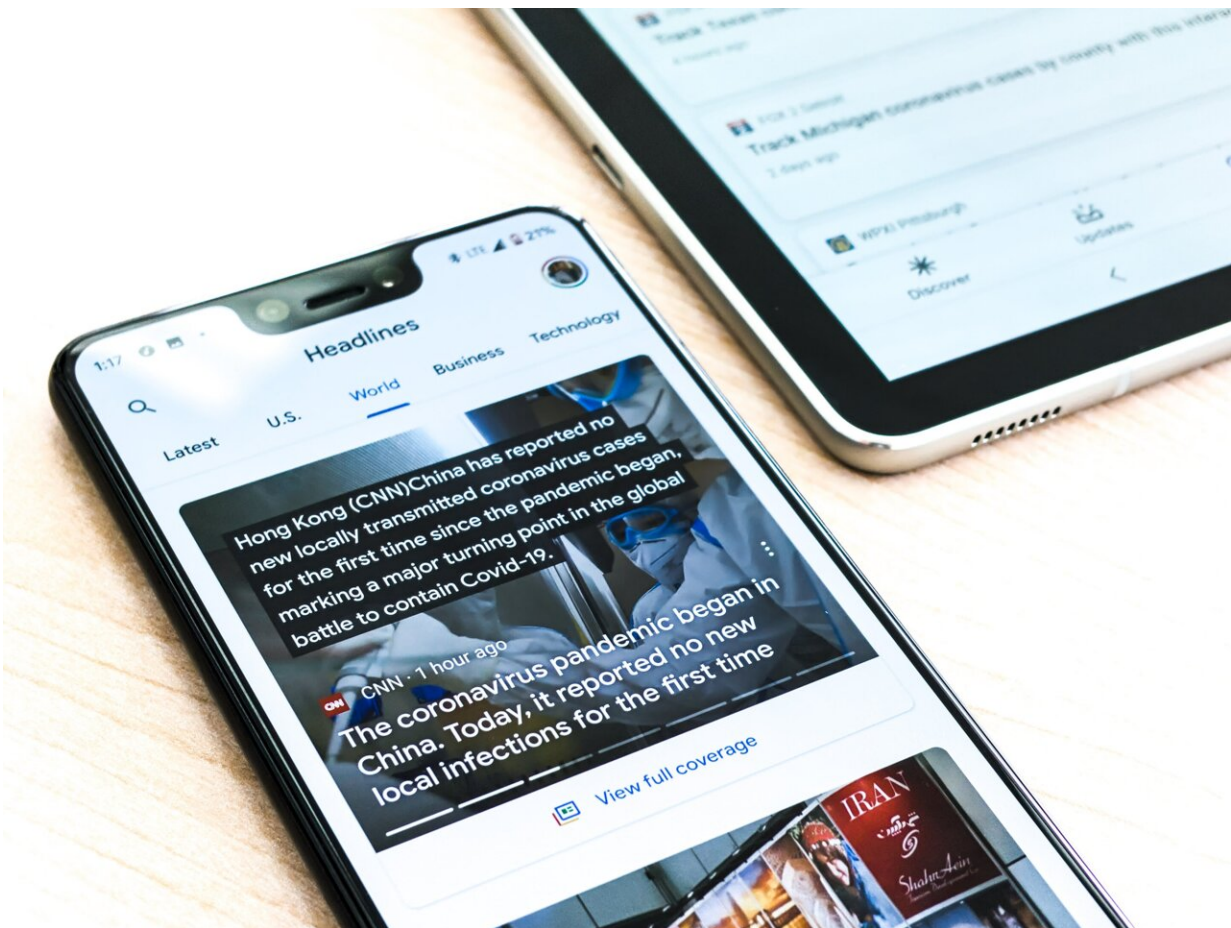


# Can non-partisan news survive in the online echo chamber?

January 8 2024, by Benjamin Kessler

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Journalists are supposed to go where the story takes them, unrestrained

by political bias. But the online media market puts the ideal of journalistic objectivity to a severe test, as highly partisan news sources compete for clicks with legacy providers known for their neutrality, such as BBC News and Reuters.

Arguably, the trend toward ideologically slanted news is unavoidable due to intensifying political polarization among voters and readers. Still, it raises questions about whether journalistic verities such as accuracy and bipartisanship can survive in the online echo chamber. If not, the implications for democracy are unsettling.

In a forthcoming paper for the *Journal of Management Information Systems*, Abhishek Ray, an assistant professor of information systems at the Donald G. Costello College of Business at George Mason University, uses [game theory](#) to unpack the competitive dynamics of the online news market. (Ray's co-authors were Hossein Ghasemkhani of Purdue University and Cesar Martinelli, an economist at George Mason University.)

The researchers model the attempts of three hypothetical news websites—one neutral and a pair of dueling partisans—to engage readers with greater or lesser degrees of [political polarization](#).

They situate the three-way competition amid various simulated market contexts (unregulated free-for-all, state-dominated duopoly, etc.), both with and without a large contingent of centrist consumers.

Ray's research uncovers surprising scenarios where websites with a neutral reputation outmatched partisan websites in attracting engagement from politically polarized readers. Being positioned in the middle of the political spectrum makes it easier for neutral websites to adjust the partisan framing of their articles to appeal more to one side or the other. Slanted news sources are far less flexible in their framing because their

brand depends on catering to a particular political niche.

Ray theorizes that careful forays into polarized territory can help neutral news outlets exploit how the human mind integrates contrasting information. When polarized readers encounter content that echoes their beliefs in an "objective" venue, it promotes confidence in that venue's neutrality, thereby boosting trust—via a well-documented cognitive process known as "leveling."

"The more people start believing that the source is neutral, the more partisan-polarized consumers start engaging with it, which ties in with the insight that neutral websites benefit from polarization," Ray says.

This perhaps explains controversial recent moves from legacy news organizations, such as CNN's fiery town hall with Donald Trump in May 2023 and the New York Times' widely criticized "1619 Project."

There are limitations to this effect, however. [Cognitive dissonance theory](#) suggests the existence of a type of polarization that emphasizes aversion to other people's beliefs over adherence to one's own. Consumers polarized in this contrarian direction are less open to engaging with neutral or opposite-partisan websites.

Additionally, very high search costs (i.e., difficulty accessing or navigating an [online platform](#)) can trump everything else, leading consumers to seek their news elsewhere, regardless of political leanings.

Overall, these findings should inspire hope for the future of neutral news organizations. But the jury is still out on what all this means for the echo chamber and, by extension, for democratic discourse.

On the one hand, exposing biased consumers to a more ideologically diverse, fact-based environment could have a depolarizing effect. On the

other hand, there's the possibility that increases in engagement (and much-needed ad revenue) might tempt editors and journalists to bend their standards to make further inroads with partisans.

To address this problem, the researchers built an "elasticity measure," using their model which measures the extent to which [news sources](#) change their framing in response to increasing engagement from consumers.

This was partly inspired by usual elasticity measures when measuring price sensitivity in response to fluctuating consumer demand. But unlike consumer price elasticity, journalistic pandering to partisans proved their proposed elasticity measure would be non-negative, suggesting that news outlets have insufficient incentive to resist rising polarization in the name of bipartisanship.

Ray infers that regulatory intervention is the only fool-proof way to insulate journalists from partisan drift. He cites the Fairness Doctrine, an FCC regulation (repealed) requiring broadcasters to give a platform to both sides of controversial political issues, as an attempt to balance civic interests with the First Amendment's free-speech protections.

"We are not calling for the regulation of news. But regulators should see that when you don't regulate, when you don't consider accuracy a guiding principle of news, when you consider a marketplace where any news organization has the freedom to attract people to their websites for consumption of [news](#) that caters to their beliefs—these are the problems that you might come up with," Ray says.

The work is currently [published](#) as a working paper in the *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

**More information:** Abhishek Ray et al, Competition and Cognition in

the Market for Online News, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4376209](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4376209)

Provided by George Mason University

Citation: Can non-partisan news survive in the online echo chamber? (2024, January 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-partisan-news-survive-online-echo.html>

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