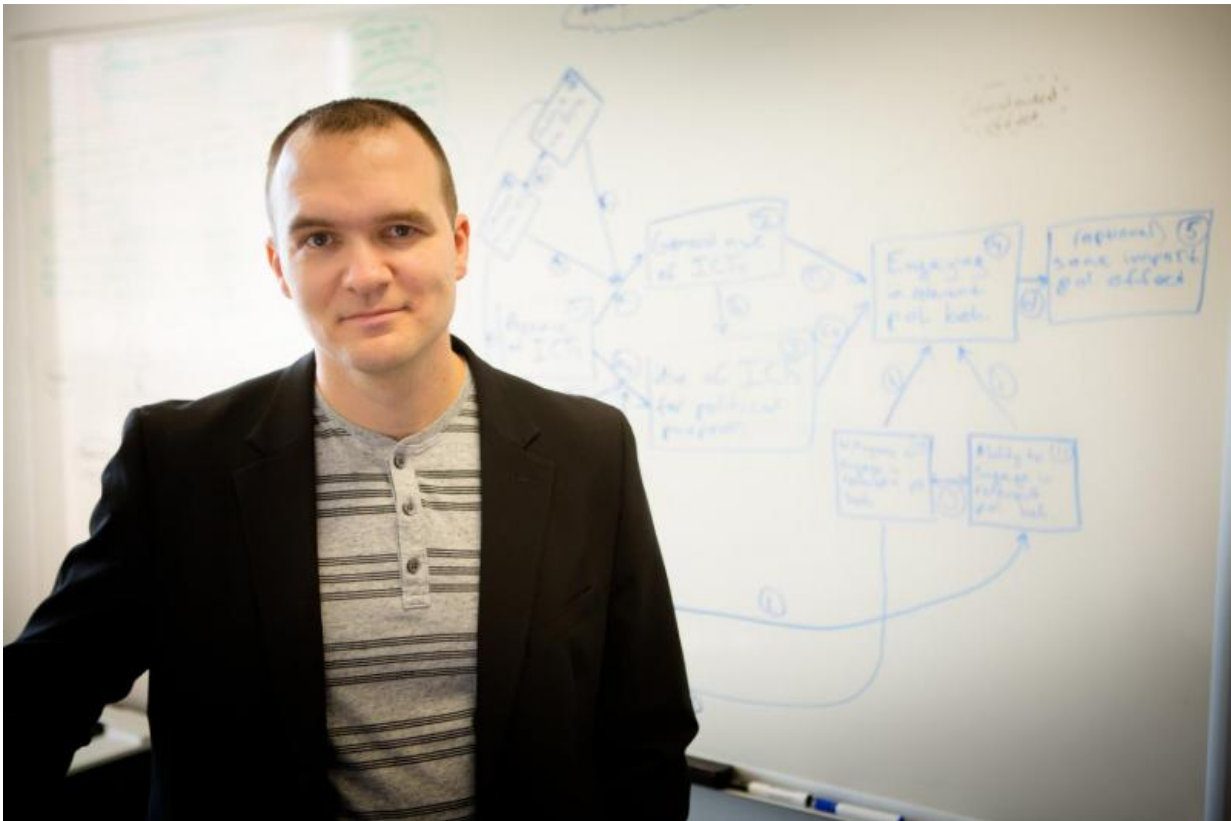


Researcher develops model to show effects of personalizing online information

December 8 2015, by Bert Gambini



New research by Ivan Dylko explores the political impact of the customizability of online information. Credit: Douglas Levere

Are your political sensitivities more to the left or to the right? Which candidate are you supporting? Is a particular social policy likely to

achieve its goal? With each question, people tend to seek information that confirms their existing opinion or belief while avoiding contrary information.

This is selective exposure, and Internet technologies are likely exacerbating this behavior, according to Ivan Dylko, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University at Buffalo and an expert in [political communication](#) and communication technology effects.

"We tend to look for information that confirms our points of view," says Dylko. "It bolsters self-esteem, helps us effectively cope with political information overload, but on the other hand, it means we're minimizing exposure to information that challenges us."

"Technology allows us to customize our online information environment."

Dylko has developed a model, published in the journal *Communication Theory*, which explores customizability's political impact and suggests how the "automatic and consistent inclusion, exclusion and presentation of information" encourages political selective exposure. He has also conducted an experimental study to test his model, the subject of two research papers currently under peer review.

At first glance, selective exposure wouldn't appear to be a product of the information age. Television viewers have historically made these choices. Newspaper readers once had to decide which local paper to read, just as magazine buyers had to choose between Time and Newsweek, for example. The same has been true of what people we chose to talk to and associate with for thousands of years.

But what media consumers did with print and broadcast is not the same

process that emerges online, nor is the idea of selective exposure as intuitive as it might seem, with researchers divided on its consequences.

"Scholars disagree about whether the Internet makes us more politically closed minded, or whether it exposes us to more politically diverse points of view," says Dylko.

Customizability is what separates past print, broadcast and face-to-face realities from present online communication realities. Users now have an unprecedented amount of information to deal with – forcing them to be more selective than ever; they have an unprecedented diversity of content choices – allowing them to find content that matches their beliefs and attitudes more closely than ever; and they have customizability technology providing nearly complete control over the information they receive.

"In a two-newspaper town, readers still might look at the rival paper in addition to their favored publication because the newspaper choices were relatively limited, but online readers can find and then spend hours looking only at content that perfectly fits their psychological and political preferences," according to Dylko.

Presets on old radio panels or print subscriptions might appear to be customizability's ancestors. But pushing a button or dropping a renewal form in the mail required conscious choices.

Online, the process is automatic, sometimes user driven, but also system driven, often occurring without a user's knowledge – an idea labeled "filter bubble" and popularized by political activist and Internet entrepreneur Eli Pariser.

Facebook, which 63 percent of its users say serves as a news source, according to Pew Research Center, is built on customizability. Users add

and remove friends, events and groups from their environment while the site analyzes all of this activity and determines what personal news cycle to present. Same is true of Twitter and numerous other popular websites.

Customizability has been explored in marketing, information science and educational psychology, but has not been deeply analyzed in political communication.

"Technologies often have unintended consequences," Dylko says. "The model published in Communication Theory describes how these customizability technologies, initially designed to help us cope with information overload, lead to detrimental political effects. Specifically, they increase political selective exposure, making us more surrounded with like-minded [information](#) and, potentially, making us more politically polarized."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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