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## Selective Exposure in a Changing Political and Media Environment

Editor

María Luisa Humanes

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Selective Exposure in a Changing Political and Media Environment

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Editorial

## Selective Exposure in a Changing Political and Media Environment

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### Abstract

Currently, the transformations occurring in media systems (especially those relating to technologies, the Internet and social networks) have led to a renewed interest in analysing the conditions that potentially foster selective exposure and, specifically, politically-oriented selection. As a result, that theory is now among the 21st century's top eight most used approaches (Bryant & Miron, 2004, p. 696). This thematic issue addresses some of the key questions about selective exposure and associated phenomena by means of two comment articles and three research articles.

### Keywords

hyperpartisan news; information processing; motivated reasoning; populism; selective exposure; visual communication

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Selective Exposure in a Changing Political and Media Environment”, edited by María Luisa Humanes (University Rey Juan Carlos, Spain).

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### 1. Introduction

Like many other theoretical approaches to media communication, selective exposure theory came about in the 1940s when the effects of the media were limited. The study by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) on the presidential campaign in 1940 noted that the effects of the media were nuanced by processes of selection, attention and retention, which served to reinforce individuals' prior predispositions and attitudes when faced with media content. In addition to selection, selective attention and selective retention were, as mediating factors, the reference groups, interpersonal communication, opinion leaders and the nature of the media outlets (Kappler, 1960, p. 19). These early studies understood that citizens looked for media content that was as concordant as possible with their pre-held ideas about reality (Stroud, 2010). Given that exposure is the step that precedes the attention and retention processes, the analysis of exposure became a particularly important research topic.

In the 1960s, there was some criticism of that approach (Stroud, 2011). Authors such as Freedman and Sears (1965) suggested that the correlation between opinions held by the media and those held by their audi-

ences could not be explained by the audiences' rejection of contrary opinions, but instead by the fact that the media environment tended to offer its audiences news that was more concordant than discordant (a situation they called 'de facto selectivity'). The ideas of Freedman and Sears (1965) had a major impact, so much so that the selective exposure theory fell into disuse in the 1970s and 1980s. In the second phase of selective exposure theory, evidence of the fact that individuals always looked for news concordant with their opinions was found not to be as strong as expected (Kinder, 2003; Zaller, 1992). In their meta-analysis of studies published between 1956 and 1996, D'Alessio and Allen (2002) corroborated that idea of moderate support ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ) for the selective exposure hypothesis.

Today, the transformations occurring in media systems (especially those relating to technologies, the Internet and social networks) have led to a renewed interest in analysing the conditions that potentially foster selective exposure and, specifically, politically-oriented selection. As a result, that theory is now among the 21st century's top eight most used approaches (Bryant & Miron, 2004, p. 696). Bennett and Iyengar (2008) wondered if what we were seeing was a resurfacing of the minimal ef-

fects of the media due, among other factors, to the multiplication of media outlets from which news could be obtained. The growth of the Internet as a news source has actually reinforced that idea because the citizens' ability to search for and find information has increased (Valentino et al., 2009). For example, the personalised searches enabling websites to generate targeted content are linked to the process of selective exposure (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 261).

A revival of the notions behind the idea of media exposure driven by predispositions has led to a refinement of both the theoretical postulates and methodological designs. In their review of articles focusing on the selective exposure theory published in scientific journals since 1940, Günther and Domahidi (2017) identified a considerable increase in scientific production since 2000.

## 2. Contributions in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue addresses some of the key questions about selective exposure and associated phenomena by means of two comment articles and three research articles.

The comment article by Matthew Barnidge and Cynthia Peacock (2019) contends that we are now in a third phase of research into selective exposure. According to the authors, this phase is characterised by two new phenomena: diversifying social connections and hyperpartisan news. Hyperpartisan news is not only partisan, but also alternative. Such news is disseminated by media outlets that eschew the traditional journalistic routines and rules, and have found a broader audience on social networks. Social networks provide the media outlets with a free publishing platform and users with the ability to share messages regardless of the traditional media. The effects of hyperpartisan news are indignation and the generation of partisan emotions. But, more importantly for the authors, "the threat of hyperpartisan news is therefore less about exacerbating left–right divides and more about creating divides between those who support democratic political systems and those who want to undermine them" (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019).

Lindita Camaj (2019) states in her commentary that the selection process does not end with exposure to media content, but continues when audiences interact with information to make decisions. She proposes the theory of motivated reasoning as analytical approach, and specifically, she argues that both the theory of cognitive dissonance and the hostile media bias theory—although they are very richness theoretical perspectives—are not so useful to explore the link between exposure and opinion formation in order to understand the multi-faced aspects of selectivity in a more holistic way.

The article by Powell, van der Meer and Brenes Peralta (2019) addresses the contribution of visuals to partisan selective exposure, linking selective exposure theory and visual communication in a novel way. Through two experiments using news on immigration

and arms control in the United States, the authors show that visuals should not be excluded from future research despite the fact that bias in the headlines and the identification of the news source have more influence than visuals do on selective exposure.

The article by Benjamin Lyons (2019) argues that individuals do not solely expose themselves to the news offered by media outlets, and that interpersonal communication is another element of political communication. From that perspective, he contends that the activation of discussion in interpersonal networks could also be understood as a process of selective exposure, that is, as a second level of post-media-exposure selectivity. Through an experiment using news on statements made by President Trump, it was found that the densest and most cohesive discussion groups emerged in response to pro-attitudinal news, that is, those that were concordant with the views held by the group's individuals. Discussion activation was lower in the case of contra-attitudinal news.

The article by Cornelia Mothes and Jakob Ohme (2019) links the processes of selective exposure to populist movements, and takes the 2017 general elections in Germany as the case study. Their field experiment showed that those who voted for the populist party *Allianz für Deutschland* (AfD) and those who sympathised with that political party displayed different forms of engagement with news posts that were critical of the party. While committed voters avoided news that was not concordant with their views, the sympathisers showed themselves to be more open to news that contradicted their ideological preferences. However, the authors also underscore the fact that public sentiment cues on social networks, such as likes or emoticons, can also have a moderating effect on selective exposure.

In conclusion, in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, the reader will find a set of articles highlighting the relevance of the selective exposure theory to our understanding of both audience behaviour and the effects of the media on today's democracies, which are in the midst of profound changes and challenges.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Commentary

## A Third Wave of Selective Exposure Research? The Challenges Posed by Hyperpartisan News on Social Media

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### Abstract

Hyperpartisan news on social media presents new challenges for selective exposure theory. These challenges are substantial enough to usher in a new era—a third wave—of selective exposure research. In this essay, we trace the history of the first two waves of research in order to better understand the current situation. We then assess the implications of recent developments for selective exposure research.

### Keywords

democracy; hyperpartisan news; political communication; populism; public sphere; selective exposure; social media

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Hyperpartisan news on social media presents new challenges for selective exposure theory. These challenges are substantial enough to usher in a new era—a third wave—of selective exposure research. In this essay, we trace the history of the first two waves of research in order to better understand the current situation, paying particular attention to the societal factors that structure news exposure. This historical sketch focuses on the United States because that is where selective exposure research originated, but the trends we highlight are also applicable in other national contexts, and it is our assertion that hyperpartisan news affects political communication worldwide.

### 2. The First Wave

Selective exposure research can be traced back to the famous “People’s Choice” study of the 1940 United States

Presidential Election (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), later forming the basis of the “minimal effects” paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s (Klapper, 1960). American society in the 1940s was characterized by “relatively dense memberships in a group-based society networked through political parties, churches, unions, and service organizations” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 707). This dense, community-oriented social organization was accompanied by a rich local newspaper ecology: Most cities had more than one newspaper and many had niche papers that catered to specific communities. Radio was immensely popular, but television was not yet on the scene. Thus, the American mass media system was not yet fully formed, and most people relied heavily on their social networks and communities to stay informed about politics—a “two-step flow” of political communication.

Individuals’ social networks therefore played a large role in structuring their exposure to news. People read particular newspapers because that’s what people in their networks did. For many, selectivity was not nec-

essarily a product of conscious political motivation, but rather a byproduct of their social surroundings. Scholars would later characterize this phenomenon as *de facto* selective exposure (Sears & Freedman, 1967), which was arguably the most prominent conclusion drawn from first wave of research.

### 3. The Second Wave

Selective exposure research declined in popularity between the 1960s and the 2000s, at which point it was renewed with vigor in response to the rise of partisan media on cable news and the internet. In the interim, American society had changed dramatically. Dense, community-oriented social networks had given way to diffuse, ego-centric networks (Fischer, 1982). The national mass media system had consolidated and then diversified with the advent of digital media technologies. Local media, meanwhile, had begun to decline.

Therefore, the societal factors governing news exposure also had changed. Exposure was now structured much more by personal interest than it was in the past. Many people chose not to pay attention to the news at all (Prior, 2007), and the rest could now choose news that reflected their political ideologies and/or partisan identities (Stroud, 2011). While it is true that online communities also shaped news exposure, membership in these communities was driven by personal interest rather than by geography. These developments led to growing concerns about political polarization (Garrett & Stroud, 2014), and, thus, the second wave of selective exposure research emphasized the deleterious effects of partisanship in the media and the public.

### 4. The Third Wave?

Social media in general, and hyperpartisan news in particular, pose new challenges to selective exposure theory, and we predict that these challenges will usher in a third wave of research as scholars attempt to meet them. Social media have restructured news exposure in two ways: by diversifying social connections and by facilitating the rise of hyperpartisan news.

#### 4.1. Diversification

Social media have changed people's news use habits, but they have not created "filter bubbles" of likeminded content. The filter bubbles idea, which drew from older fears about "online echo chambers" and "cyber-Balkanization," has become a popular narrative since Pariser's (2011) influential book and its accompanying Ted Talk, but empirical evidence tells a different story. In fact, most research shows that rather than acting as a homogenizing influence, social media *diversify* communication relative to other settings (Barnidge, 2017).

Part of why this occurs is because we are once again getting our news through our social networks.

Many social media users report that they don't seek out news because they believe the news will come to them (Toff & Nielsen, 2018), and these patterns of behavior result in relatively high levels of incidental exposure to news on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). However, this reliance on social networks for news is not a return to the 1940s. We are no longer embedded in tight-knit, community-based networks. Rather, social networks are large, diffused, diverse, and organized around individuals. Thus, social media promote not informational selectivity, but rather informational diversity, because the social networks that drive news exposure also have diversified.

#### 4.2. Hyperpartisan News

Social media also have facilitated the rise of hyperpartisan news. Hyperpartisan news: (1) has an obviously one-sided political agenda, which makes no effort to balance opposing views; (2) pushes anti-system messages that are critical of both mainstream media and establishment politics, often relying on misinformation to do so; and (3) relies heavily on social media as a platform for dissemination. Thus, hyperpartisan news can be situated squarely at the intersection of partisan and alternative news, and considerable overlap exists between hyperpartisan news and "fake" news (Mourão & Robertson, 2019).

This conceptual location distinguishes hyperpartisan news from older forms of partisan news, because hyperpartisan news is not just partisan, but also alternative. As non-mainstream media that eschew journalistic norms and routines, alternative media typically challenge or subvert mainstream narratives and establishment politics. Recently, these media have found a larger audience on social media, which afford news organizations a free publishing platform and users the ability to share messages independently of legacy media.

### 5. Implications for Selective Exposure Research

These two trends—the diversification of news exposure and the proliferation of hyperpartisan news—present new challenges to selective exposure research. These include: (1) two-sided exposure on social media; (2) the nature of hyperpartisan news effects; and (3) the ineffectiveness of traditional "antidotes" to selective exposure.

First, exposure to hyperpartisan news is generally two-sided. Because hyperpartisan news is typically produced for and spread via social media, there also are increased opportunities for incidental exposure to it. In fact, our own research suggests that social media users, particularly strong partisans, are exposed to both left- and right-leaning hyperpartisan news on social media (Peacock, Hoewe, Panek, & Willis, 2019). Therefore, while people still seek out congenial information and share it on social media, they are exposed to counterattitudinal hyperpartisan news through the very same



channels. Thus, selective exposure research must come to terms with the fact that the same social media behaviors can expose people to hyperpartisan sources on both sides of the political spectrum.

Second, the nature of hyperpartisan news effects may differ from the effects of exposure to older forms of partisan news. Hyperpartisan news is meant to cause outrage, cue partisan emotions, and get clicks (i.e., make money). Cyrus Massoumi, who ran a conservative page called *Truth Monitor* along with a liberal page called *Truth Examiner*, described his content as “always inflammatory” and “excluding facts from the other side.” He says his sites were meant to cater to “the lowest common denominator”. Hyperpartisan news does just that: It provides low-quality news with the goal of making money from people’s—in many cases misguided—anger and outrage.

What does consuming such content do to news consumers? No doubt it exacerbates political polarization, particularly affective polarization. But these polarizing effects are likely just the tip of the iceberg. Hyperpartisan sites commonly traffic in misinformation and conspiracy theories (Mourão & Robertson, 2019), a practice that probably results in pervasive distrust in institutions and information among its audience. The threat of hyperpartisan news is therefore less about exacerbating left—right ideological divides and more about creating new political divides between those who support democratic political systems and those who want to undermine them. It isn’t just about competing perspectives. It is about blending truth and untruth to subvert those perspectives altogether, diverting public conversations away from fact-based arguments and positions.

A consistent diet of hyperpartisan news likely results in an audience that is angry, misinformed, highly distrustful of news media and political institutions, and eager to vote for non-establishment or anti-democratic political candidates. Therefore, in today’s media environment, we should perhaps be concerned more about anti-democracy effects than we are about political polarization. Furthermore, because of the global reach of social media, hyperpartisan news has the potential to undermine news media and political democracy not just in the United States but around the world. Indeed, hyperpartisan news certainly appears to coincide with the rise of populist parties and candidates in countries including Hungary, Brazil, the Philippines, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, among others.

Finally, the known “antidotes” to the polarizing effects of selective exposure may not work the same for hyperpartisan news. Exposure to counter-dispositional information has commonly been heralded as a way to counteract the influence of partisan media, reduce polarization, and increase tolerance. When it comes to hyperpartisan news, though, it is difficult to see how this “antidotal effect” would work. Is it reasonable to believe one could “balance” the content of conservative *Truth Monitor* by reading the liberal *Truth Examiner*? Both sites dis-

seminate the same low-quality, conspiratorial content, meaning one might anticipate even fewer reasoned opinions and lower tolerance from a reader who visits both left- and right-leaning hyperpartisan sites. Thus, exposure to hyperpartisan news may be a different animal altogether from partisan news on cable television and more established online sites—and one that is decidedly more threatening to the foundations of democratic societies around the world.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Commentary

## From Selective Exposure to Selective Information Processing: A Motivated Reasoning Approach

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### Abstract

Literature suggests that while without doubt people engage in selective exposure to information, this does not entail that they also engage in selective avoidance of opinion-challenging information. However, cross-cutting exposure does not always lead to dispassionate deliberation. In this commentary I explore psychological conditions as they apply to attitude-based selection and make an argument that selectivity does not stop at exposure but continues as audiences engage with information they encounter and incorporate in their decision-making. I propose the theory of motivated reasoning as a rich theoretical underpinning that helps us understand selective exposure and selective information processing.

### Keywords

audience; information; information processing; media; motivated reasoning; selective exposure

### Issue

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## 1. Introduction

It is assumed that the prospects for a deliberate democracy are dire in a society where individuals seek only information that supports their beliefs and limits their exposure to other perspectives (Cohen, 1997). The affordances provided by the current media environment for selective exposure represent the worst nightmare for deliberate theorists as they create the perfect conditions for ideological echo chambers. Thus, the renewed interest in this topic comes as no surprise as scholars grapple to understand and predict the causes and consequences of information selectivity.

Indeed, the concept of selective exposure is not new (Klapper, 1960) and the literature already offers rich theorizing on the topic. Scholarly work shows that news consumers tend to select media content that is in line with their attitudes across print, online media, and broadcast content. As Garret (2013) eloquently puts it: “The central question is no longer whether or not attitudes influence media exposure decisions—there is little question that they do. Instead, scholars are most concerned with the conditions under which selectivity occurs” (p. 247).

In this commentary I explore psychological conditions as they apply to attitude-based selection and make an argument that selectivity does not stop at exposure but continues as audiences engage with information they encounter and incorporate in their decision-making. I emphasize the importance of understanding of processes that lead to selective exposure and selective information processing and propose motivated reasoning as a rich theoretical underpinning that helps us understand both.

## 2. Attitude-Based Selectivity

The phenomenon of selective exposure can be defined as “any systematic bias in selected messages that diverge from the composition of accessible messages” (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015, p. 3). Literature shows that media consumers tend to select media content that is in line with their attitudes (Garrett, 2013; Klapper, 1960), with partisan and ideological attitudes taking central stage in political communication (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), the most applied theoretical foundation to selective expo-

sure, explains that people are predisposed to seek exposure to information they agree with and avoid conflicting information that might cause psychological discomfort. People are motivated to reduce dissonance by seeking out reinforcing information and avoiding challenging points of view. Moreover, hostile media bias theory explains the tendency of partisans to judge media coverage as unfavorable to their point of view (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), which compromises their trust in media. Rather than affecting media exposure in general, trust in mainstream media affects primarily media choice (Rimmer & Weaver, 1987).

Conceptually, these theories explain the early stages of the deliberate media engagement (i.e., the motivation behind the tendency to turn to mass media for information in the first place), conceptualizing media use as instrumental and purposive. But little is known what happens in the link between exposure and opinion formation.

### 3. Conflicting Evidence: Reinforcement Seeking and Challenge Avoidance

Increasingly the literature is finding that people exhibit a preference for opinion-reinforcing political information without systematically avoiding opinion challenges, contradicting “the common assumption that reinforcement seeking and challenge avoidance are intrinsically linked aspects of the selective exposure phenomenon” (Garret, 2009). A large and stable majority of Americans maintain a diverse news diet, consuming smaller amounts of both pro- and counter-attitudinal partisan sources (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). Studies have found that people with high political interest and high partisanship are the most likely to pay attention to the political news across all media types, partisan and centric (Camaj, 2018). Self-reported measurements can inflate ideological exposure, and when observed in real life situations people’s media repertoires are very diverse rather than segregated in echo-chambers (Dvir-Gvirsman, Tsifti, & Menchen-Trevino, 2016).

In a more refined elaboration of the cross-cutting exposure phenomena, recent scholars distinguish between selective *exposure* and selective *avoidance* (Garret, 2009; Garrett et al., 2013). This line of scholarship argues that seeking opinion-reinforcing and avoiding opinion-challenging information are not equivalent behavior based on empirical findings that suggest that while audiences seek out ideologically aligning media, they do not actively avoid cross-cutting news sources. Motivating factors for cross-cutting exposure range from anxiety (Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009), expected utility (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012), and to better defend their position (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008).

While this literature provides a clear picture on how we physically engage with media sources, it does not provide any clarity on how we mentally engage with informa-

tion gained from those sources. Yet, in an environment of cross-cutting exposure only research on message processing bias can help us understand whether individuals favor information that aligns with preexisting attitudes over attitude-challenging information.

### 4. From Selective Exposure to Selective Information Processing

In recent years scholars in political communication have increasingly turned to motivated reasoning theory (Kunda 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013) as a framework for understanding selective exposure (Camaj, 2018; Stroud, 2011; Wojcieszak, 2019). According to this theory, people are motivated by two types of goals when seeking out information: accuracy goals predispose people to reach correct conclusions, and directional goals motivate people to reach their preferred conclusions.

Driven by their desire to know the truth, individuals in the first group are motivated to seek accurate information across media sources that helps reach accurate conclusions. Conversely, directional goals motivate people to attend to political cues or heuristics, such as party identity and their own predispositions (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014), when selecting information in order to arrive at particular conclusions that make them feel validated. Thus, individuals motivated by directional goals seek attitude-congruent information.

In the context of a US election a recent study suggested that interested partisans, those with directional goals, are more likely than other people to engage in cross-network news media exposure (Camaj, 2018). Yet, cross-network viewing did not generate more moderate opinions. On the contrary, people who were more prone to consume news on network and cable television, were also the ones who expressed the most extreme opinions about political candidates, suggesting that media effects occurred mostly as a consequence of biased information processing.

Motivated reasoning represents a psychological moderator that explains not only patterns of information seeking and news selection, but also patterns of information processing that happens after the initial exposure. Motivations for information affect the evaluation of evidence and how it applies to one’s attitudes. People who are motivated by accuracy goals are more likely to evaluate information more even-handedly and process information more deeply (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Rudolph, 2006). Conversely, people motivated by directional goals process more critically information from sources they disagree with and give weight to information consistent with their preexisting beliefs more heavily. Directional goals motivate people to attend to political cues or heuristics (Bolsen et al., 2014) so they process information in biased or partisan ways, disregarding information that contradicts their point of view.

Most theorists align accuracy motivations with central processing, while directional goals with peripheral

processing of information. This train of thought emphasizes that the durable partisan identities are cued and activated by content and guide reasoning about refusal of counter-attitudinal information in an automatic and effortless way (Leeper & Sloth, 2014).

Recently, thought, there is a recognition that the strategies employed in selection during information processing can be consciously or unconsciously (Taber & Lodge, 2012). After all, it takes effort to recognize counter-attitudinal arguments and find reasonings to devalue them. As Taber and Lodge (2012) argue, “defense of one’s prior attitude is the general default when reasoning about attitudinally contrary arguments, and it takes dramatic, focused intervention to deflect people off a well-grounded attitude” (p. 249). Thus, biases in information processing can result from varied motivation-effort interactions (Leeper & Sloth, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

Literature suggests that while without doubt people engage in selective exposure to information, this does not entail that they also engage in selective avoidance of opinion-challenging information in a systematic way (Garret, 2009). Rather, there is ample evidence that people engage in cross-cutting exposure more often than they don’t. But, as Garret (2013, p. 249) argues, “individuals’ tolerance toward (and occasional appetite for) counter-attitudinal political news should not be confused with dispassionate deliberation.” By focusing our empirical attention on the selective exposure to sources of information or content, we are missing an important facet of selectivity, namely the selectivity and biases as they apply to information processing in decision-making.

In an environment of cross-cutting exposure, the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) is well suited to provide a theoretical foundation to explore whether and under which circumstances individuals favor information that aligns with their preexisting attitudes over attitude-challenging information. There is a critical need to look into “the black box” in order to understand the multi-faced aspects of selectivity in a more holistic way.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Picture Power? The Contribution of Visuals and Text to Partisan Selective Exposure

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### Abstract

Today's high-choice media environment allows citizens to select news in line with their political preferences and avoid content counter to their priors. So far, however, selective exposure research has exclusively studied news selection based on textual cues, ignoring the recent proliferation of visual media. This study aimed to identify the contribution of visuals alongside text in selective exposure to pro-attitudinal, counter-attitudinal and balanced content. Using two experiments, we created a social media-style newsfeed with news items comprising matching and non-matching images and headlines about the contested issues of immigration and gun control in the U.S. By comparing selection behavior of participants with opposing prior attitudes on these topics, we pulled apart the contribution of images and headlines to selective exposure. Findings show that headlines play a far greater role in guiding selection, with the influence of images being minimal. The additional influence of partisan source cues is also considered.

### Keywords

balanced content; experimental research; image; selective exposure; text; visual communication

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen an explosion both in the diversity of choice available to news audiences and in the visualization of news media. Today's fragmented and high-choice media environment enables citizens to select news that matches their political preferences, whilst avoiding information counter to their priors (Sunstein, 2009). In turn, concerns exist that selective exposure contributes to an increasingly polarized citizenry (Stroud, 2010; but see Nelson & Webster, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017). So far, however, scholars of selective exposure have exclusively studied news selection based on textual cues, ignoring concurrent technological advancements that yielded a proliferation of visual media (Fahmy, Bock,

& Wanta, 2014). Images now take centre stage in news and provide eye-catching cues for selection (Zillmann, Knobloch, & Yu, 2001). However, as yet, it is not understood what role visuals play in partisan selective exposure, or whether they might even help to counter it.

The relevance of visuals in selective exposure is illustrated by contested political issues which are also often highly visual. When reporting such issues news organisations can adopt opposing positions which are presented both textually as well as visually. For instance, headlines and images can help frame refugees as innocent 'victims' or dangerous 'intruders' (Van Gorp, 2005). Importantly, the modality (verbal or visual) in which these arguments are communicated matters for the way in which they are processed by audiences. Visuals are attention grabbing

(Garcia & Stark, 1991) and readily foster an emotional connection with the viewer (Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, & Vanman, 2014). However, visuals are often less explicit in their ability to relay meaning compared to the syntactic structure of a written text (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). This article explicitly tests how the different qualities of visual and verbal media influence the selective exposure behaviour of citizens with opposing attitudes about contested issues.

Of course, polarized political journalism is not omnipresent. Most media outlets continue to favour balanced reporting covering competing perspectives of an issue, both in the U.S. and in other Western democracies (Prior, 2013; Umbricht & Esser, 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Moreover, observational and experimental research has shown that substantial numbers of media consumers purposely seek out balanced political information (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2015). However, relatively little research exists into the selection of balanced content in polarized contexts (Brenes Peralta, 2017). This study adds to the nascent literature on selective exposure to balanced content, and extends it by operationalizing balance in words *and* visuals.

In addition to a headline and visual, a news item is almost always accompanied by a source cue—an explicit indicator of the publishing outlet such as a small logo or a header. The ideological stance of this source can provide additional information to influence audiences' perceptions (Baum & Groeling, 2009) and subsequent selection (Iyengar & Hahn, 2008). For instance, audience perceptions (Pew Research Center, 2014) show that Fox News is perceived as a regular source of anti-immigration coverage, *The New York Times* tends to adopt a pro-immigration stance, whilst news agencies like Reuters provide a balanced perspective. Another key contribution of this study is examining how polarized source cues influence selective exposure alongside the visual and verbal content of the message itself.

To achieve these aims, we use concepts from selective exposure and visual communication theories operationalized in two experiments ( $N = 1068$ ) using multiple stimulus exemplars and different political issues. By doing so, this study provides novel insights about (1) selective exposure to *multimodal* (text plus visual) content reflecting a fuller spectrum of political views, and (2) the relative strength of source cues and content cues in selection. We hope that these insights can help journalists and editors to develop engaging multimodal content whilst being aware of how they might contribute to a (de)polarized citizenry.

### 1.1. Selective Exposure: Prevalence, Influences and Omissions

This study relies on selective exposure—the tendency for citizens expose themselves to like-minded political content—as it's overarching theoretical approach. De-

spite extensive research using a variety of methods, the jury is still out on the prevalence of this phenomenon (e.g., Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2013; Sears & Freedman, 1967). More recent studies suggest that personalized echo chambers and filter bubbles are not as concerning as speculated (Nelson & Webster, 2017; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016), since individuals also seek out counter-attitudinal news (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Stroud, 2011).

Concerns about the prevalence of attitude-consistent selective exposure might further be tempered by considering balanced political content. From the demand side, media consumers often seek balanced news coverage provided by broadcast television (e.g., Prior, 2013). This is supported by experimental research showing that people select balanced content when given the opportunity (e.g., Feldman, Stroud, Bimber, & Wojcieszak, 2013; Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Other studies suggest this can be at least as often as pro-attitudinal content (Brenes Peralta, Wojcieszak, Lelkes, & de Vreese, 2016).

In order to explain these patterns of selection, some scholars have argued that the prevalence of selective exposure depends on psychological characteristics that vary across individuals (e.g., motivations and attitude strength; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Garrett, 2009), as well as on certain characteristics of media messages (e.g., information utility or the evidence type; e.g., Hart et al., 2009).

This study addresses three omissions in prior research that fall into this latter category—message characteristics—to shed new light on this mixed literature. Namely: (1) a fixation on the written word has disregarded visuals as drivers for news selection; (2) a focus on one-sided (i.e., pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal) news to the neglect of balanced content; and (3) a failure to examine how source cues interact with the verbal and visual content of news items. These omissions are considered in more detail in the sections that follow.

### 1.2. Visuals as a Cue to Selective Exposure

Scholars have long considered visuals as an integral part of political communication (Barthes & Heath, 1978), in part due to their effects on citizen's political perceptions and behaviour (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Graber, 1990). Indeed, recent studies have shown that the presence of news visuals can encourage the sharing and selection of news stories on social media (Casas & Williams, 2019). However, to our knowledge, only a handful of studies have drawn a causal connection between visuals and news selection (Knobloch, Hastall, Zillmann, & Callison, 2003; Wolf & Grotta, 1985; Zillmann et al., 2001). Zillmann et al. (2001) showed that, compared to news reports without an image, stories accompanied by an image of victimization were read for longer and better remembered. As such, the presence of images can help citizens select into news. However, no studies have ex-



amined the contribution of visuals to pro-attitudinal selective exposure, let alone considering how visuals interact with the headline of a typical news item. That is a key aim of this study.

In order to influence selective exposure, a news item would need to catch one's attention, encourage processing of the content, and relay meaning—with items whose central meaning being congenial to one's preferences likely to be selected more often. The contribution of words and visuals to this process can be illuminated by a fledgling body of research on *multimodal framing* (e.g., Dan, 2017; Geise & Baden, 2015; Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). In their theoretical model of framing effects, Geise and Baden (2015) integrated insights from visual communication research (Barry, 1997; Garcia & Stark, 1991; Paivio, 1991) with framing theory (Entman, 1993; Messaris & Abraham, 2001) to articulate several propositions about how meaning is extracted from words and visuals: generally, visuals are eye-catching, perceived quickly, and exert an activating effect by fostering an emotional connection with the reader. By comparison, text is less salient but its syntactic structure lends itself to cognitive elaboration of a story's substance and, in turn, a more prescribed construction of meaning.

In order to test these propositions, empirical studies of multimodal media effects have adopted a common approach: systematic manipulation of whether the central message depicted by an image and text matches, or does not match (also known as congruence, or redundancy; e.g., Lang, 1995). Such mismatches are relatively com-

mon in news media where busy editors select images in haste and from a limited pool, which can lead to haphazard pairings of image with text (Fahmy et al., 2014). Studies of visual-verbal congruence have, for example, used competing frames from war and conflict news (e.g., combining an image of threatening militants with a text about suffering victims) to broadly confirm the propositions of Geise and Baden (2015) about the distinct processing and effects of words and visuals in multimodal content (e.g., Boomgaarden, Boukes, & Iorgoveanu, 2016; Powell et al., 2015; Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2018; Seo & Dillard, 2016). In this study, we also adopt a manipulation of image-headline congruence to assess how the unique qualities of each modality contribute to selective exposure.

An important omission from this body of work, however, is the study of balanced content, which we know is attractive to audiences when selecting news content (Feldman et al., 2013). By definition, a balanced headline should present opposing sides of an issue. For instance, “*The pros and cons of stricter gun laws in America*”, or “*Syrian refugees: victims or threat?*”. Balance can also be depicted visually in the form of image juxtaposition. Placing two pictures next to each other can serve to emphasise the opposing stances on an issue by directly contrasting them (for an example, see Figure 1). This study adopts this approach to examine the selection of balanced visual and textual content and, to the best of our knowledge, is the first to investigate these types of balanced images that are sometimes seen in news media.



**Figure 1.** An example of image juxtaposition presenting opposing sides of the Syrian conflict. Note: this image was not used in the stimulus material—see Figure 2 and Figure 3 for stimulus examples (Logan, 2017).

Through manipulating image-headline congruence, and by including balanced content, this study empirically examines multimodal selective exposure to a spectrum of political views. To do this we use headlines and images from news coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis and gun control combined in social media posts, so that the central meaning conveyed by the image and text either matches or does not match. Crucially, by analysing selection behaviour of those who support and oppose refugees and gun control, this design allows us to test whether images or headlines are a stronger driver of selective exposure. Due to the psychological ‘power’ of visuals, but their relative ambiguity compared to text, it is unclear which modality is the stronger determinant of selection behaviour. Moreover, due to relative dearth of research into balanced content, especially balance operationalised visually, we are unable to state definitive expectations about its selection. We therefore formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: Are news headlines or visuals more influential in driving pro-attitudinal selection of news items?

RQ2: How frequently are balanced headlines and visuals selected compared to pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal headlines and visuals?

### 1.3. The Impact of Source Cues on Selection

Today’s high-choice media environment makes it not only more possible for consumers to seek out news they might find agreeable but also provides an economic incentive for news organizations to cater to their viewers’ political preferences (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). As such, one can be certain that purveyors of conservative leaning (e.g., Fox News) and liberal leaning media (e.g., *The New York Times*, NBC, *The New Yorker*, *Slate*; Pew Research Center, 2014) will continue to sustain a diet for polarized audience segments. Moreover, in keeping with the well-known “hostile media” phenomenon (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chih-Yun Chia, 2001; Hansen & Kim, 2011), partisans of either side are likely to impute bias to news sources that do not reflect their preferences. These perceived biases mean that indicators of source affiliation should provide a cue to selective exposure.

Selection does indeed seem to differ according to the affinity between a news organisation and the consumers’ political views. In an experiment, Iyengar and Hahn (2008) showed that conservatives preferred to select news attributed to Fox News and avoid liberal outlets, and vice versa for liberals, for a range of issues. However, citizens do sometimes select sources that cut across their political preferences (Prior, 2013). However, no studies have examined how source cues interact with the verbal and visual content of a news item itself to influence selection. That is a goal of this study.

To address this question, we included polarized source cues (*The New York Times* for liberal media; Fox News for conservative media; Reuters for neutral/bal-

anced media) that matched the bias (pro/con/balanced for refugees and gun control) presented by the *headlines* of our news items. We considered this a logical approach since the textual headline typically takes priority over images in the editorial process, with visuals often selected as an afterthought (Fahmy et al., 2014). Based the evidence reviewed, we expect that the addition of source cues to a linked headline will reduce the influence of images in selective exposure. Formally we predict that:

H1: The inclusion (compared to omission) of polarized news sources will strengthen the influence of headlines over images in news selection.

## 2. Method

To test the contribution of visuals, headlines and source cues to selection we rely on an experimental design. To ensure that the observed patterns hold across different political contexts and are therefore more reliable and generalizable, we conducted two identical experiments within different contexts. Study 1 tests news selection in the context of immigration in the U.S., drawing on news about the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East, with a focus on Syrian asylum seekers. Study 2 examines news selection processes in the context of gun ownership in U.S. This issue relates to the long-running debate regarding whether legal gun ownership is a right and necessity for personal protection or is the cause of numerous deadly mass shootings. Both issues are considered highly polarized topics and strongly related to political ideology.

### 3. Study 1 Method: Selection of Partisan News about Immigration

#### 3.1. Design

In order to test the hypotheses, Study 1 applies an online survey-embedded experiment in the context of immigration in the U.S. The first experiment concerns a three within-subjects (*visual bias*: pro-immigration, i.e., immigrants as victims, versus anti-immigration, i.e., immigrants as intruders, versus balanced) by three within-subjects (*headline bias*: pro-immigration, i.e., immigrants as victims, versus anti-immigration, i.e., immigrants as intruders, versus balanced) by two between-subjects (*source cue*: present versus absent) factorial design. To assess the selection of news items that were (in)congruent with participants’ prior attitudes, each condition contained a randomly allocated sample of respondents that either supported or opposed refugees immigrating to the U.S.

#### 3.2. Sample

U.S. participants were recruited in December 2016 via the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowd-sourcing

platform. Previous research that used an MTurk sample has shown that replication studies and use of personality scales on MTurk yield comparable results to other participant pools (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Sprouse, 2011). In total, 534 respondents completed the survey in full and also answered an attention-check item correctly. The sample reflected a fair representation of the U.S. voting population for age ( $M = 38,37$ ) and sex (47.8% female). Regarding the distribution of education, 36.3% was lower educated, 12.2% was higher educated, and 51.5% had a moderate level of education.

### 3.3. Procedure

Participants accessed the survey-embedded experiment via an online link. After giving informed consent, participants answered an issue-attitude question that assessed their general support of the issue of migrants coming to the U.S. Participants were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 7 (anchored strongly oppose and strongly support), how strongly they support or oppose refugees from Syria coming to the U.S. Respondents who answered this question with neither oppose or support were thanked and excluded from the survey, as we needed to identify those for whom the visual and textual bias were (in)congruent with their prior attitude. This item was followed by questions including respondents' demographics and political orientation. Afterwards, participants were informed that they would view multiple news items on the following pages.

The next page showed the nine stimulus news items (i.e., all visual and headline combinations, randomly ordered between participants) related to immigration to the U.S. Participants were instructed to imagine that they came across these news items in their everyday life (on for example their Facebook newsfeed or a news website) and were asked to select their top three news items they would like to view and leave the remaining items blank. After that, the same nine news items were each shown separately in a random order and participants were asked to rate the likelihood that they would select each item in their daily lives. Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

### 3.4. Stimuli and Independent Variables

The stimuli consisted of nine image-headline news items on immigration to the U.S. Both textual and visual stimuli elements were taken from media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis.

For the final experiment, three pro-immigration (e.g., "Rejecting Syrian refugees goes against American ideals"), three anti-immigration (e.g., "Refugees not welcome here, governors of 16 states say"), and three balanced (e.g., "Syrian refugees: victims or threat?") headlines were selected. Based on a pilot experiment of numerous candidate headlines, the stimulus headlines were selected that most clearly conveyed the respective

bias to respondents. Moreover, to maximize internal validity, headlines were chosen that were rated similarly on several factors known to influence media effects, including perceived arousal, salience, and complexity (e.g., Lang, 1995; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006).

Because the balanced visuals showed a combination of pro- and anti-immigration in a single split image, more images had to be found than headlines. Six pro-immigration (e.g., a picture depicting a crying child pulled from a boat) and six anti-immigration (e.g., picture showing a refugee partaking in a violent protest) were selected. Just like the headlines, a pilot test on numerous candidate images was used to select the stimulus images that most strongly perceived as conveying the respective frame. Like the headlines, the images were also chosen based on their similar scores on perceived arousal, salience and complexity.

The images and headlines were then combined into nine news items comprising all possible matching and non-matching image-headline pairs (i.e., 1. Image pro  $\times$  headline pro, 2. Image pro  $\times$  headline balanced, 3. Image pro  $\times$  headline anti, 4. Image balanced  $\times$  headline pro, 5. Image balanced  $\times$  headline balanced, 6. Image balanced  $\times$  headline anti, 7. Image anti  $\times$  headline pro, 8. Image anti  $\times$  headline balanced, and 9. Image anti  $\times$  headline anti). The nine items were displayed in the form of a Facebook-style newsfeed (see Figure 2 for examples). The whole design was counterbalanced so that there was random allocation of the order in which the issues were presented, the position of the items on the screen, and the within-condition pairings of the different image and headline exemplars. Thus, multiple combinations per image-headline pairing were made to ensure that peculiarities of the specific combinations of headlines and visuals did not determine the selection of news items.

Dependent on the condition participants were allocated to, the news items either showed the source of the message or not. The source was always matched with the headline. When the headline was pro-immigration, *The New York Times* as a liberal information source was shown. For the anti-immigration headline, Fox News was added, and for the balanced headline Reuters was used (see Figure 3 for stimulus examples including sources, on the topic of gun control topic).

### 3.5. Measures

**News selection.** In order to measure whether participants would select a news item, based on the image and headline presented, two dependent measures were employed. First, when participants were shown the nine news items on one page, they were instructed to select the three news items that they would want to view. This selection variable provides an indication of whether respondents select pro-attitudinal items over a balanced or counter-attitudinal items based on the presented image or headline when there are multiple options (Feldman et al., 2013).





**Figure 2.** Examples of three stimulus news items from Study 1, for the refugee context, without sources. Notes: matching image-headline pairs are shown for the pro- (top), balanced (middle) and anti-refugee (bottom) conditions. In total the stimulus newsfeed contained nine immigrations news items, comprising all possible matching and non-matching image-headline pairings.

**Figure 3.** Example of three stimulus news items from Study 2, for the gun context and including sources. Notes: matching image-headline pairs are shown for the pro (top), balanced (middle) and anti-gun laws (bottom) conditions. In total the stimulus newsfeed contained nine immigrations news items, comprising all possible matching and non-matching image-headline pairings.

Second, the nine news items were then shown in a random order on separate pages, and participants were asked, thinking about their everyday life, how likely they would select each news item when they came across it on a scale from 0 “very unlikely” to 100 “very likely” (e.g., van der Meer, 2018). This measure indicates participants’ likelihood of selecting news items with different combination of pro- or counter-attitudinal images with headlines.

### 3.6. Analyses

To be able to run the analyses we computed new conditions based on participants’ attitudinal congruence with the image and headline. Images and headlines were coded as congruent if it was in line with participants’ prior immigration attitudes and were coded incongruent if the message was counter to their views on immigration. Reported attitudinal scores ranging from one through three on the 7-point immigration scale were regarded as congruent with anti-immigration stimuli, and incongruent with the pro-immigration stimuli. Scores five through seven were interpreted as congruent with the pro-immigration stimuli and incongruent with the counter-immigration stimuli.

For the analysis, the data were stacked (wide-to-long) to deal with the within subject design. Thus, each judgment given by a respondent is treated as a single case. This approach was adopted to deal with the likelihood of selection rating measure which involved each respondent rating multiple news items, resulting in multiple observations per participant. Therefore, since final observations in the stacked data set are not independent—i.e., each respondent rated nine news items and therefore appeared nine times in the dataset—responses are clustered within respondents. To control for this a multilevel approach with random intercept was applied. The use of a multilevel approach to control for this type of clustering has been applied in previous research, especially in quasi-experimental designs presenting multiple vignettes to respondents (for a comparable analytical approach see: Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016; van der Meer, 2018). Regression analyses then tested if the different pairings of images and headline can explain selection behavior and likelihood ratings. For an alternative approach see Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014).

## 4. Study 1 Results

### 4.1. Visual and Verbal Cues in Polarized News Selection

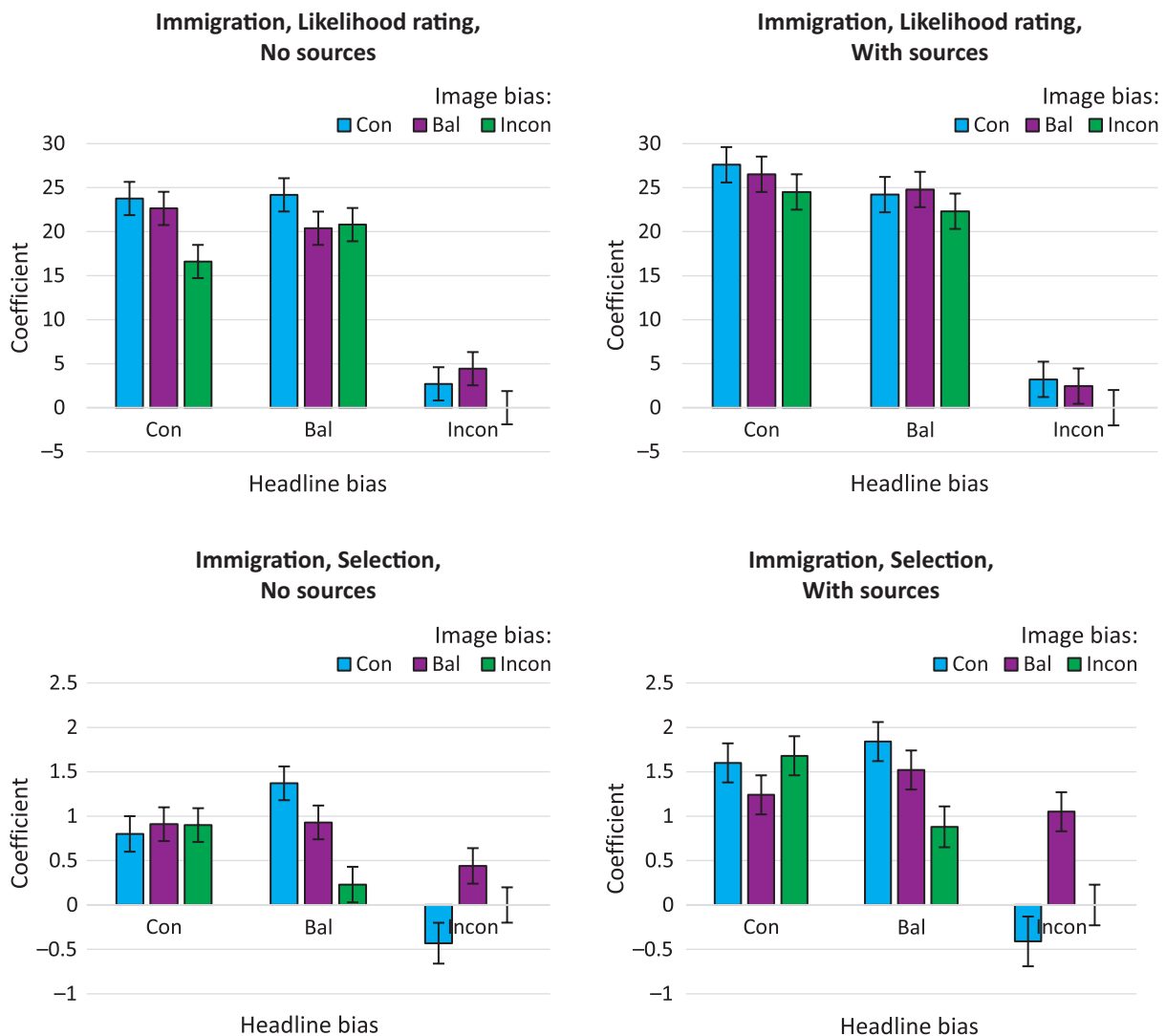
Multilevel regression analyses were used to address RQ1 regarding the power of polarized images and headlines in selective exposure, as well as RQ2 regarding the selection of balanced images and headlines. Figure 4 shows that, for both likelihood of viewing and the selection variables, pro-attitudinal and balanced headlines were strongest predictors of selection. The magnitude of these

effects dwarfed that of the different image bias conditions. This was especially so for likelihood ratings. Interestingly, for news items with a balanced headline only, the bias of the attached image did influence the selection score—with pro-attitudinal images selected more frequently than balanced, which was selected more often than counter-attitudinal. These results are shown in Figure 4 and the full regression tables are shown in Table A1 and Table A2 in Appendix A.

Taken together, this answers RQ1 by showing that participants relied far more on headlines rather than images in their selective exposure to news. And, to answer RQ2, balanced headlines were selected equally as much as attitude congruent headlines, and much more so than attitude incongruent headlines. The effects of images only emerged when coupled with balanced textual content, further suggesting that images are a weaker cue to selection than headlines.

### 4.2. Source Cues

To test the additional effect of source cues on selective exposure to visual and verbal content, an interaction term was tested to see if the coefficients in the multilevel regression models differ by presence versus absence of source cues. As the source always matched the headline in terms of political stance, source-by-headline interactions were tested and several were subsequently observed (also visible in Figure 4). The multilevel regression analysis with likelihood ratings (Table B1 in Appendix B) showed that in the case of a congruent headline with an incongruent image and a congruent headline with a balanced image, the presence of source cues significantly increased the likelihood that a news item would be selected. Also, a news item with a balanced headline and a balanced image was more likely to be chosen. The multilevel logistic regression model for the selection variable showed comparable results. The inclusion of source cues strengthens the influence of headlines over images in news selection for the news items with a congruent headline and a congruent image, a congruent headline and an incongruent image, a balanced headline and a balanced image, and a balanced headline and a congruent image. When we changed the reference category to the balanced image and balanced headline conditions (as compared to the incongruent-incongruent condition) we observed comparable results (Table B2 in Appendix B). In addition, a pattern of selective avoidance, rather than selective exposure, was observed since the inclusion of source cues decreased the likelihood that respondents selected news items with an incongruent headline and an incongruent image, an incongruent headline and a balanced image, and an incongruent headline and a congruent image. This supports H1 by showing that the influence of images in selection is diluted, and the influence of headlines is strengthened, with the addition of partisan source cues. Results can also be seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Coefficient plot comparing the selection of immigration news items with matching and non-matching headlines and images. Notes: *Incon-Incon* condition is used as the reference category. Regression coefficients and standard errors are plotted. *Con* = attitude congruent; *Bal* = balanced; *Incon* = attitude incongruent.

## 5. Study 2 Method: Selection of Partisan News about Gun Control

### 5.1. Design

The experimental design applied in Study 2 is similar to the one in Study 1. Study 2 aims to replicate the findings of Study 1 for the issue of gun control. The second experiment concerns a three within-subjects (*visual bias*: pro-gun control, i.e., victims of shootings due to gun ownership, versus anti-gun control, i.e., the legal right and to protect yourself, versus balanced) by three within-subjects (*headline bias*: pro-gun control versus anti-gun control versus balanced) by two between-subjects (*source cue*: present versus absent) factorial design.

### 5.2. Sample

MTurk was used to recruit 534 U.S. participants. In total, the average age was 38.4 and 48% were female. Re-

garding the distribution of education, 36% was lower educated, 12% was higher educated, and 52% had a moderate level of education.

### 5.3. Procedure

The experiment followed exactly the same procedure as reported in Study 1.

### 5.4. Independent Variables and Stimuli

Similar to the manipulation of the news items in the first experiment, images and headlines were selected from media coverage on the ongoing debate about gun control in the U.S. Again, both images and headlines were selected based on pilot tests that indicated which images and headlines most strongly conveyed the desired bias. Moreover, images and headlines were chosen that were similarly rated on perceived arousal, salience, and complexity. Thus, images and texts were selected that were

pro-gun control (e.g., headline: “Stricter gun laws will prevent more mass shootings”; image: picture showing a victim of mass shooting), anti-gun control (e.g., headline: “Stricter gun laws is treason”; image: picture showing someone protecting his family from a burglar with a weapon), and balanced (e.g., headline: “Opinions divided on gun control”; image: split image containing both pro- and anti-gun control images) (see Figure 3 for examples). Images and headlines were paired and counterbalanced in the same way as in the first experiment to obtain all combinations of congruent and incongruent pairs. The information source cue was manipulated in the same way as in Study 1.

5.5. Measures and Analyses

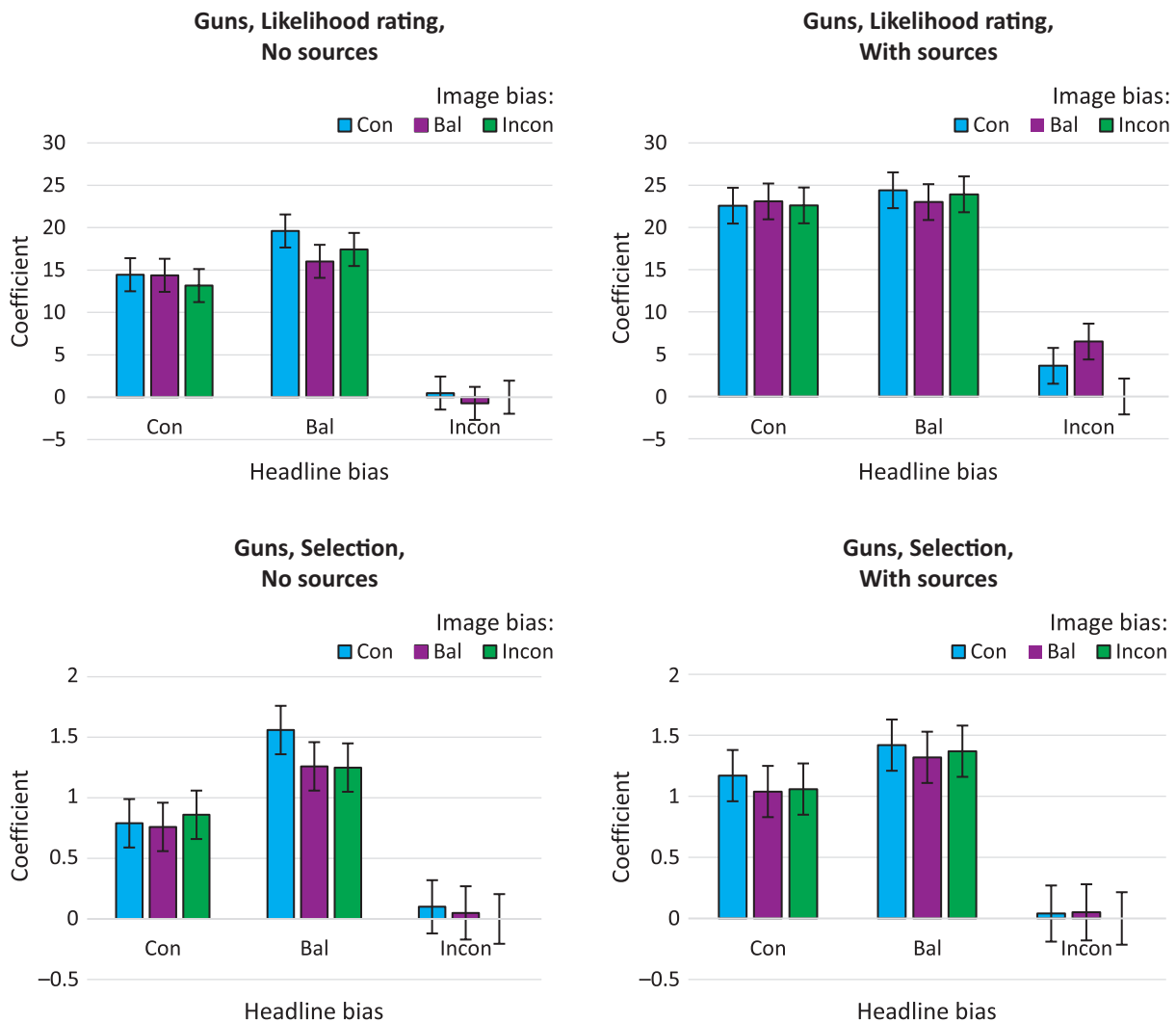
The measurement of the dependent variables and the analysis strategy for the second study was identical to the strategy reported under Study 1.

6. Study 2 Results

6.1. Visual and Verbal Cues in Polarized News Selection

Much the same pattern of results as in Study 1 were observed for Study 2—as shown in Figure 5. For both the likelihood ratings and the selection scores, headlines were dominant in driving selection, with no discernible influence of images. This outcome was even more clear-cut than for Study 1. An interesting difference is that balanced headlines were selected more often than attitude-congruent headlines, for both the likelihood rating variable and selection scores. For full regression results see Table A3 and Table A4 in the Appendix A.

This provides the same answer to RQ1: headlines are more influential than images in news selection. Regarding RQ2 there indication that balanced headlines are preferred over attitude-congruent headlines, and attitude-congruent headlines were preferred over attitude-incongruent headlines.



**Figure 5.** Coefficient plot comparing the selection of gun control news items with matching and non-matching headlines and images. Notes: Incon-Incon condition is used as the reference category. Regression coefficients and standard errors are plotted. Con = attitude congruent; Bal = balanced; Incon = attitude incongruent.



## 6.2. Source Cues

Once again, the same pattern of results emerged for Study 2 as in Study 1. A significant source-by-headline interaction for likelihood scores shows that the addition of a source cue increased the influence of the headlines in selection (see Table B3 and Table B4 in the Appendix B). The likelihood ratings showed that participants were more likely to select attitude-congruent and balanced headlines with a matching source (in terms of political stance) than without, and were less likely to select an incongruent headline with a source than without. No effects were found for the categorical selection variable. In line with Study 1, these results provide support to H1, that the influence of images in selection is diluted by the addition of source cues. These results are shown in Figure 5.

## 7. Discussion

This study set out to explore how images in news items contribute to partisan selective exposure. Until now, this topic has been neglected in studies of selective exposure which have focused entirely on text in headlines. Moreover, we sought to address how balanced visual and verbal cues influence selection, both with and without the addition of source cues belonging to partisan news organizations. Findings showed that headlines play a far greater role in guiding partisan selective exposure, with the influence of images being minimal. Moreover, balanced headlines were selected equally as often as pro-attitudinal headlines. And the addition of source cues increased the influence of headlines in selection, reducing the already small role played by images. These results were remarkably similar for both the issues of immigration and gun control in the U.S.

The dominance of headlines over images in partisan selective exposure was surprising considering the abundance of evidence from visual communication for the psychological “power” of news images (Garcia & Stark, 1991; Iyer et al., 2014). Instead, the findings show that the clear meaning delivered by the structured syntax of a text provides a less ambiguous and more informative cue to partisan news selection than images (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Therefore, despite pre-tests showing that the images did convey a clear meaning, a headline is the most decisive in determining citizens’ selective exposure to like-minded political news. The importance of visuals in information processing and media effects (see e.g., Powell et al., 2015, 2018) but relative irrelevance compared to text in pro-attitudinal selective exposure is worthy of future research. This might fruitfully focus on whether emotional images can mitigate attitude polarization once citizens have already selected into partisan content.

The findings revealed an equally strong preference for balanced content as for pro-attitudinal news. This is in line with recent studies suggesting that citizens’ self-

selection into ideological echo chambers is not as prevalent as some had initially suspected (Nelson & Webster, 2017; Prior, 2013). That said, participants in this study did resolutely avoid cross-cutting selection of counter-attitudinal headlines (Garrett, 2009). Another novel addition of this study was to consider visual balance by presenting two sides of an issue via juxtaposed news images. Although images were a relatively weak cue to selection overall, an effect of image bias did emerge when they were accompanied by balanced headlines about the immigration issue. Attitude congruent, balanced, and attitude incongruent images were selected in this order, respectively, suggesting that visual balance is discernible to citizens when accompanied by a balanced headline. Future research should further investigate whether audiences value visual balance as an attractive and informative quality of today’s increasingly visual news media.

Source cues belonging to partisan news organizations played a significant role in selective exposure. The addition of Fox News, Reuters and *The New York Times* logos to news items increased the selection of ideologically matched headlines compared to images. In line with previous findings (Iyengar & Hahn, 2008), source cues especially bolstered the selection of pro-attitudinal headlines. This suggests that these logos provide a simple and effortless decision heuristic that do foster selection into ideologically divided camps. That said, even with source cues present, balanced selection remained highly prevalent. This is a reassuring but somewhat unexpected finding, since, in light of hostile media theory (Hansen & Kim, 2011), one would expect a more negative perception and thereby reduced selection of *all* non-congenial news media. Taken together, the magnitude of effects produced by the three independent variables in this study suggests a clear hierarchy of influence over partisan selective exposure: headline bias, source cues, and, finally, image bias.

There are a number of reasons to be confident about the validity of our conclusions. Multiple different headline and image exemplars were used in each condition, with their pairings counterbalanced, meaning that the results are not a product of stimulus peculiarities. Additionally, all stimuli were carefully pre-tested to ensure they depicted the intended bias and to match them for potentially confounding factors—perceived arousal, salience and complexity. Furthermore, our multiple issue approach increases generalizability, whilst stimulus presentation in a Facebook-style newsfeed heightens external validity. Finally, we observed similar results when party affiliation (Republican, Democrat) was used in the analyses instead of prior issue attitudes.

There are, however, notable limitations to this study. First, regarding ecological validity, all news items presented to participants were about the same issue, whereas a real social media timeline would contain items about a range of issues, as well as posts from one’s friendship network. Future studies should study visuals in selective exposure using a richer media setting. Sep-



arately, our selection environment was limited to one page of news items that were rated or selected. A more externally valid approach would be to create a navigable online ‘magazine’ through which participants are free to browse with their selection behaviour unobtrusively tracked (e.g., Zillmann et al., 2001). Another important limitation is that, in order to fully disentangle the effects of images from that of headlines, one would need to include conditions in which images and headlines were shown in isolation, and then compare this with selection behaviour in combined image-headline conditions. This was, however, beyond the scope of the present study and is being tackled in other research efforts (Powell, Hameleers, & van der Meer, 2019). In addition, in this study we only manipulated the presence of source cues linked to the headlines of our news items. This means that we cannot ascertain whether news visuals do play a role in selection if they are paired with a certain source cue. Future studies should seek to include all possible pairings of visual and verbal content and source cues. Moreover, our source cues were only drawn from only three news organizations, and a broader array of sources is needed in future studies. Finally, it is important that future research expands this work beyond the context of Facebook to systematically study different media and various platforms. To illustrate: in different social media platforms where images or video are the main focus (such as Instagram or Snapchat), images may play a different, potentially more central role. Also, images and text are not necessarily always separable, for example in political memes. Ideally such work would combine content analysis to more comprehensively examine the intended *function* of visuals in news and social media—i.e., to simply capture attention, or to convey meaning—with experiments into news selection and attitude effects.

The theoretical implications of this study are clear. It is the first to connect theories of partisan selective exposure and visual communication—an important contribution given today’s high-choice, highly fragmented and increasingly visual media environment. The observed dominance of text over visuals is somewhat reassuring in the sense that citizens do make the (albeit small) effort to process the meaning of a news headline instead of being drawn in by attention-grabbing visuals. However, this does imply that pictures may not serve as a means to draw citizens into counter-attitudinal news and thereby encourage attitudinal depolarization. Ultimately, more studies are required to examine the extent to which visuals fulfil a democratic good of encouraging selection into political and cross-cutting news, and whether visuals might help nullify any polarizing effects produced by selective exposure. More broadly, the inclusion of balanced content and source cues in this study helps quantify the relative influence of various message cues that can drive partisan news selection: headlines lead the way in determining partisan selective exposure, followed by the ideological affiliation of source cues, and, lastly, the contribution of images. The smaller effect of

ideologically polarized news sources compared to textual content might be considered normatively encouraging. This chimes with the more optimistic findings of recent research showing preferences for balanced content (Brenes Peralta et al., 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2017) and should be supplemented by future studies into *how* different message characteristics are processed by viewers, and the way in which this is influenced by individual psychological factors.

This study lends practical guidance to news organisations and journalists alike. First, journalists should be aware that audiences will follow headlines rather than images in selecting news that matches their political views. This is in line with the traditional editorial priority for text, but presents an interesting conundrum as modern newsrooms become increasingly focused on the visual. Second, news organisations should strive for the journalistic ideal of balanced content since this is at least as attractive to audiences as congenial polarized content. This is heartening since headlines about both sides of an issue or posing an open question can therefore serve as ‘click bait’ without journalists needing to resort to being negative, extreme or pro-attitudinal. Third, news organisations who actively make their logos visible alongside their content can expect increased selection from all audience segments, but especially from their loyal readership.

To conclude, this study provides clear evidence of the role of visuals in partisan selective exposure. The text of headlines leads the way in citizens’ decision to select congenial and balanced news, with source cues belonging to news outlets playing a contributing role. Images proved to be a more ambiguous indicator of the ideological stance of a news item and, in turn, played a minimal role in news selection. These findings go beyond previous studies by establishing a *multimodal* understanding of selective exposure to a fuller spectrum of political views. In doing so they provide clear guidance to journalists developing engaging content whilst being aware of how they might contribute to a (de)polarized citizenry.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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**Appendix**
*Appendix A*
**Table A1.** Refugees context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing* a news item, source and no source.

News item type		Source information included	
Image	Headline	Without source information	With source information
Congruent	Congruent	23.77 (1.89)***	27.60 (2.01)***
Congruent	Incongruent	2.71 (1.89)	3.22 (2.01)
Congruent	Balanced	24.19 (1.89)***	24.21 (2.01)***
Balanced	Congruent	22.64 (1.89)***	26.52 (2.01)***
Balanced	Incongruent	4.43 (1.89)**	2.45 (2.01)
Balanced	Balanced	20.39 (1.89)***	24.79 (2.01)***
Incongruent	Congruent	16.61 (1.89)***	24.51 (2.01)***
Incongruent	Balanced	20.80 (1.89)***	22.32 (2.01)***
	Constant	39.74 (1.82)***	39.41 (1.80)***
	ICC level	.462	.377
	LL full model	-11201.42	-10966

Notes: \*\*p < .01.; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

**Table A2.** Refugees context, logistic multilevel models explaining peoples' *selection* of a news item, source and no source.

News item type		Source information included	
Image	Headline	Without source information	With source information
Congruent	Congruent	.81 (.20)***	1.60 (.22)***
Congruent	Incongruent	-.43 (.22)*	-.412 (.28)
Congruent	Balanced	1.37 (.19)***	1.84 (.22)***
Balanced	Congruent	.91 (.19)***	1.24 (.22)***
Balanced	Incongruent	.44 (.20)	1.05 (.22)***
Balanced	Balanced	.93 (.19)***	1.52 (.22)***
Incongruent	Congruent	.90 (.19)***	1.68 (.22)***
Incongruent	Balanced	.23 (.21)	.88 (.23)***
	Constant	-1.31 (.15)***	-1.85 (.18)***
	ICC level	8.34e-26	5.34e-25
	LL full model	-1474.95	-1407.93

Notes: \*p < .05.; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

**Table A3.** Gun control context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing* a news item, source and no source.

News item type		Source information included	
Image	Headline	Without source information	With source information
Congruent	Congruent	14.45 (1.95)***	22.58 (2.17)***
Congruent	Incongruent	.49 (1.95)	3.63 (2.11)†
Congruent	Balanced	19.61 (1.95)***	24.40 (2.11)***
Balanced	Congruent	14.38 (1.95)***	23.08 (2.12)***
Balanced	Incongruent	-.74 (1.95)	6.50 (2.12)**
Balanced	Balanced	16.03 (1.95)***	23.01 (2.12)***
Incongruent	Congruent	13.17 (1.95)***	22.61 (2.12)***
Incongruent	Balanced	17.43 (1.95)***	23.92 (2.12)***
	Constant	43.97 (1.95)***	39.15 (1.89)***
	ICC level	.433	.364
	LL full model	-11265.26	-11224.88

Notes: †p < .10; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

**Table A4.** Gun control context, logistic multilevel models explaining peoples' *selection* of a news item, source and no source.

News item type		Source information included	
Image	Headline	Without source information	With source information
Congruent	Congruent	.79 (.20)***	1.17 (.21)***
Congruent	Incongruent	.10 (.22)	.039 (.23)
Congruent	Balanced	1.6 (.20)***	1.42 (.20)***
Balanced	Congruent	.76 (.20)***	1.04 (.21)***
Balanced	Incongruent	.05 (.22)	.05 (.23)
Balanced	Balanced	1.26 (.20)***	1.32 (.21)***
Incongruent	Congruent	.86 (.20)***	1.06 (.21)***
Incongruent	Balanced	1.25 (.20)***	1.37 (.21)***
	Constant	-1.48 (.16)***	-1.60 (.17)***
	ICC level	1.15e-15	1.74e-16
	LL full model	-1467.48	-1436.49

Notes: \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

*Appendix B*
**Table B1.** Refugees context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing and selection of* a news items, interacted with source information.

News item type			Dependent variable	
Image	Headline	Interaction source information	Likelihood rating	Selection
Congruent	Congruent		23.77 (1.94)***	.80 (.20)***
Congruent	Congruent	With source info	3.83 (2.76)	.80 (.29)**
Congruent	Incongruent		2.71 (1.94)	-.43 (.23)*
Congruent	Incongruent	With source info	.52 (2.76)	.02 (.36)
Congruent	Balanced		24.19 (1.94)***	1.37 (.19)***
Congruent	Balanced	With source info	.02 (2.76)	.48 (.29)†
Balanced	Congruent		22.64 (1.94)***	.91 (.19)***
Balanced	Congruent	With source info	3.88 (2.76)†	.32 (.29)
Balanced	Incongruent		4.43 (1.94)**	.44 (.20)*
Balanced	Incongruent	With source info	-1.98 (2.76)	.61 (.30)*
Balanced	Balanced		2.39 (1.94)***	.93 (.19)***
Balanced	Balanced	With source info	4.40 (2.76)†	.59 (.29)*
Incongruent	Congruent		16.61 (1.94)***	.90 (.19)***
Incongruent	Congruent	With source info	7.91 (2.76)**	.78 (.29)***
Incongruent	Balanced		2.81 (1.94)***	.23 (.20)
Incongruent	Balanced	With source info	1.52 (2.76)	.65 (.30)*
Source			.33 (2.56)	.54 (.23)*
	Constant		39.74 (1.80)	-1.31 (.15)
	ICC level		.421	2.01e-15
	LL full model		-22171.35	-2882.875

Notes: †p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Regarding the "Interaction source information" column: coefficients adjacent to "With source info" shows the additional effect of the addition of source information beyond the effect without a source (shown by the coefficients adjacent to blank space). Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.



**Table B2.** Refugees context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing and selection of a news item*, interacted with source information.

News item type			Dependent variable	
Image	Headline	Interaction source information	Likelihood rating	Selection
Congruent	Congruent		3.37 (1.94)*	-.13 (.18)
Congruent	Congruent	With source info	.56 (2.76)	.20 (.25)
Congruent	Incongruent		-17.69 (1.94)***	-1.36 (.21)***
Congruent	Incongruent	With source info	-3.88 (2.76)	-.57 (.32)†
Congruent	Balanced		3.80 (1.94)*	.44 (.17)**
Congruent	Balanced	With source info	-4.37 (2.76)	-.12 (.25)
Balanced	Congruent		2.25 (1.94)	-.02 (.18)
Balanced	Congruent	With source info	-.52 (2.76)	-.27 (.25)
Balanced	Incongruent		-15.96 (1.94)***	-.49 (.18)**
Balanced	Incongruent	With source info	-6.38 (2.76)*	.02 (.26)
Incongruent	Incongruent		-2.39 (1.94)***	-.93 (.19)***
Incongruent	Incongruent	With source info	-4.40 (2.76)†	-.59 (.29)*
Incongruent	Congruent		-3.79 (1.94)*	-.03 (.18)
Incongruent	Congruent	With source info	3.51 (2.76)	.18 (.25)
Incongruent	Balanced		.41 (1.94)	-.70 (.19)***
Incongruent	Balanced	With source info	-2.87 (2.76)	.06 (.26)
Source			4.07 (2.56)	.06 (.18)
	Constant		6.13 (1.80)***	-.38 (.12)**
	ICC level		.421	4.86e-13
	LL full model		-22171.35	-2882.86

Notes: †p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with balanced headline and balanced image. Regarding the "Interaction source information" column: coefficients adjacent to "With source info" shows the additional effect of the addition of source information beyond the effect without a source (shown by the coefficients adjacent to blank space). Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.



**Table B3.** Gun ownership context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing and selection* of a news items, interacted with source information.

News item type			Dependent variable	
Image	Headline	Interaction source information	Likelihood rating	Selection
Congruent	Congruent		14.45 (2.02)***	.79 (.20)***
Congruent	Congruent	With source info	8.13 (2.91)**	.38 (.29)
Congruent	Incongruent		.49 (2.02)	.10 (.22)
Congruent	Incongruent	With source info	3.13 (2.88)	-.06 (.32)
Congruent	Balanced		19.61 (2.02)***	1.56 (.20)***
Congruent	Balanced	With source info	4.78 (2.87)†	-.14 (.29)
Balanced	Congruent		14.38 (2.02)***	.76 (.20)***
Balanced	Congruent	With source info	8.68 (2.88)**	.29 (.29)
Balanced	Incongruent		-.74 (2.02)	.05 (.22)
Balanced	Incongruent	With source info	7.22 (2.88)	.00 (.32)
Balanced	Balanced		16.03 (2.02)***	1.26 (.20)***
Balanced	Balanced	With source info	6.96 (2.88)*	.06 (.29)
Incongruent	Congruent		13.17 (2.02)***	.86 (.20)***
Incongruent	Congruent	With source info	9.43 (2.88)*	.20 (.29)
Incongruent	Balanced		17.43 (2.02)***	1.25 (.20)***
Incongruent	Balanced	With source info	6.48 (2.88)*	.13 (.29)
Source			4.82 (2.63)†	-.12 (.23)
	Constant		43.97 (1.84)***	-1.48 (.16)***
	ICC level		.398	2.49e-28
	LL full model		-22495.32	-2903.98

Note: †p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with incongruent headline and incongruent image. Regarding the "Interaction source information" column: coefficients adjacent to "With source info" shows the additional effect of the addition of source information beyond the effect without a source (shown by the coefficients adjacent to blank space). Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

**Table B4.** Gun ownership context, multilevel models explaining peoples' *likelihood of viewing and selection of a news item*, interacted with source information.

News item type			Dependent variable	
Image	Headline	Interaction source information	Likelihood rating	Selection
Congruent	Congruent		-1.57 (2.02)	-.47 (.18)**
Congruent	Congruent	With source info	1.17 (2.89)	.32 (.25)
Congruent	Incongruent		-15.54 (2.02)***	-1.17 (.20)***
Congruent	Incongruent	With source info	-3.83 (2.86)	-.12 (.28)
Congruent	Balanced		3.58 (2.02)†	.30 (.17)†
Congruent	Balanced	With source info	-2.19 (2.85)	-.20 (.24)
Balanced	Congruent		-1.64 (2.02)	-.50 (.18)**
Balanced	Congruent	With source info	1.72 (2.86)	.22 (.25)
Balanced	Incongruent		-16.76 (2.02)***	-1.21 (.20)***
Balanced	Incongruent	With source info	.26 (2.86)	-.06 (.28)
Incongruent	Incongruent		-16.03 (2.02)***	-1.26 (.20)***
Incongruent	Incongruent	With source info	-6.96 (2.88)*	-.06 (.29)
Incongruent	Congruent		-2.86 (2.02)	-.41 (.18)***
Incongruent	Congruent	With source info	2.47 (2.86)	.14 (.25)
Incongruent	Balanced		1.41 (2.02)	-.02 (.17)
Incongruent	Balanced	With source info	-.49 (2.86)	.07 (.25)
Source			2.15 (2.61)	-.06 (.17)
	Constant		6.00 (1.84)***	-.22 (.12)†
	ICC level		.398	4.06e-15
	LL full model		-22495.32	-2903.98

Notes: †p < .10; \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Reference category is news item with balanced headline and balanced image. Regarding the "Interaction source information" column: coefficients adjacent to "With source info" shows the additional effect of the addition of source information beyond the effect without a source (shown by the coefficients adjacent to blank space). Cells contain unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors. IIC = Intraclass correlation coefficient; LL = Log likelihood.

Article

## Discussion Network Activation: An Expanded Approach to Selective Exposure

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### Abstract

Studies of selective exposure have focused on use of traditional media sources. However, discussion networks are an integral part of individuals' information diets. This article extends the selective exposure literature by exploring the potential for networks to likewise be selectively accessed. A pre-registered experiment found that participants nominate denser, more ideologically coherent networks in response to congenial political news relative to uncongenial news, and express willingness to share it with more people. Analysis of open-ended data suggest shared political beliefs are more likely to motivate discussant selection in response to congenial, rather than uncongenial, news. Properties of networks generated in response to political and non-political news did not vary. These results provide nuance to our understanding of political information exposure.

### Keywords

discussion networks; information seeking; polarization; selective exposure; social identity

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

An established body of literature has grappled with the tendency of individuals to selectively expose themselves to pro-attitudinal information, focusing on media content (Stroud, 2011). As individuals interact with identity-threatening information (e.g., political topics), they engage in biased search, seeking out information that bolsters their group's positions (Stroud, 2011). Ultimately though, studies of this phenomenon have operationalized information seeking behavior in terms of media use, considering only the causes and consequences of exposure to mediated messages. However, discussion networks serve as essential sources in individuals' personalized information environments. Discussion networks are comprised of the set of all social contacts with which an individual discusses a range of issues, including but not limited to politics (Klofstad, McClurg, & Rolfe, 2009). Researchers may have shied away from examining net-

works as dependent variables in such studies of selective exposure because they are often thought of as static entities, of whose information individuals are passive recipients (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009, p. 21). However, recent studies in organizational behavior (Menon & Smith, 2014; Smith, Menon, & Thompson, 2012) have shown that the activated portions of much larger latent networks are indeed guided by context and psychological states. This opens networks up to be seen as the outcomes of partisan selective exposure.

This project explores the potential for subsets of an individual's discussion network to be selectively accessed as information sources, based on situational motivations or psychological states. One reason this selectivity is increasingly important to understand is in light of large proportions of the public using social networking sites, because these sites enable maintaining and accessing larger networks containing more weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). If individuals are able to

choose from a broader range of contacts for discussion, there is more potential for situational selectivity driven by the characteristics of a given news story.

The approach undertaken here also adds nuance to existing discussion network research that has overlooked situational variation. Such outcomes would be relevant to democratic functioning, because certain policy issues or news story characteristics may encourage different approaches to network activation, and thus produce different provisions of socially mediated information. Extending the basic theory behind selective media exposure to this domain, the congeniality of an issue may drive individuals to seek additional opinions from a broader or narrower subset of their discussion contacts.

Using a pre-registered experiment, I show how issue congeniality can shape discussion network activation. These results should broaden how researchers conceptualize partisan selective exposure. As individuals increasingly maintain discussion contacts online, and partisan media choices proliferate online (e.g., Brady, Crockett, & Van Bavel, 2019), the potential for selective network activation in response to political news warrants further attention.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Selective Exposure: From Media to Discussion

Research on selective exposure stretches back decades (Berelson, Gaudet, & Lazarsfeld, 1944; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). In recent years, transformations in the media environment have reinvigorated work in the area, focusing on the effects of increased audience control and a fragmented media landscape (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Brundidge, 2010; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011). However, findings about the potential for increasing selective exposure over time remain mixed (Guess, Nyhan, Lyons, & Reifler, 2018).

Importantly, though, citizens consult sources other than news media when forming and reinforcing their understanding of the political world. Interpersonal discussion is an equally important component in the flow of political communication (Katz, 1957; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Moy & Gastil, 2006). Discussion is in many ways aided by the current proliferation of social network sites, enabling consultation with a broader network containing more latent, weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). But just as importantly, individuals may exhibit partisan selectivity in accessing these *other, non-news sources* as well. The key contribution of this article is addressing selectivity in the broader set of information channels citizens access. Specifically, this article addresses a form of second-step selectivity that occurs after media exposure, when media content is digested and reflected upon through discussion (Shah et al., 2017).

Researchers should include discussion networks in examinations of selectivity, then, because not only do they comprise one of the two key components of the polit-

ical communication ecosystem, but because individuals think of partisan media and partisan group members in much the same way; both are seen through the same partisan lens (Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). In other words, media outlets and discussion partners are thought of (and potentially selected) in many of the same ways.

### 2.2. Discussion Networks and Contextual Activation

Interpersonal networks serve as critical sources of information, with both denser network structures, wherein more of the contacts know one another (i.e., network density; Granovetter, 1973) and greater similarity among members (i.e., network homogeneity; Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004) ultimately degrading information availability (Klar & Shmargad, 2017) and quality of thought. Homogenous networks strengthen and even polarize concordant opinions, though these protected, affirming pockets of like-mindedness can instill more passion to participate in the political process. Disagreement within personal networks likely has several beneficial outcomes. It can increase tolerance by depolarizing feelings about in and out-groups (Parsons, 2010). Anticipation of future disagreement can drive an information search for new material (Eveland, 2004). It can increase knowledge and sophistication through increased exposure to diverse or novel information, and can in turn strengthen one's arguments. It increases understanding of both one's own position and the rationales supporting the opposition's. This can in turn lead to higher levels of persuasion (Barabas, 2004; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Levitan & Visser, 2008; Mutz, 2002; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004).

Although networks are conceptually recognized as dynamic phenomena, most studies measure their composition and antecedents as static (Klein, Saltz, & Mayer, 2004; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006; Sasovova, Mehra, Borgatti, & Schippers, 2010). Instead of consistently activating the same discussants in every context, however, individuals seek different components of their far-larger latent network based on conscious or unconscious motivations (Menon & Smith, 2014). Because individuals' sense of who they are shifts situationally (for example, when their partisan identity is threatened by uncongenial information), "so too does their mental representation of their social networks," (Menon & Smith, 2014, p. 117; Smith et al., 2012). Rather than being strategic in network activation, Menon and Smith (2014) argue that patterns of activation depend on underlying psychological states. The congeniality of a media message may alter these states (Hasell & Weeks, 2016).

### 2.3. News Content's Potential to Shape Network Activation

It has long been acknowledged that information flows from mass media through media audiences and on to interpersonal discussion networks (Katz, 1957). The ar-

gument made here is that it does so differentially based on media content. Individuals not only selectively share which content to consume based on valence, but subsequently selectively choose *who* to discuss it *with* based on its valence.

Given media that is congenial or uncongenial to one's views, how does the second step of flow proceed—through congenial or uncongenial discussion partners? Some prior work suggests congenial political news might be discussed more often with co-partisans. Individuals may seek to strengthen bonds with those with whom they already consistently agree (Ellison et al., 2007). In complementary fashion, news consumers may share uncongenial news with dissimilar discussants in an effort to cater to that discussant's tastes (Atkin, 1972; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

However, other work that examines news sharing and proselytizing behaviors could suggest the opposite—that individuals would be more likely to discuss news casting their preferred party in a flattering light more broadly overall, and more frequently with out-partisans, specifically. One reason for this may be *schadenfreude*, or happiness at the misfortune of others. Some news consumers may look to spread news of a politician's embarrassment to gloat in the face of their out-party social contacts (Crysel & Webster, 2018). Another reason individuals may share news they find congenial with out-partisans is with aim of persuading them (Thorson, 2014). Congenial news may be seen as potentially persuasive ammunition in ongoing deliberations among social contacts with discordant views. This is supported by evidence that cable news viewers—who are more likely to see likeminded content—proselytize more often than other news viewers (Platzman, 2015).

### 3. Hypotheses and Research Questions

Do individuals nominate more or less ideologically homogenous discussion networks, or more or less dense networks, based on the political congeniality of the news article? Do these network characteristics vary between political and non-political issue cues? This study compares discussion network activation for a variety of topics, using a pre-registered experiment (see [osf.io/2xv9q/?view\\_only=9005ea7a577443f797a962e2eedca7a2](https://osf.io/2xv9q/?view_only=9005ea7a577443f797a962e2eedca7a2) for hypotheses, questionnaire, stimuli, and analysis plan). I test two key aspects of news that might drive echo chamber dynamics: attitudinal congeniality and political vs non-political content.

First, I examine response to pro- and counter-attitudinal fact-checks of Donald Trump. Some research suggests that pro-attitudinal news is more likely to be discussed with one's in-group to stimulate bonding (Ellison et al., 2007). However, studies on selective sharing (An, Quercia, & Crowcroft, 2014; Aruguete & Calvo, 2018), particularly regarding congenial and uncongenial fact-checks (Shin & Thorson, 2017), suggest that individuals will be more likely to discuss "good news," (rather

than "bad news") about their party with the other side, whether to persuade or to gloat and self-gratify (Crysel & Webster, 2018).

H1. Pro-attitudinal fact-checks will produce less dense, less politically homogenous network subsets than counter-attitudinal fact-checks.

I then examine response to three non-political topics. These comprise two hard news and one soft news topic, with hard news varying in its degree of controversy—vaccine hesitancy, self-driving cars, and popular films. I expect political views will not motivate network activation for these issues. It's less clear how the density of networks might be affected. The literature is unclear as to whether political or non-political topics will produce denser networks. I also check for any key differences amongst the set of non-political topics.

H2. Non-political issues will produce less politically homogenous networks than political issues.

RQ1. Is there any difference in the density of networks produced by political and non-political issue cues?

RQ2. Do non-political topics' networks differ from one another in density or homogeneity?

Prior to the network properties I analyse, I first ask a basic "reach" question—how widely would you share this news? I expect pro-attitudinal news will have greater reach than counter attitudinal news. I am agnostic about any other differences in this outcome.

H3. Pro-attitudinal fact-checks will have greater reach than counter-attitudinal fact-checks.

#### 3.1. Planned Exploratory Analyses

Finally, I include an open-ended prompt for participants to describe their selection motivations in their own words. I later present these responses in an exploratory analysis. I also conduct exploratory tests of the moderating roles of political interest and strength of partisanship.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Sample and Design

Participants (N = 1,872) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in February 2019. They were paid \$.90 and completed the experiment in an average of 4.80 minutes (SD = 4.54). Participants were 55.65% male, 79.5% white, with a mean age of 36.76 (SD = 11.27), and median education of a bachelor's degree. Including "leaners," 56.3% were Democrats, 32.26% were Republicans, and 11.45% were independents. In terms of Trump support, 34.83% supported him "somewhat" or "strongly".

They first provided demographic information before being randomly assigned to view the headline and pre-

view image for one of seven news articles. These articles included four fact-checks of Donald Trump drawn from *Politifact*—two with “True” ratings and two with “False” ratings, and three non-political news articles, also drawn from real sources, concerning self-driving car safety (from *The Telegraph*), the dangers of the anti-vaccination movement (from *The Independent*), and the 50 best comedies of the century (from *Rolling Stone*). They were then asked a series of questions about with whom they would discuss the news story, which served as outcome measures.

## 4.2. Measures

### 4.2.1. Independent Variables

For those exposed to a fact-check article, congeniality is calculated by taking the slant of article (Trump “True” statements are Pro-Republican, Trump “False” statements are Pro-Democrat) crossed with respondent party (Republican/Democrat), resulting in scores of  $-1$  (uncongenial,  $N = 485$ ) or  $1$  (congenial,  $N = 456$ ). Because I am interested in the effects of congeniality, I do not include Independents in these analyses. I conduct supplementary analyses in which they are included. I also conduct a robustness check in which I substitute Trump support in the place of party in the congeniality calculation (Trump support is 4-pt., centered:  $-2, -1, 1, 2$ , and crossed with slant). Other indicator variables were constructed using treatment assignment (i.e., a “Vaccines” indicator, a “Self-driving cars” indicator, and a “Movies” indicator based on assignment to these articles).

### 4.2.2. Dependent Variables

Reach ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) was gauged by asking “How many people would you share this news with?” (4 pt.,  $0 =$  “none,”  $3 =$  “a lot.”).

Cognitive network activation was again gauged using measures drawing on the GSS network battery. Participants were asked to provide up to 5 discussion partners, the strength of ties among these ( $0, 1, 2$ ), the political ideology of each ( $1 =$  *very liberal*,  $7 =$  *very conservative*), and the party affiliation of each (Democrat, Republican, something else).

*Network density* is again calculated by summing the strength of ties and dividing by total possible ties of each respondent’s network. The resulting measure ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = .60$ ) ranged from 1 to 3.

*Network homogeneity* (Makse & Sokhey, 2014) takes the average of the alters’ party affiliation agreement with respondent party (e.g., when respondent is Republican and alter is Republican = 1, when alter is Democrat or other = 0). The average ( $M = .56$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) thus ranges from 0 to 1. As an alternate measure of homogeneity, I measure *network coherence*. In all hypotheses regarding network homogeneity, I refer to both measures. For *network coherence* (Erisen & Erisen, 2012),

I use reported ideology of each contact measured on a 1–7 scale, and the participant’s self-reported ideology from the same scale. I then take the absolute value of the ideological distance between the participant and each contact and average the distances to find the political coherence of the network from the perspective of the participant. Coherence ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) ranges from 0 to 6. To aid in interpretation, I multiply coherence by  $-1$ , so that participants with more ideologically similar alters score higher.

### 4.2.3. Moderators

Strength of partisanship ( $1 =$  strong,  $M = .42$ ,  $SD = .49$ ), and political interest (5 pt.,  $5 =$  “very interested,”  $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) were measured as potential moderating variables.

## 5. Results

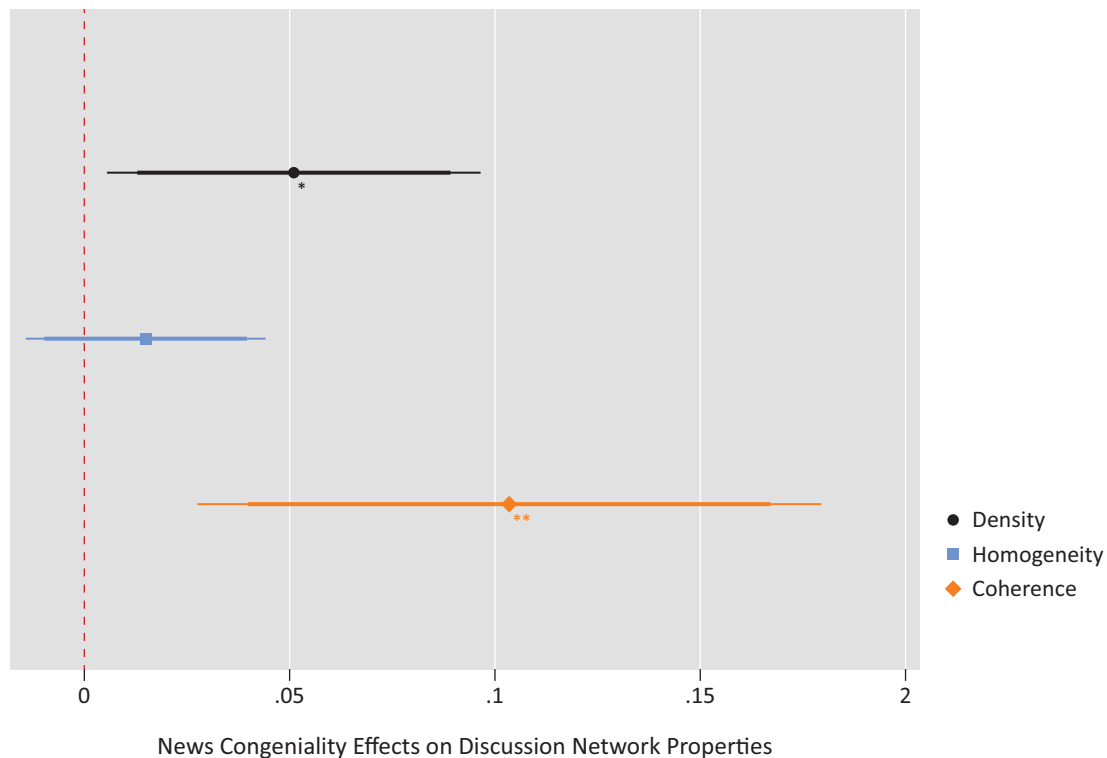
### 5.1. Congeniality Effects on Network Properties

All analyses were conducted using OLS regression. *H1* stated that pro-attitudinal fact-checks would produce less dense, less politically homogenous network subsets than counter-attitudinal fact-checks. Accordingly, I fit a series of OLS regressions, one for each of the three network properties, with congeniality as the independent variable. These models include all participants who were assigned to one of the political (fact-check) conditions. Additionally, as the focus is on network properties, only participants who provided more than 1 alter could be included. 225 partisans said they would discuss the news with 1 or 0 others and were thus excluded from these network property models. The results are depicted in Figure 1. Congenial news exposure produced denser discussion networks ( $b = .05$ ,  $p = .028$ ), and networks that were more coherent—or ideologically similar to the participant ( $b = .10$ ,  $p = .008$ ). There was no effect on the measure of network homogeneity derived from binary partisanship ( $b = .01$ ,  $p = .316$ ). All analyses were robust to the inclusion of question fixed effects to account for specific article assignment.

### 5.2. Political vs. Non-Political News Effects on Network Properties

*H2* stated that non-political issues would produce less politically homogenous networks than political issues. *RQ1* asked if there are there any differences in the density of networks produced by political and nonpolitical issue cues. These models include the article-assignment indicator variables—vaccines, self-driving cars, and movies—as independent variables. The fact-check conditions are left out as the reference category. Results show no significant differences in network properties between political and non-political content. *RQ2* asked if non-political topics’ networks differ from one another in density or





**Figure 1.** News congeniality effects on discussion network properties. Notes: network density is based on the average strength of ties among all alters (N = 661). Network homogeneity is based on shared partisan affiliation between participants and alters (N = 786). Network coherence is based on average ideological distance of alters from the participant (N = 786).

homogeneity. Models addressing this question included all participants assigned to non-political stimuli, with the “movies” article left out as the reference category. Again, there were no significant differences across non-political content.

### 5.3. Effects on Reach

H3 stated that pro-attitudinal fact-checks would have greater reach than counter-attitudinal fact-checks. To address this question, the previous model restriction to participants providing at least 2 alters was lifted. Participants reported intention to share pro-attitudinal news more widely,  $b = .08, p = .008$ . However, all non-political news stories (vaccines,  $b = .46, p < .001$ , self-driving cars,  $b = .27, p < .001$ , and movies,  $b = .24, p < .001$ ) generated greater willingness to share more widely than did political stories, as shown in Figure 2.

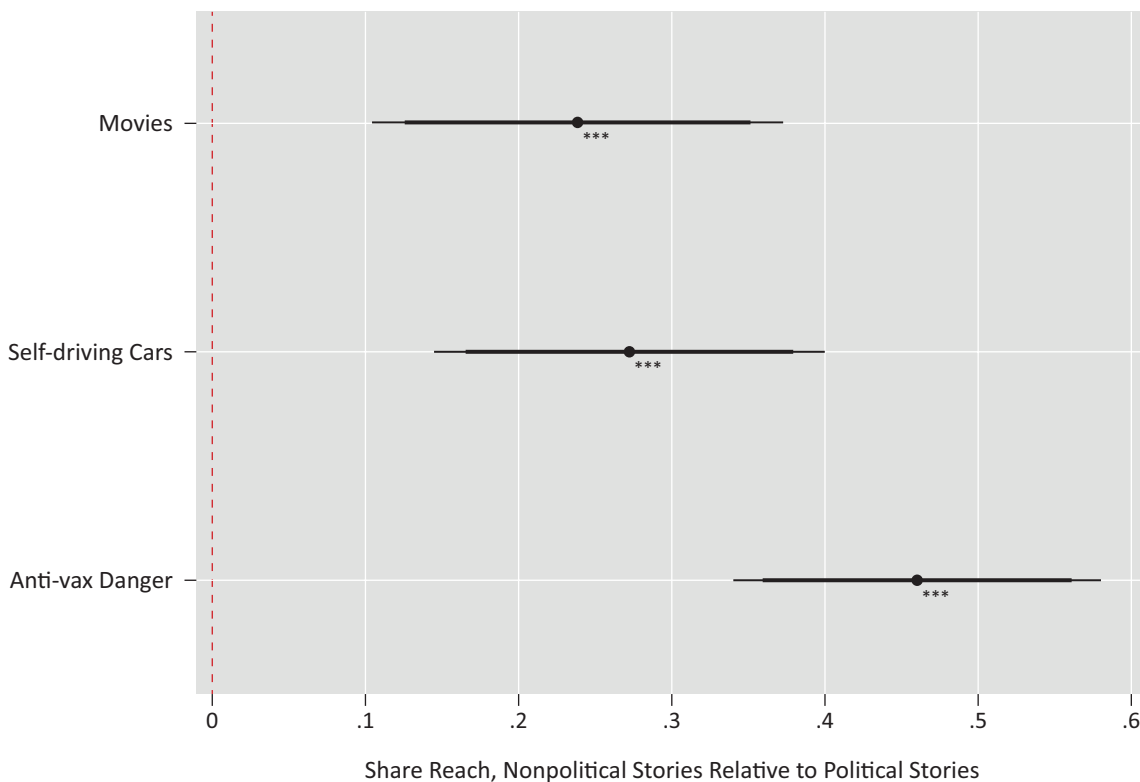
### 5.4. Exploratory Analyses

Planned exploratory analysis of political interest’s potential moderating role was conducted using OLS regression, replicating the models used to test H1, with the addition of the moderating variable and the interaction term of interest and congeniality. Results show political interest moderated the effect of congeniality on network homogeneity and network coherence such that congeniality’s

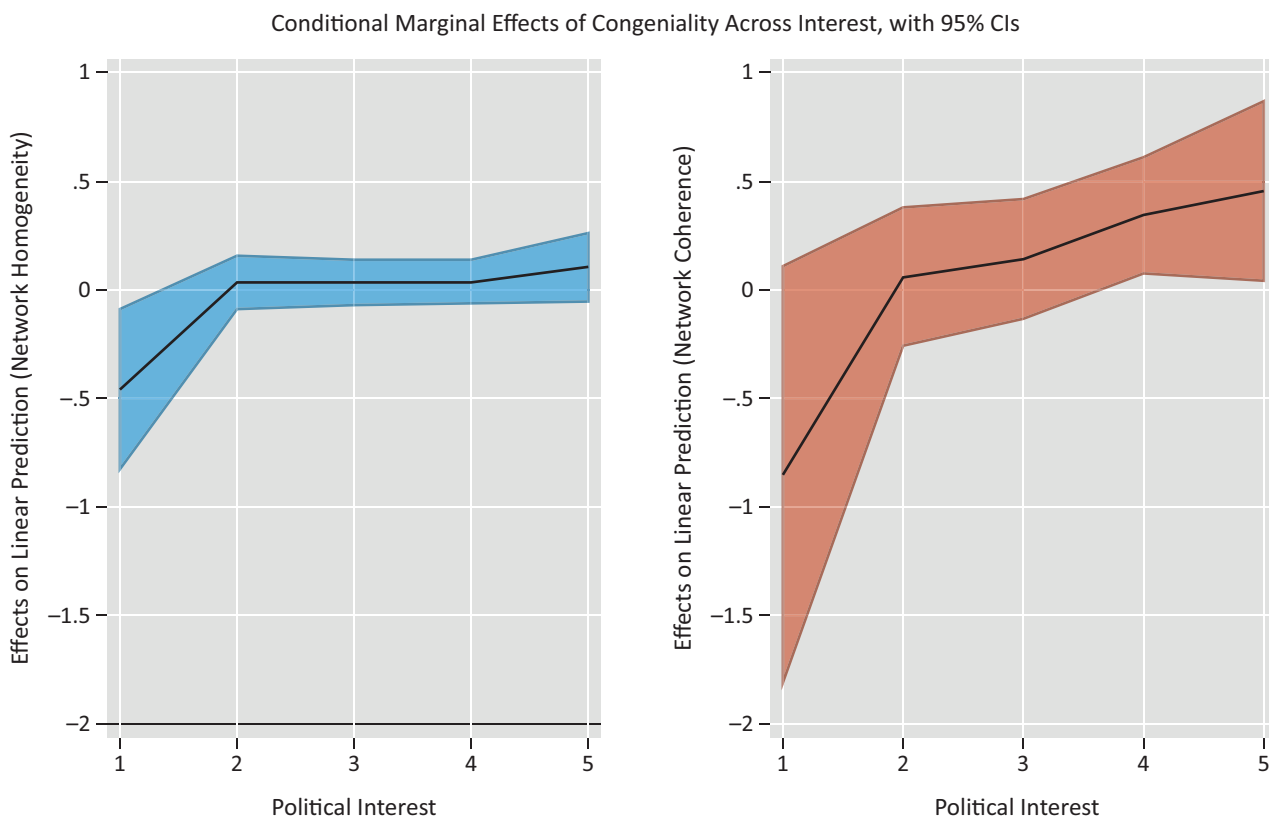
effect on these was greater among high-interest partisans and lesser among low-interest partisans. There was no interaction in the density model. The congeniality-interest interactions are depicted in Figure 3. The same tests were conducted using strength of partisanship in the place of interest. There were no significant interactions, though the effects of congeniality were robust to the inclusion of strength of partisanship in the model.

I also conducted two planned robustness tests (one additional planned robustness test, in which *trait* network similarity would be included as a covariate, was not conducted as the measure was not included in the online questionnaire in error). First, Trump support was used in the place of partisanship in construction of the congeniality indicator. The results were substantively similar. Using the Trump-support congeniality indicator, pro-attitudinal news still produced denser networks ( $b = .04, p = .005$ ), had no effect on homogeneity ( $b = .00, p = .674$ ), produced more ideologically coherent networks (though the effect was weaker,  $b = .04, p = .073$ ), and generated greater reach ( $b = .04, p = .020$ ). Next, because the research was motivated by questions of selective exposure, only partisans were included in the above analyses. Separate analyses were conducted using the full sample, including independents. These models produced substantively identical results.

Finally, I conducted an exploratory analysis of open-ended responses concerning selection motivation. This



**Figure 2.** Share reach of non-political stories relative to political stories. Notes: share reach measured as “How many people would you share this news with?” (4 pt., 0 = “none”, 3 = “a lot.”). N = 1,872.



**Figure 3.** News congeniality effect on network homogeneity and coherence, across political interest. Notes: network homogeneity is based on shared partisan affiliation between participants and alters. Network coherence is based on average ideological distance of a network from the participant. Both N = 786.



analysis focused on partisans in the political news conditions in order to examine potential differences driven by congeniality (N = 941; after filtering for N/A responses, N = 821). An initial assessment of the responses suggested the 11 motivations depicted in Table 1. Many respondents said discussants were chosen because they were close friends and family (N = 265) or habitual political discussants (N = 135), or they were generally comfortable discussing politics with the discussant (N = 70). Many respondents also said they chose no one because they don't discuss politics in general (N = 90). Still, a good number of respondents indicated that their selections were based on more situational factors. Logistic regression models predicting each motivation by the news article's congeniality show that those exposed to congenial news were more likely to select discussants based on shared political views ( $OR = 1.33, p = .022$ ). On the other hand, those exposed to congenial content were less likely to say they selected "no discussant" due to content-specific reasons (those exposed to uncongenial news were more likely to do so) ( $OR = .77, p = .021$ ). Those expressing this motivation often doubted the veracity of the uncongenial news item (e.g., "fake news").

## 6. Discussion

This study found that participants nominate denser and more cohesive sets of discussion partners in response to pro-attitudinal news, or conversely, that counter-attitudinal news may be shared with more diverse subsets. In other words, at least regarding news centering on claims made by Trump, individuals appear to be more eager to share pro-attitudinal news with co-partisans, particularly those in their inner circle. Notably, this finding is the opposite of the hypothesized effect of congeniality. One potential account for these results is that participants are not interested in persuading out-party members with news that may disconfirm their prior be-

liefs, but instead looking to reinforce bonds over agreeable news stories with those with whom they already know they agree (Ellison et al., 2007). And on the other hand, readers may choose to discuss counter-attitudinal news more broadly in an effort to cater to *those* (more-distant) audiences' differing tastes (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). More broadly, readers are more likely to attend to news with cues that others will be interested; there is a social utility gratification of the information (Atkin, 1972). Therefore, social utility may help explain the results. These accounts, especially the former, are somewhat supported in the open-ended data.

Notably, though, participants reported interest in sharing pro-attitudinal news with more people. Differential effects of political versus non-political content on network properties were limited, but participants reported willingness to share non-political content more widely overall. When given the option, most people prefer to opt out of political news (Guess et al., 2018). Finally, I find that political interest moderates the effects of congeniality such that more interested partisans nominate denser, more cohesive networks in response to pro-attitudinal content, while those low in interest nominate broader, less ideologically coherent networks in response. In each case, these findings track with evidence on the greater prevalence of echo chambers among the most highly engaged partisans (Guess et al., 2018).

The study also has important limitations. This study's political news stimuli center on President Trump, which might uniquely shape discussion, even relative to other affect-laden political content. Still, the stimuli are an accurate representation of contemporaneous political discussion topics; veracity of claims made by polarizing politicians on the national stage are now a centerpiece of public discourse. Moreover, it is important to note that this study cannot ascertain the quality, diversity, or depth of the conversation yielded by differential degrees of density or homogeneity in the respondents' networks.

**Table 1.** Open-ended responses for network selection motivations as predicted by news congeniality.

Motivation	Uncongenial	Congenial	Total	Congeniality regression
				Odds ratio
Close friend/family	131	134	265	1.04 (.08)
Habitual political discussant	58	77	135	1.20 (.11)
Comfort with discussant	38	32	70	.92 (.12)
Expertise	15	17	32	1.08 (.20)
Interest to discussant	38	31	69	.91 (.11)
Diverse views	17	10	27	.77 (.16)
Shared beliefs	28	46	74	1.33 (.17)*
No one—no political discussion	14	12	26	.94 (.19)
No one—not this topic	56	34	90	.77 (.09)*
Inform/persuade	4	6	10	1.24 (.40)
Other	17	6	23	
Total	416	405	821	

Notes: \* =  $p < .05$ . N = 821. Column 2–4: frequencies. Column 5: odds ratio for congeniality predicting each motivation based on logistic regression.

However, overall, these findings help establish that news topics shape discussion networks.

## 7. Conclusion: Understanding Information Processes in a Socially Mediated Age

These results show that accessing networks is often situationally contingent (though this may be either strategic or subconscious). Hence, a discussion network may sometimes serve as an echo chamber and sometimes as a more diverse source. Studies using a single-shot self-reported network item, or constructing a network from trace data, may elide the fact that only certain subsets are activated for different discussions and this varies with social and informational cues. These findings suggest that discussion networks are endogenous to media use and not simply a static, independent factor moderating its effects on attitudes, knowledge, and other behavior. Building on these findings, selective exposure models should incorporate both discussion *and* media use, examining their interplay through a reinforcing spirals framework (Slater, 2007).

For this reason, there are unique implications of contextual network activation for affective polarization and knowledge. Contextually activated discussion networks are consequential for the person processing the news, but also for his or her alters—both in their exposure to information and in the social conditions under which they are exposed (Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018). Indeed, partisans may selectively discuss political content with others, but this should not be understood as a one-way street of selectivity. Partisans are selectively exposing *themselves and others* to congenial responses when they choose to “share.”

The fact that political talk is a two-way street—wherein individuals activate contacts to seek their opinions but also to shape them—warrants more attention in future research. The current work cannot interrogate these processes, instead only seeking to establish that political discussion unfolds in a manner compatible with the tenets of selective exposure. However, additional studies may examine the *effects* of selective network activation, in terms of the quality and diversity of information that is ultimately accessed, and the downstream effects of this selective two-step flow on those not directly exposed to a given media message (e.g., Aruguete, & Calvo, 2018; Carlson, 2018; Druckman et al., 2018).

Further, future work should examine the effects of homogenous social settings (e.g., if an individual is embedded in a partisan echo chamber in their social network platform of choice), which may make group threats more salient and drive activation of network contacts accordingly. Conversely, a social setting that provides reminders of an individual’s wide variety of social circles may spur contact with a more diverse set of discussants. Examining these questions of social context matter because news exposure is socially embedded (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Barnidge, 2017; Lee & Kim, 2017).

This study was largely exploratory, examining whether content cues would shape networks. Replications and extensions are needed. However, they provide a basis from which considering discussion network activation and taking seriously the role of cues and motivations will enrich our understanding of how citizens (selectively) engage with the political world.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

## Partisan Selective Exposure in Times of Political and Technological Upheaval: A Social Media Field Experiment

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### Abstract

Contemporary democracies are increasingly shaped by a surge of populism, posing serious threats to the idea of liberal democracy. Particularly in the run-up to elections, knowledge of such threats is essential for citizens to cast an informed vote. Against this background, the present study examined the likelihood of media users to engage with political news providing critical perspectives on populist movements in a 24-hour social media field experiment during the 2017 federal election campaign in Germany ( $N = 210$ ). Based on two selective exposure measures, findings suggest that exposure to critical news is contingent upon the conceptualization of populist partisanship as a political orientation of either high commitment (i.e., voting intention) or high affinity (i.e., sympathy for a party). While high commitment triggered a rather classic confirmation bias, especially regarding click decisions, high affinity caused selection patterns to be more strongly guided by informational utility, particularly during newsfeed browsing, with counter-attitudinal information receiving more attention. When public sentiment cues were present, however, attitudinal patterns disappeared. These findings imply that partisan news use in times of political upheaval is best gauged by taking a closer look at the particular type of partisanship that guides selective exposure, as both types of partisanship caused contrary exposure patterns, and that today's news environments potentially override attitudinal influences by providing additional social monitoring cues.

### Keywords

confirmation bias; incidental exposure; informational utility; online opinion; partisanship; populism; selective exposure; social endorsements; social media

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

In the run-up to elections, political news about the incumbent government and the political opposition help citizens cast an informed vote by providing clues on how to evaluate the government's past performance compared to competing party agendas. The media's public service function is becoming ever more important in recent years, with new right-wing populist movements starting to systematically challenge the consti-

tutional foundation of liberal democracy and the performance of established democratic parties in Western democracies (Galston, 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016). Indeed, journalistic news coverage has been shown to monitor populist movements mainly from a critical-analytical perspective, seldom leaving populist statements by political actors unopposed and often taking a critical stance on populist parties to point out threats they potentially pose to democracy (Müller et al., 2017; Negrine, 2017).



However, in times of disputed journalistic credibility in the wake of political polarization (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018) and a diminishing public demand for journalistic news (Dahlgren, 2019), it remains an open question whether critical-analytical journalism is able to actually reach the public and, thus, contribute to enhanced public awareness of populist threats, especially when news consumption is now more commonly taking place in social, high-choice media environments.

Against this background, the present study investigates selective exposure to critical-analytical news on populism in a 24-hour social media field experiment during the 2017 federal election campaign in Germany, characterized by a surge of the right-wing populist party AfD. Based on an experimental design of high ecological validity, selective exposure will be examined—both as visibility time of posts in participants' newsfeeds and the number of posts participants clicked on—with regards to two main drivers of news exposure in times of political and technological upheaval, namely partisanship and public sentiment cues.

The findings of our study suggest that selective exposure research may benefit from differentiating more clearly between high party commitment and high party affinity as two separate constructs when examining the effects of partisanship on selective news exposure in the context of new political movements, as they appear to affect news exposure in opposite ways. Furthermore, social cues provided by today's news environments were found to be decisive in attenuating selection biases, increasing user openness across the political spectrum towards critical news regarding populism.

## **2. Partisan Selective Exposure in Times of Political Upheaval**

Critical news coverage can essentially help citizens become aware of populist threats by clarifying the democratic implications of populist demands. However, extant research on confirmation bias in partisan selective exposure suggests that the actual awareness of such threats greatly depends on media users' political predispositions, as users tend to prefer information that aligns with their political preferences while avoiding—although to a smaller extent (Garrett, 2009)—information that challenges their viewpoints (Feldman, Wojcieszak, Stroud, & Bimber, 2018; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, Westerwick, & Donsbach, 2013).

The determining motivational drivers of confirmation biases are often explained by drawing on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). According to dissonance theory, individuals selectively approach attitude-bolstering content and avoid challenging information in order to reduce discomfort and maintain a consistent self-image (see also Aronson, 1999; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). In the area of political communication, a mounting number of studies supports this notion, demonstrating the reinforcing effects of partisan

selective exposure on political self-views as indicated by increased attitude strength or attitude accessibility (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017), which in turn can stimulate further reinforcement of confirmation biases (Dahlgren, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2019; Stroud, 2010).

In social psychology, most consistent support for the notion of partisan selective exposure was found in instances of 'postdecisional' dissonance regarding past behaviours or beliefs held with strong commitment, thereby becoming less amenable to change (D'Alessio & Allen, 2002; Mills, 1999). Hence, in pre-election contexts, partisan selective exposure is most likely to occur among voters who have already decided upon whom to cast their vote for. Although voting intentions can change over time, this scenario is unlikely for committed supporters of populist parties, as populism stresses partisanship to a special degree by cultivating strong in-group favouritism, fostering positive political self-views through emphasizing an idealized homogeneity of the people, while simultaneously excluding non-compliant and non-eligible segments of the population as outgroups (Bos et al., in press; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

From a social identity perspective, the sense of belonging to an ingroup is not unique to populism, but rather serves as a major reference point for media users in general to perform confirmation biases in the context of partisan news exposure (Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018). The case of populism—more specifically right-wing populism—is special, however, in that the definition of the ingroup is far more exclusive and is accompanied by particularly strong affective appeals (Wirz, 2018). In contrast to its alleged representation of the people as a whole, right-wing populism actually draws a clear line between those who share its ideology and those who do not, reserving the right to belong—and thus access to the ingroup—solely for those who subscribe to the populist ideology (Berbair, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2015). Accordingly, populist voters were shown to be particularly interested in political information that actively addresses the gaps between the 'innocent' ingroup and the 'culprit' outgroup (Hameleers, Bos, & De Vreese, 2017). Not surprisingly, this anti-pluralism creates a particularly strong sense of a 'politicized self' (Bos et al., in press), which in turn leads to a generally greater perceived stigmatization by and actual skepticism of mainstream parties, their supporters, and the media (e.g., Eberl, 2019; Van Spanje & Azrout, 2019). In light of the strong ingroup-outgroup polarization instigated by populist movements and against the background of the vast empirical evidence in support of general partisan confirmation biases, we, therefore, pose the following hypothesis:

H1: Prospective voters of a right-wing populist party will less be likely to expose themselves to critical news about their party than prospective voters of other parties.



In the context of established democratic parties, partisanship was found to highly correlate with other types of political predispositions, such as issue positions, general political ideology, or sympathy for a given party (Jou & Dalton, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011; Stroud, 2010), each often yielding similar effects in terms of confirmation biases. However, this general consistency of political orientations—and their effects on selective exposure—may not equally apply to populism, as attitudes of populist sympathizers towards populism appear to be much more ambiguous and inconsistent than those of committed populist voters. In Germany, for example, only a minor part of the population would actually vote for the AfD (16%) although a majority of citizens have been dissatisfied with the overall government performance (68%) and its handling of immigration issues (51%; Infratest Dimap, 2018), considered as two main drivers of voting in favour of right-wing populism (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & De Vreese, 2017; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2019). Especially the politically disenchanted segments of the electorate may thus sympathize with populist agendas in the run-up to an election but do not necessarily support populists in elections, not even for the purpose of protest voting (Giebler & Regel, 2018). A major reason for this inconsistency likely lies in the political programs of populist parties themselves, as they are usually narrow in terms of their issue agendas, less clearly explicated, and far more reluctant to political compromise than the programs of established democratic parties (Fenger, 2018; Mudde, 2004; Reinemann et al., 2017). Voting for populist parties thus contains many unknown risks for sympathizers, as the outcomes of a populist party's election victory are less predictable.

In light of this uncertainty, citizens with an affinity for populist parties should not only considerably differ from sympathizers of mainstream parties in terms of their eventual commitment to the party; they should also differ from committed populist voters in terms of how they approach attitude-challenging information, such as critical news on populism. While classic confirmation bias frameworks suggest that sympathizers of established democratic parties show confirmation biases merely to a smaller extent due to lower levels of partisanship (e.g., Stroud, 2010), we expect populist sympathizers to not only show reduced levels of confirmation biases but to exhibit even inverse exposure patterns, caused by the high political uncertainty regarding populism's handling of a potential election victory. Hence, news exposure of populist sympathizers should not be primarily driven by aspirations to protect preexisting attitudes but more likely by a need for orientation (Arendt & Fawzi, 2018), that is, by the informational utility of messages that critically examine populist movements before an election.

According to informational utility frameworks (Atkin, 1973; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2008), high uncertainty in how to adapt to the (political) environment leads media users to primarily engage with information that

provides assistance in future decision making, regardless of whether it confirms or challenges previous attitudes. Accordingly, a study by Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman (2012) found that informational utility indeed overrides confirmation biases among voters who perceive high uncertainty before an election (see also Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019). While these studies, however, expected and found similar patterns across all supporters of a specific established democratic party—irrespective of their level of commitment to this party—the present study expects informational utility only to override confirmation biases among populist sympathizers due to their higher need for orientation in face of the risky and uncertain political enterprise populist parties stand for. In contrast to what was expected for prospective voters, we, therefore, pose the following hypothesis on partisanship with regards to less committed yet highly sympathetic party supporters:

H2: Higher affinity for a right-wing populist party will lead to increased exposure to critical news about this party.

### 3. Partisan Selective Exposure in Times of Technological Upheaval

The effects of partisanship have been studied in various user contexts, with an increasing focus on online settings, related to vivid academic debates about the extent to which political preferences exert control over selective exposure in digital environments. While some scholars point to an increasing influence of political predispositions in times of 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019), a majority of empirical studies found only limited support for a prevalence of partisan selective exposure online (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018; Nelson & Webster, 2017). The latter findings are commonly explained by a greater likelihood of incidental exposure to attitude-challenging information due to increased content variety and weak ties to users with diverse opinions (Brundidge, 2010; Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017).

These potential constraints for partisan biases to occur online have been mainly discussed in reference to social media as increasingly prevalent news sources. On social media, users are thought to more likely to engage with cross-cutting news, as content is accompanied by social endorsements that provide important cues for media users to monitor their social environment—an observant behaviour of 'analytic labour' that has become habituated among online users to reduce uncertainty (Kaiser, Keller, & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018; Karakayali & Kilic, 2013). In contrast to user statistics (i.e., number of shares and views) or personal recommendations by friends, public sentiment cues such as 'likes' and additional emoticons should particularly suit media users' social monitoring aspirations, as they allow users to get an idea of what

the broader online public sphere thinks about political issues (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2019), thereby offering important heuristics for users to decide upon what information to access (Kaiser et al., 2018).

Although initial experimental studies indicate that public sentiment cues may indeed moderate the effects of political attitudes on selective news exposure (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Winter, Metzger, & Flanagin, 2016), little is known as to whether this impact holds regarding populist movements, which particularly excel in using social media to spread their ideology (Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017). Due to the remarkable ingroup favouritism encouraged by populism, heuristic cues on the general public perception of populism may be less relevant to committed populist voters than to populist sympathizers with a higher need for orientation. For the latter, however, the informational utility of heuristic social monitoring cues may either be diminished by the informational utility of the journalistic content or instead amplified in comparison to content-related informational utility due to it requiring less cognitive effort than exposure to counter-attitudinal contents. Given the overall inconclusive expectations with regards to the effects of public sentiment cues, we examine the following research question:

RQ1: Do public sentiment cues alleviate the attitudinal effects as outlined in H1 and H2?

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Overview

To address the hypotheses and research questions, the present study examined partisan selective exposure to critical news posts on populism in a 24-hour social media field experiment during the 2017 federal election campaign in Germany. Participants browsed a mock newsfeed, with eight news posts explicitly including criticism of the German right-wing populist party AfD. While the content of the posts was held constant, public sentiment cues were randomly manipulated within subjects (no cues vs. 'likes' only vs. genuine cues with additional affective user reactions, such as 'angry' or 'love'). The distinction between 'likes' and genuine user reactions was made to ensure the comparability of findings with previous studies that mainly relied on 'likes' and for reasons of ecological validity, as the range of public sentiment cues on Facebook is constantly expanding.

### 4.2. Participants

Participants were recruited by an international online panel company that initially invited a national sample of 2,331 active social media users born in Germany to participate in the study in exchange for a monetary incentive. Of all panel members invited, 358 respondents participated in the study, corresponding to a response rate of

15.4%. Of those who completed the survey, 77 cases had to be excluded due to server problems, and a further 33 respondents were excluded on account of having participated via smartphone; in both cases, the validity of the recorded data could not be ensured. Finally, 38 respondents did not comply with the experimental instructions and were therefore also excluded from the analyses. The final sample thus consisted of 210 valid cases showing a satisfactory variation in sociodemographic variables, and a better representation of national German demographics than common experimental student samples (55% male; mean age:  $M = 35$  years,  $SD = 9$ ; education: 52% secondary school, 28% high school, 17% graduate degree).

### 4.3. Procedure

In an online session of about 20 minutes, respondents indicated their political attitudes, among other variables, before they were redirected to the mock newsfeed and asked to browse its contents and to click on whatever posts they found interesting. To ensure that the experimental material was considered at least briefly, the time limit for newsfeed browsing was set to two minutes. The maximum time limit of ten minutes allowed participants to scroll through all material at a moderate pace without having time to read all posts in detail. On average, participants spent 4.50 minutes engaging with the newsfeed ( $M = 290$  sec,  $SD = 162$ ). Within the scheduled time for news browsing, participants were able to click on posts to get to the related full articles or videos and get back to the newsfeed for continued browsing. After browsing the news, participants completed a final questionnaire soliciting psychological and demographic variables.

### 4.4. Newsfeed and Experimental Material

The exposure task was administered by a software application that was specifically developed to simulate a Facebook-like newsfeed and to unobtrusively track selective exposure to each post. News posts and linked contents were collected from the 20 Facebook pages with the widest reach in Germany at that time, including political news (e.g., Spiegel Online, Bild) and entertainment news (e.g., Promiflash, sport1). A final sample of 100 posts, which were published by these Facebook pages on the day of the study, were displayed in a randomized order in the mock newsfeed to permit the study of partisan selective exposure under more realistic conditions.

The posts were shown to participants exactly as they appeared on the original Facebook sites with source, headline, subheading, picture, and teaser. To test for effects of public sentiment cues, however, the social endorsements associated with each post were randomly manipulated within subjects: participants saw the posts with either (a) no public sentiment cues, (b) 'likes' only, or (c) genuine affective reactions that each post had instigated in the online community (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Example screenshot of an AfD-critical post with genuine reactions.

Public sentiment cues were randomly assigned to the 100 posts and for each respondent individually based on nine categories with equal chances to be selected for display: (1) no public sentiment cues; (2) 1–6 ‘likes’; (3) 20–48 ‘likes’; (4) 127–406 ‘likes’; (5) 934–3,677 ‘likes’; (6) 1–6 genuine reactions; (7) 20–48 genuine reactions; (8) 127–406 genuine reactions; and (9) 934–3,677 genuine reactions (for a similar procedure see Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Winter et al., 2016). For reasons of ecological validity, each post thus had a 1:9 chance of being displayed without user reactions—on account of the fact that most posts receive at least some user reactions shortly after being published—and an equal chance of 4:9 of being displayed with either ‘likes’ or genuine user reactions. For the analyses, the categories were then merged into (a) no public sentiment cues, (b) ‘likes’ only, and (c) genuine public sentiment cues’. Applying this procedure, each individual AfD-critical post was displayed with no cues in 12% of cases, with ‘likes’ in 45% of cases, and with genuine user reactions in 43% of cases (for further details, see Table 1).

As the study utilized original, non-manipulated Facebook posts, two coders content analyzed the posts post hoc in terms of political relevance, reference to the AfD party, and mentioned criticism regarding the party. Among 42 overall political posts in the mock newsfeed (Krippendorff’s Alpha = .81), nine posts mentioned the AfD (KAlpha = 1.00), while eight included criticism regarding the AfD, mainly expressed through quoted actors and sources (KAlpha = 1.00). Regarding the pictures associated with the posts, four posts contained close-ups of politicians who had made criticism towards the AfD, two posts used photos of AfD politicians, and two

posts included rather abstract non-personalized pictures. One post referred to a video (source: Bild) that covered more than just the AfD, yet with criticism regarding the AfD serving as the lead story. The posts’ sources reflect a combination of online outlets and subsidiaries of traditional newspapers (Bild, FAZ.NET), printed news magazines (Spiegel Online), and TV channels (n-tv), as well as genuine online sources (Tag24, wize.life, Epoch Times), with a balanced mix of sources across the political spectrum from left (e.g., Spiegel Online) to right (e.g., Epoch Times).

#### 4.5. Measures

##### 4.5.1. Selective Exposure

Two selective exposure measures were employed for each respondent: (a) visibility time of AfD-critical posts in the newsfeed (in *ms*), captured by a digital meter point attached to each post; and (b) number of clicks on AfD-critical posts to get to the linked contents (0 = no AfD-critical post was clicked, 8 = all AfD-critical posts were clicked). For the final analyses, the only posts included were those which had been visible on the participants’ screens for at least 50 *ms*, representing the approximate average of an individual’s ability to process the meaning of a picture (Potter, Wyble, Hagmann, & McCourt, 2014). Furthermore, posts were only included if they had been visible for less than 15 seconds (15,000 *ms*) in order to avoid drawing inferences on the basis of visibility times that likely originated from user inactivity. The average visibility time across all valid posts was 3.62 seconds (*SD* = 3.23). The eight AfD-critical posts were visible for 16.08 seconds (*SD* = 13.99) on participants’ screens. Regarding participants’ click behavior, on average, respondents clicked on 4% of the posts they saw (*M* = .04, *SD* = .20). The average number of AfD-critical posts that participants clicked on was 0.31 (*SD* = 0.61).









##### 4.5.2. Voting Intention

To measure partisanship in terms of voting intention, participants were asked to indicate which of the German parties standing for election they were going to vote for. As populism relies on strong ingroup-outgroup polarization, participants who indicated voting for the AfD were classified as the ‘ingroup’ (19%), whereas participants who did not indicate voting for the AfD were categorized as the ‘outgroup’ (62%). Respondents who were undecided were excluded from the analyses (18%), as their support for the AfD, or its lack thereof, could not be ensured.

##### 4.5.3. Party Affinity

To measure partisanship in terms of party affinity, participants were asked to indicate how much they sympathize with the AfD on a 5-point scale (1 = like not at all; 5 = like very much; *M* = 2.15, *SD* = 1.51).

**Table 1.** Overview of AfD-critical posts and random assignment of public sentiment cues per post ( $N = 210$ ).

Source	Spiegel Online	n-tv	Bild	FAZ.NET	Tag24	wize.life	Epoch Times	Epoch Times
Headline (transl.)	Justice minister: Maas calls parts of AfD program unconstitutional	Maas picks AfD program to pieces	Will AfD e-mail affair cost Weidel her job? +++ Hurricane Irma: That's what Florida looks like.	Federal election: Maas calls AfD program unconstitutional	Investigations against Gauland after statement against Özuguz	CSU secretary general Scheuer: Weidel's facade conceals 'Reichsbürger' ideology"	Maas: AfD program 'partly unconstitutional' 'authoritarian system, not for	Künast fears AfD in Bundestag: AfD strives for an democracy'
Original Public Sentiment Cues								
No Public Sentiment Cues	13%	10%	10%	14%	12%	9%	11%	15%
'Likes' Only	42%	47%	43%	47%	51%	43%	42%	47%
Genuine Public Sentiment Cues	45%	43%	47%	39%	37%	48%	47%	39%

4.5.4. Control Variables

Additional measures were included to control for confounding influences of two basic individual predispositions known to affect selective exposure, political interest and dogmatism. Regarding political interest, respondents were asked to indicate their general interest in politics (1 = *not interested at all*; 10 = *very interested*;  $M = 7.35$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ). Dogmatism was measured by eleven items adopted from Shearman and Levine (2006), measured on 5-point scales (1 = *do not agree at all*; 5 = *fully agree*). The items were averaged to form an index of dogmatism ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ , Cronbach's alpha = .755).

5. Results

To test the effects of voting intention and party affinity on selective exposure to AfD-critical news posts with distinct public sentiment cues, a series of OLS regressions was conducted, one for each public sentiment cue type (no vs. 'likes' only vs. genuine). Based on two indicators of selective news exposure (visibility time, number of clicks), each model included voting intention and party affinity as predictors, while additionally controlling for age, gender, education, political interest, and dogmatism. Results are shown in Table 2.

Regarding news posts without public sentiment cues, the analyses revealed a confirmation bias for those who had already made up their minds about whom to cast their vote for in the upcoming election. In line with H1, prospective AfD voters were less likely to spend time on AfD-critical posts in their newsfeed ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $p = .054$ ) and less likely to click on AfD-critical posts in order to engage with the linked contents ( $\beta = -.38$ ,  $p = .012$ ). In total, prospective AfD voters spent 2966 ms less time on AfD-critical posts and clicked on 0.25 fewer AfD-critical posts than prospective voters of other parties.

Regarding party affinity, the analyses yielded reverse effects on selective exposure for those who tentatively

identified with the party. In line with H2, higher affinity for the AfD led to longer visibility times of AfD-critical posts on the participants' screens ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p = .02$ ) and increased number of clicks on such posts ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p = .069$ ). In total, visibility time of and number of clicks on AfD-critical posts increased by 952 ms and 0.05 clicks, respectively, with each scale point on the incremental AfD-affinity scale.<sup>1</sup>

When public sentiment cues were present, however, these attitudinal patterns disappeared, regardless of whether news posts were accompanied by 'likes' or additional affective user reactions (RQ1). Visibility time and number of clicks were no longer influenced by voting intention or party affinity ( $ps > .10$ ), implying a conditional effect of partisanship on selective exposure to AfD-critical news posts contingent upon the presence of other users' reactions.

6. Conclusions

In recent years, whether or not citizens are aware of the challenges populism poses for liberal democracy has become a crucial question for communication scholars. This question primarily implies an openness for counter-attitudinal information among supporters of populist parties. While cross-cutting exposure is generally conceived of as a decisive "criterion of citizen performance in democracy" (Chaffee, Saphir, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2010, p. 247), its practical implementation is a matter of constant debate. The present study aimed to further our understanding of the circumstances affecting receptiveness to attitude-challenging information by examining selective exposure to critical-analytical news posts on the German right-wing populist party AfD as a function of partisan commitment and social monitoring in a pre-election context.

Our findings imply two distinct patterns of exposure to AfD-critical news posts, depending on participants' attitudinal commitment to the party. In line with H1, participants who have already decided to vote for the

**Table 2.** Impact of voting intention and political affinity on selective exposure to AfD-critical news posts by public sentiment cue type, beta weights (p-values in parentheses).

	No Public Sentiment Cues		'Likes' Only		Genuine Public Sentiment Cues	
	Visibility Time	Number of Clicks	Visibility Time	Number of Clicks	Visibility Time	Number of Clicks
AfD Voting Intention	<b>-.30 (.054)</b>	<b>-.38 (.012)</b>	.13 (.301)	.04 (.731)	.01 (.916)	-.03 (.839)
AfD Party Affinity	<b>.37 (.02)</b>	<b>.29 (.069)</b>	-.12 (.400)	-.14 (.288)	-.14 (.297)	-.08 (.578)
R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.14	.04	.04	.09	.08
N	103	103	155	155	155	155

Notes: All analyses controlled for age, gender, education, political interest, and dogmatism, and showed acceptable variance inflation values of VIFs < 3.

<sup>1</sup> Since two AfD-critical posts in the mock newsfeed were published by 'Epoch Times', which is known to be AfD-friendly, the analyses were re-run without these two posts in order to ensure the robustness of the findings. Results lean in the same direction, albeit with less power due to the reduced sample size.



AfD were less likely to approach critical news about the party than the 'outgroup' of non-AfD voters, both in terms of how long they attended to posts in the experimental newsfeed and regarding their willingness to engage with linked contents. However, the effect was more pronounced regarding click decisions than attention allocation during browsing, indicating that committed partisans were more likely to incidentally encounter attitude-challenging information in social media environments without necessarily dealing with the information in more detail. This finding may help reconcile conflicting evidence on the persistence of confirmation biases in digital media environments by lending support for both the notion of incidental exposure (e.g., Nelson & Webster, 2017) and partisan selective exposure (e.g., Bakshy et al., 2015). Both exposure patterns appear to refer to different levels of news engagement, with exposure to counter-attitudinal contents being more pronounced on the level of peripheral elaboration in the course of newsfeed browsing. These results carry somewhat discouraging implications for citizens' awareness of populist threats, as confirmation biases appear to proliferate under circumstances of increased incidental exposure to attitude-challenging information. Incidental exposure may even have reinforced the active avoidance of contents linked to the posts, thereby potentially exacerbating political polarization (see also Weeks et al., 2017).

However, this notion only applies to committed voters and thus only to a fraction of a wider range of populist supporters. For the larger share of populist sympathizers, the analyses yielded opposite effects, in line with H2, by showing that participants with a higher affinity for the AfD were more likely to attend to and click on AfD-critical news posts. This finding supports the notion of a greater need for orientation among populist sympathizers, who were—following informational utility frameworks (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012)—expected to approach populism-critical news in order to reduce uncertainty regarding their political preferences. This notion is further supported by the finding that the effects of party affinity especially occurred during news browsing. Hence, the informational needs of populist sympathizers to learn about the democratic challenges posed by populism clearly dominate news exposure in the face of a multitude of alternative user options in high-choice media environments.

These findings extend previous research on established democratic parties by showing that new political movements are likely related to two distinct types of supporter which do not necessarily overlap: supporters with a high commitment to a populist party and supporters with a high affinity for a populist party's agenda. While prospective voters (high commitment) were more likely to avoid uncongenial information as commonly expected and found in extant research, party sympathizers (high affinity) were primarily interested in information that challenged their political preferences. While the first group may thus not be reached by critical news on pop-

ulist threats to democracy and, hence, not be amenable to counterarguments, the latter and larger group of populist sympathizers appears significantly more open to deliberate discussions on populism. Given the shift to the right in many western democracies and an increasing polarization of the electorate along populist demarcation lines, our findings hence encourage a closer look at who we are talking about when speaking of populists and their potential resilience to the values of liberal democracy.

Our study additionally suggests that even confirmation biases shown by highly committed populist voters may be attenuated in social media environments. When populism-critical news posts were accompanied by public sentiment cues (RQ1), attitudinal impacts disappeared. In line with earlier research on the moderating role of social endorsements in partisan selective exposure (e.g., Winter et al., 2016), committed AfD voters did not differ significantly from non-AfD voters if social monitoring cues were present, suggesting that users tend to adapt to the social news environment instead of solely relying on individual predispositions (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2019). Similar effects occurred with regards to populist sympathizers: exposure to AfD-critical posts was no longer decided upon AfD affinity under the presence of social monitoring cues, indicating that the informational utility of public sentiment cues exceeds message-related informational utility to a certain degree. Hence, heuristic cues appear to become increasingly decisive in what messages users engage with in social news environments. Even in case of high political commitment, such cues may provide important guidance for media users by satisfying an increasing need for 'analytic labour' (Karakayali & Kilic, 2013), while simultaneously demanding little cognitive effort. This appears to apply both to classic 'likes' as aggregate forms of public approval (Winter et al., 2016) and to emoticons with a greater variety of expressed emotions. Although this study—due to its relatively small sample size—did not allow for a more detailed analysis of the specific number of public sentiment cues and its effects on selective exposure, these findings indicate that the mere presence of social cues may limit problematic selection biases and provide fertile ground for citizens—independent of their political background—to (re-)connect with political outgroups. In light of the increased need for social orientation in digital environments, future research should delve deeper into the question of exactly when and how this promising impact of social monitoring cues comes into play.

The findings of the present study need to be seen in light of several limitations. First, criticism regarding the AfD is likely related to a generally higher news value of negative information. Negativity bias could thus be a potential confound in our analyses of selective exposure (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006) that could not be accounted for in the present study due to the high ecological validity of the design, using non-manipulated content actually published by main news sites. Hence,



negativity bias should be considered in future research on populism by examining valence (negative, positive) and attitude-(in)consistency independently. The same limitation applies to the valence of public sentiment cues, as our field study did not allow for systematic variation of genuine user reactions. As Table 1 showed, most of the original user reactions that were prompted by the eight AfD-critical posts contained a similar combination of emoticons (mostly 'angry' and 'amused'), along with 'likes'. This naturally existing user-generated material reflects not only a limited possibility for researchers to achieve satisfactory variation in social cues when relying on non-manipulated content, thereby complicating systematic comparisons; it also points to the difficulty of interpreting the messages that such combinations potentially send to the readers. In case of the combination of 'angry' and 'amused' cues, for instance, it remains unclear whether users thereby primarily perceive support or critique by other users with regards to what is mentioned in the post. Future research is needed to look deeper into the semantic meaning of combined affective user reactions in order to allow for a meaningful, systematic variation of public sentiment cues. On a related note, the present study examined attention to public sentiment cues only indirectly by inferring participants' awareness of such cues from observed user behaviours, following extant research in this area (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Winter et al., 2016). Although this implies a certain risk of drawing false inferences if participants do not actually pay attention to such cues, studies utilizing eye-tracking during news browsing demonstrated that users do indeed take such cues into account when browsing and selecting information online (e.g., Dvir-Gvirman, 2019). Future research should build on these findings to develop a valid and easy to implement measure of attention allocation towards social cues in order to allow for more rigorous manipulation checks and to thereby overcome the need for more complex field experiments to rely on indirect inferences when studying the effects of social cues. A related limitation of the study pertains to the indirect test of the effects of informational utility on selective exposure. Following approaches suggested by Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019), the present study implied greater utility of attitude-inconsistent posts among voters with a higher need for orientation, in this case, populist sympathizers. Future studies should take this approach further by directly measuring the perceived utility of attitude-consistent and counter-attitudinal information as a function of political predisposition. Moreover, future research is needed to examine the specific motivational drivers of counter-attitudinal exposure exhibited by populist sympathizers, as they may influence information processing differently. On the one hand, the higher need for orientation among populist sympathizers may be related to accuracy motivations (Hart et al., 2009) to achieve an adequate under-

standing of populism and could thereby promote political depolarization. This notion would be in line with findings by Beam et al. (2018) on the depolarizing effects of counter-attitudinal exposure on Facebook. On the other hand, the informational needs of populist sympathizers could also rely on defense motivations (Hart et al., 2009) to reinforce tentative attitudes by engaging in disconfirmation biases (Taber & Lodge, 2006), which may eventually increase political polarization, as suggested by the findings of Weeks et al. (2017).

Besides these open questions—mostly originating from the study's aim to achieve high ecological validity, resulting in a more complex design compared to more traditional experimental studies—the ecological validity of this study has its limits, too. Specifically, exposure patterns of populist voters and sympathizers may be different if examined in even more natural exposure situations, because populists are commonly known to distrust mainstream media, as primarily—although not solely—examined in the present study, to a special degree and to more strongly rely on alternative media (Haller & Holt, 2018).

Despite these caveats, our study provides important insights on exposure to counter-attitudinal information in times of political and technological upheaval. By measuring partisanship in a more nuanced way and by studying exposure in realistic high-choice, social user settings, our findings suggest two main implications: first, that affinity to populism alone does not necessarily equate with intolerance towards populism-critical information, and second, that social cues provided by today's news environments may serve as decisive elements to contain selection biases to the benefit of a deliberate public discourse in turbulent political times.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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