked their own candidates more, and liked the opposing candidates less. They were also less likely to want their child to marry someone from the opposing political party, and were more likely to associate members of the opposing party with negative traits (such as being mean) and less likely to associate them with positive terms (like honest).

"Heavy use of partisan media doesn't just affect your attitudes about the other party's candidates," Garrett said.

"It also affects how you think about the other party's supporters – you'll be more likely to see them as less patriotic and more close-minded, for example."

People who visit partisan sites associated with the opposing party are less polarized – they don't have such negative attitudes about the candidates and supporters of the other political party.

But Garrett and his colleagues found a troubling interaction effect: Polarization is actually amplified when people view a lot of partisan content associated with their own political views and also a lot of content associated with the opposition.

There was some evidence of that in the United States, but even stronger evidence in Israel, where the researchers could see how use of partisan

media on both political sides at one point in time was linked to further polarization later on.

Garrett said he thinks he knows why.

"We know that partisan media will ridicule people on the other side, and may even encourage their supporters to go to the opposition websites to see the horrible things they are saying," he said.

"So people aren't consuming media on both sides of the issue to understand what the truth is. They're seeking out the other side just to see how wrong-headed they are."

Garrett said that a nonpartisan, neutral media still has its place in society.

"Our results in the United States underscore the importance of preserving a nonpartisan [news](#) media," he said.

"The mainstream media have a value beyond the business itself and could help limit some of the partisanship we have seen in this country."

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