Exposure to News and Diverse Views in the Internet Age

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I. INTRODUCTION

While the Internet has yet to eclipse television as the medium most used by Americans to get news about national and international issues, the gap has narrowed in recent years. Since the early 2000s, fewer Americans report using television and more report using the Internet. Newspapers also have diminished in prominence. Since 2008, more Americans name the Internet as the source of most of their national and international news than newspapers. This trend coincides with the increasing popularity of online news sites. Legacy media sources, such as CNN and the New York Times, are joined by newer ventures, such as Politico and Huffington Post, in the dissemination of news online. This transformation of the news raises important questions. What, if anything, does the transition to online news mean for coverage of important public issues? What about the availability of contrasting viewpoints?

These modern questions have historical roots. One precedent for thinking about these issues can be found in the now abandoned

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2 Ibid.
Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine, which has not been enforced for decades,\(^3\) was arguably the most prominent regulatory attempt at addressing these questions in the United States. The Fairness Doctrine required stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use the public airwaves to discuss “public issues of interest” in such a way that provided for the “expression of the contrasting views of all responsible elements in the community.”\(^4\) The purpose of this essay is not to examine the drawbacks and merits of the doctrine. Instead, we draw from the doctrine’s normative propositions about the availability of news and diverse perspectives as a starting point for examining online news.

II. ONLINE NEWS AND PUBLIC ISSUES OF INTEREST

What does the move to online news mean for coverage of important public issues, the first objective of the Fairness Doctrine? In the subsequent paragraphs, we review social science research about online news content, audience news use, and the effects of online news. We then reflect on what the research means for the discussion of public issues of interest.

A. Content

The Internet’s potential as a news transmitter is immense. The medium does not impose the space and time constraints of newspapers, radio, or television. The ways in which information can be conveyed online are multiple and include the traditional modalities of audio, print, and video as well as newer features such as hyperlinks, computer-mediated communication, and interactive data visualization tools. All of these features can be employed in ways to enhance learning about public affairs. The Internet also gives more people the ability to produce news; no longer are we in an era in which the scarce broadcast spectrum needs to be carefully allocated among a few news outlets. Today, the Internet provides anyone with minimal training a platform for putting news online. The availability of hyper-local news sites and citizen journalism projects are a testament to this idea.


In practice, however, the Internet has not always lived up to its potential as a news source. In 2010, for example, the Project for Excellence in Journalism published the results of an in-depth examination of the news ecosystem in Baltimore. Although the study identified numerous Internet news providers, these newer outlets did not engage in much original reporting about major news topics in the city. Newer news sources, such as those run by community journalists, do not have the resources to cover the news in the same manner as traditional outlets. At least in Baltimore, new online news providers often reprinted news from established offline outlets such as the *Baltimore Sun*.

Distributing high quality journalism from traditional outlets could be beneficial; however, there are questions about the quality of traditional journalism efforts as well. Traditional media outlets, facing declining audiences, decreasing ad revenues, and newsroom layoffs, may not be able to produce the same type of journalism that they once did. Indeed, the Baltimore study tracked the *Baltimore Sun*’s news product over time and found that the newspaper was generating less original reporting than it did a decade earlier. A recent FCC report authored by Steven Waldman and the Working Group on Information Needs of Communities summarized the Baltimore study and related research: “the growing number of web outlets relies on a relatively fixed, or declining, pool of original reporting provided by traditional media.” These conclusions demonstrate that the promise of the Internet as a news venue is far from realized.

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6 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

This is not to say that there are not some illuminating examples of stellar online news initiatives. Pro Publica, for example, has put together interactive databases allowing journalists and citizens to analyze Political Action Committee (“PAC”) contributions and recipients of federal financial bailout funds. Further, Factcheck.org and its cousin, the audiovisual Flackcheck.org, analyze factual claims made by political candidates and provide information correcting the record when the claims are unsubstantiated. These sorts of efforts demonstrate the potential of the Internet as a news source.

B. Audience

Although there are questions about the quality and “newness” of online news content, that plentiful news is available online seems clear. Given the opportunity to obtain news online, how do Internet users respond? Further, how does changing technology affect the nature of the audience’s encounters with news content?

When more choices are available to audiences, they are better able to match their interests to their news exposure. This is consequential in terms of (a) whether audiences seek news at all and, if they do, (b) which issues draw audience attention.

Just because news is available does not mean that people will seek the news. Before the emergence of the Internet, the expansion of cable television offered an early look at how audiences respond to increasing options. Political scientists Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell found that audiences for presidential primetime appearances declined over time. The pattern was attributed in part to the emergence of cable television, which allowed uninterested viewers to avoid these addresses. The Internet, offering many more options, also facilitates the avoidance of news if audiences so choose. Markus Prior’s research provides strong evidence that a media environment characterized by many entertainment options allows those preferring


14 Ibid., 110.
entertainment to avoid the news easily. The emergence of the Internet may further reduce news audiences because it provides alternative content that some find more interesting than public affairs.

Even when people choose to use online news sources, there are important differences in how the Internet guides news selection relative to other media. Newspapers and television news provide contextual cues about which topics are important—graphic indicators and story placement both convey this information. Further, one typically glances at the front page of a hard copy newspaper, even if a favored section is buried more deeply in the paper. For television news, one usually sits through stories ordered in such a way to convey importance. Internet news sites do convey some of these same types of contextual cues about story importance, such as listing a breaking story toward the top of a webpage, including a picture, or making the headline larger than the headlines of other news stories. Yet online, it is easier for readers to completely bypass these indicators and instead attend to pages that contain content more tailored to their particular interests.

The ability to focus on issues of interest and to miss other topics is illustrated in social science research. David Tewksbury and Scott Althaus experimentally compared students’ use of a hard copy newspaper to an online version of the same newspaper. They discovered that students using the online version were less likely to look at public affairs news in comparison to those reading a hard copy newspaper. Tewksbury and Althaus explained the result by noting that people are better able to narrowly pursue their own interests online. This is in contrast to hard copy newspapers, where contextual cues may lead readers to encounter issues about which they initially have little interest. Other studies confirm that the Internet allows for


17 Ibid., 460–62.

18 Ibid., 472.

19 Ibid., 472.

20 Ibid., 458.
the selection of news about specific issues of interest. Indeed, those with specialized interests may gravitate toward the Internet as a news source. Norman Nie and his colleagues found that when people are asked about the most important issues facing the United States, those more frequently using the Internet for news name less common issues, such as education and taxes, in comparison to those infrequently using the Internet for news, who name more popular issues such as the economy and the “War on Terror.” Those with more specialized interests may turn to the Internet for more in-depth information on those topics.

Thus far, we have been discussing purposeful exposure—some people purposefully avoid news and some purposefully look for specific issues. Yet one can encounter news without intending to do so. When a music radio station includes a news break, for example, this could be seen as a type of unintentional news exposure. Similarly, people could run across news online without seeking it out. When logging on to a Yahoo! e-mail account, for instance, one could run across news content on the site. If news were strategically placed online to encourage unintentional news exposure, the Internet could increase news exposure.

But to what extent does incidental exposure to news occur? In the broadcast era, incidental exposure to the news may have occurred because, at certain times of day, audiences had few choices if they wanted to watch television. Before cable, some likely watched the news not because they were interested, but because it was their only televised option. They could either watch the news or turn off the television. Tellingly, broadcast news audiences declined as cable television diffused and gave people more shows to watch other than news programming. The Internet arguably has a similar effect, where citizens can browse websites tailored to their individual interests, thus avoiding the news if their preferences lie elsewhere.


24 Ibid., 151.
Yet accidental encounters with the news are possible online. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey, sixty-two percent of respondents reported having encountered news even when they were “online for purposes other than getting news.”25 Social media sites also may provide Internet users with additional opportunities to encounter news if people push news to their connections. Notably, forty percent of American adults occasionally encounter political content from their friends via social networking sites, suggesting the potential for incidental exposure to news on sites like Facebook.26 Although this number is impressive, current evidence suggests that these sites are not yet a main news source for many Americans.27

Another important feature of the Internet also must be taken into account: the most frequently accessed news sources. Mainstream news outlets have large audiences online as well as offline. Matthew Hindman, in his extensive study of web traffic and politics, found that thirty times more people visit mainstream news websites, such as CNN, MSNBC, and the New York Times, than visit political websites, such as the Huffington Post and the Free Republic.28 In addition to accessing these sites directly, online users also are directed to them. Search engines are one popular tool used to navigate the Internet, with 91 percent of adult Internet users reporting that they utilize search engines.29 Their choice to use a search engine may influence the political information to which they have access. Search engine


algorithms favor large, well-known websites at the expense of smaller ones, limiting the range of sources from which citizens can choose to read about public affairs.\(^{30}\) During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, for instance, traditional campaign sources, including mainstream news and official candidate websites, made up more than sixty percent of the top search results for the presidential candidates on search tools like Yahoo! and Google.\(^{31}\)

Though more research is necessary in each of these areas, it is clear that the Internet allows citizens to choose whether to find political news online and may provide some opportunity for incidental news exposure. Online search technologies and the popularity of large sites, however, may influence the types of political information citizens find.

C. Effects

One reason for promoting media coverage of important issues is to inform the public. In the 1949 report from the FCC containing the Fairness Doctrine, precisely this rationale was offered: “one of the most vital questions of mass communication in a democracy is the development of an informed public opinion through the public dissemination of news and ideas concerning the vital public issues of the day.”\(^{32}\) Does the Internet contribute to the development of an informed public?

Social scientific research suggests that, for some, the Internet assists with information gain. Numerous studies document that consuming news media, in general, contributes to learning about important public issues.\(^{33}\) Studies focusing specifically on the Internet

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30 Hindman, Digital Democracy, 56–57.


also demonstrate that online news use is related to political knowledge.34 Yet the Internet may affect knowledge gain in different ways than other media. First, the Internet may lead people to learn about different issues depending on their interests. In one experiment, those using a newspaper’s website for news learned about different issues than those using a hard copy of the same newspaper, despite considerable overlaps in the content.35 The authors proposed that online newspaper users were more effective at honing in on issues of interest and avoiding other content. Additional research supports the idea that the Internet allows those with specialized interests to obtain domain-specific knowledge.36

Those without a substantive interest in the news may use the Internet to avoid gaining information about the news and current events. Work by Dietram Scheufele and Matthew Nisbet showed that those using the Internet for entertainment purposes have lower levels of political knowledge.37 Markus Prior’s research demonstrated that those who are uninterested in the news have lower levels of political knowledge when they have more media choices compared to when they have fewer choices.38 Having access to both the Internet and cable television, Prior reasons, allows those preferring entertainment to screen out news and focus on entertainment.39 Those without cable and the Internet may suffer through the news from time to time, thus gaining higher levels of political knowledge than those with more media choice.


35 Tewksbury and Althaus, “Knowledge Acquisition,” 472.


38 Prior, Post Broadcast Democracy, 137.

39 Ibid., 120.
Second, various online features can influence how citizens learn from the news. An experiment comparing those using a hyperlinked website to those using a website not including hyperlinks demonstrated that hyperlinks affect knowledge. In particular, hyperlinks result in lower factual knowledge gain. Yet for experienced Internet news users, hyperlinks can generate greater knowledge density whereby users see more connections between various concepts. In other words, these linking tools help experienced users to develop more complex understandings of how political issues relate to one another.

Whether accidental exposure to news content online could increase public knowledge is unclear. Several studies suggest that people may learn from unintended news exposure. David Tewksbury, Andrew Weaver, and Brett Maddex, for example, found correlations between political knowledge and encountering news online when not purposefully seeking it out. Yet citizens do not have to pay attention to news they encounter unintentionally; they can simply switch to another website or ignore the information. If people are unmotivated to learn about the news, they may simply switch their exposure pattern when encountering news to something that better matches their preferences.

D. Summary

With respect to providing public affairs information and creating an informed public, the Internet has a mixed record. Although there are ways to refine the information that is available online, it is without question that news and public affairs content are widely accessible. Availability does not mean use, however. Contemporary social science

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41 Ibid., 98.

42 Ibid., 102.


44 Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex, “Accidentally Informed,” 545.
and the realities of the modern media environment suggest that the online news environment is far more complicated—audiences need the motivation to turn to the information and an understanding of how search technologies filter online information. The success of many news websites demonstrates that there is some appetite for news content; however, the appeal is not universal. Online news may come close to meeting the goal of providing information about public issues, but it also may make it easier for uninterested segments of the population to filter out the news. If the objective is to have an informed public, gaps in news interest and knowledge may be read as disconcerting.

III. ONLINE NEWS AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The normative underpinnings of the Fairness Doctrine extended beyond the provision that public affairs information should be provided to the public. A second contention of the doctrine was that citizens should have access to diverse perspectives: “the public interest is best served in a democracy through the ability of the people to hear expositions of the various positions taken by responsible groups and individuals on particular topics and to choose between them.”

The “ability of people to hear expositions of various positions” requires elaboration. The FCC meant that citizens should have access to different perspectives. Today, people arguably do have this access—and to a much greater extent than in times past. Thanks at least in part to the Internet, people can easily encounter a variety of perspectives on important issues. Yet whether people actually hear opposing views objectively is another matter entirely. We examine access to diverse views and the motivation to think about different perspectives in the sections below.

A. Content

Without question, diverse perspectives exist online. An online search of virtually any public issue will turn up a variety of views. Although many opinions are accessible online, the way in which they are structured differs in a subtle, but important, way from the regulations imposed by the Fairness Doctrine. To promote encounters

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with various views, the Fairness Doctrine required stations licensed by the FCC to provide time for reasonable, competing views on controversial public issues. This mandated within-station balance. A form of within-station balance can be found online among those news sites striving for objectivity and practicing balanced reporting. Other sites, however, have partisan bents. Yet a user still can encounter many perspectives by accessing a diverse range of partisan sites. Thus, online users can achieve across-website balance.

A content analysis of Internet news sources helps to illustrate the structure of news online. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling conducted an extensive analysis of news selections by five different online sources: AP, Reuters, Daily Kos, Free Republic, and Fox News. They evaluated whether different perspectives were being conveyed online by analyzing the stories covered on each site. The results documented partisan bents in story selection, particularly for Daily Kos, Free Republic, and Fox News. In order to encounter the different available views that exist among these sites, users would need to access multiple sites.

These findings point to an important concern about Internet content, namely that it could lead to “echo-chambers” where people mainly hear views matching their own. Available online content allows this to happen. Partisan bloggers, for example, often link to other likeminded blogs. Even when they do link to the other side, in many instances, the only reason is to make fun of the other view. This feature of online content may direct users to focus on likeminded information. Whether online audiences tend to look exclusively at likeminded information at the expense of competing views is the subject of the next section.

46 Ibid., 1259.
48 Ibid., 345.
49 Ibid.
51 Sunstein, Republic.com 2.0, 148.
B. Audience

Although multiple perspectives are available online, this does not mean that audiences encounter them. With the availability of many sources advocating for different views, more onus now is placed on the media user. In a media environment that contains sites with many political bents, which sites do individuals choose? Do they seek out diverse views? To what extent does technology affect their choice?

Several observations are important. First, traditional news sites and news aggregators garner large audiences. To the extent that these sites present diverse perspectives, this could be seen as evidence that the Internet provides for exposure to diverse views. Second, numerous research studies have found that people prefer information matching their political proclivities, a behavior known as selective exposure. Several studies focusing on online behavior illustrate that the same phenomenon occurs online. Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng, for example, tracked participant use of an online website with eight articles on four issues, with one pro and one con article on each issue. They found that participants were more likely to select, and to spend time with, attitude-consistent articles.

Third, even though individuals display a preference for likeminded information, this does not mean that they have quarantined


55 Knobloch-Westerwick, "Looking the Other Way," 432.

56 Ibid., 442.
themselves into impenetrable echo chambers.57 Some purposefully go online to look for diverse views.58 Research by R. Kelly Garrett demonstrates that although the Internet may facilitate seeking likeminded views, it is not clear that the tendency to avoid counter-attitudinal information is equally strong.59 Even if users gravitate toward likeminded information, they may tolerate some discrepant views.

Further, just as people may encounter news accidentally online, they also may incidentally encounter perspectives with which they disagree online.60 Magdalena Wojcieszak and Diana Mutz, for example, found that people encountered political news in chat rooms devoted to topics other than politics, such as trivia and hobby chat forums.61 In these spaces, people sometimes encountered political disagreement even though they did not seek out the disagreement actively.62 In perhaps the most relevant study, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro, analyzing Internet tracking data from the 112 most highly trafficked news and politics sites, document that although partisan websites predominately attract likeminded partisans, partisans tend to go to diverse outlets online.63 Weighing the available evidence, it is clear that the Internet makes it easy for people to find multiple views. Although people seem to gravitate toward likeminded information, they still may encounter different views.


59 Garrett, “Echo Chambers Online?,” 279.


61 Wojcieszak and Mutz, “Online Discussion Spaces,” 47.

62 Ibid.

Despite the ability to encounter diverse views online, more research needs to evaluate whether people hear these views. It is difficult for people to separate their personal beliefs from their evaluations of alternative views and news content. For example, scientific evidence that favors one’s views is subject to less scrutiny in comparison to information that is opposed to one’s perspective.\(^64\) Research on the hostile media phenomenon has documented that, when faced with a putatively neutral article, partisans are more likely to see the article as biased against their political perspective instead of in favor of their views.\(^65\) In other words, partisans on both sides detect a hostile bias in the media.\(^66\) When a source actually is biased, those who agree with the source’s political bent see the source as less biased compared to those who disagree with the source’s political bent.\(^67\)

Fourth, and finally, advances in online technology may limit the diversity of views people see. In what Eli Pariser calls the “filter bubble,” search engines, social media sites, and political campaigns are personalizing the information individuals receive based on their past online behaviors such that each person lives in his or her own online bubble of individualized information.\(^68\) Personalization can help people to find news, products, and candidates aligning with their individual interests. The danger, however, is that personalization involves computer algorithms deciding what people want without alerting individuals that their past online behavior changes the information that they see.\(^69\) This could mean that people who tend to

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\(^{66}\) Ibid.


\(^{69}\) Ibid., 10.
read news articles from a liberal perspective will begin seeing more liberal-leaning articles on a news website without realizing that other views are being suppressed by personalization technology. Political and issue campaigns take advantage of personalization techniques as well. By purchasing databases containing consumer and Internet use behavior, campaigns can reach out only to people who are politically active and who already support a specific cause.

In sum, even though diverse views exist online, there is no guarantee that (a) the public will process the information with equal charity toward all perspectives or (b) each person will have the same access to diverse information as the web becomes more personalized.

C. Effects

The normative impetus behind requiring the presentation of diverse perspectives is the idea that exposure to different views is beneficial for citizens. Recent communication research suggests that although there may be clear benefits to hearing alternative perspectives, not all consequences of exposure to oppositional views are in keeping with visions of an ideal democracy. Diana Mutz found that talking about politics with those holding different views can increase understandings of other perspectives and can improve political tolerance. Yet exposure to discrepant views also can increase political ambivalence, reduce political participation, and delay decisions for whom to vote. Although Mutz focused on interpersonal conversations, research suggests that exposure to counter-attitudinal media can have similar effects. In particular, analysis by author Natalie Stroud shows that the use of counter-attitudinal media is related to lower levels of political participation and less polarized

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71 Diana C. Mutz, Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 85.

72 Ibid., 102.

attitudes and that likeminded partisan media use predicts higher levels of participation and polarization.\textsuperscript{74}

This is not to say that exposure to counter-attitudinal information has uniform consequences. When forced to encounter counter-attitudinal information in a laboratory setting, the effects are complicated. In some instances, citizens respond based on their partisan inclinations. One study found that when political values—such as the belief that “our society would benefit greatly if people were more self-sufficient”—are attributed to specific political groups (e.g., “conservative Republicans believe that . . . ”), people are more likely to respond on the basis of their political leanings compared to when the same political value is attributed to neutral others (e.g., “some people believe that . . . ”).\textsuperscript{75} This study demonstrates that those opposed to a message, such as Democrats hearing a message about Republican views, may react negatively to the message. Other studies confirm that exposure to counter-attitudinal information can lead people to rebel against the message by becoming even more committed to their original attitudes.\textsuperscript{76} Yet citizens also can be persuaded by partisan information. Lauren Feldman’s experimental research demonstrates that exposure to partisan, opinionated news can have persuasive effects that occur independently of one’s partisan inclinations.\textsuperscript{77} Future research aiming to understand this mixed pattern of results with respect to how citizens respond to counter-attitudinal information will help to clarify the desirability of exposure to diverse views.

Even less research has been done on the effects of personalization technologies. Most discussions of individualization have focused on its descriptive existence rather than on its effects. More research needs to be conducted to understand the effects of elements of the Internet that

\textsuperscript{74} Stroud, \textit{Niche News}, 136–37.


make it more difficult for individuals to find information that differs from their personal perspective.

D. Summary

The Fairness Doctrine aimed to increase the availability of diverse views. By many counts, the Internet has done just this. Whether the audience encounters and appreciates diverse views, however, is another matter entirely. Although the evidence suggests that audiences encounter counter-attitudinal information, they also display a preference for likeminded information, do not always give contradictory information a fair hearing, and may increasingly encounter smaller amounts of diverse information as the Internet becomes more personalized. In this sense, the public, rather than the Internet, may fail to live up to one of the normative propositions underlying the doctrine.

IV. Conclusion

Normative provisions contained within the now-defunct Fairness Doctrine served as a way to organize research on how the Internet affects news coverage, the development of an informed public, and encounters with diverse perspectives. Little precedent is found here that the Internet fails to live up to the doctrine’s content requirements. News is available online. Diverse views can be found online. Instead, the image that emerges from the reviewed research is that public perceptions and motivations play an important role in the reception of news and diverse views. Some are uninterested in news and others seek it out. Some want to retrieve different opinions and others to confirm their existing views. The Internet facilitates all of these desires because it provides users with so many choices. At the same time, algorithms for displaying information online may be constraining choice. Future attention should be paid to the development of online personalization technologies to determine whether individuals are placed increasingly into individualized online spaces without their active consent.

Although this essay has proceeded without questioning the normative proposals undergirding the Fairness Doctrine, they should be critically examined. Is an informed public equipped with insight into diverse views desirable? Although we personally tend to agree, the research reviewed here urges caution. People should have choice when it comes to their media diet. And exposure to diverse views comes with costs—lower levels of participation, for example. The
challenge is to figure out how to close any potential gaps between normative and descriptive accounts about exposure to news and diverse views.