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# Reinforcement of the Political Self Through Selective Exposure to Political Messages

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick[1] & Jingbo Meng[2]

1 School of Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA
2 Annenberg School of Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

*The idea that recipients prefer messages that reinforce preexisting attitudes and self-perceptions has pervaded much communication research, but effects of selective exposure are rarely examined. This 2-session experiment (n = 157) investigates such effects. The first session presented computerized questions on 12 political issue attitudes and political self-concept. Accessibility data were collected based on response times. In the second session, participants browsed through an online magazine including 4 of the 12 issues, each issue being covered by 2 articles featuring opposing viewpoints. Selective exposure was logged and categorized as attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal. Finally, a questionnaire repeated measures for attitudes and self-concept. The results show that participants preferred attitude-consistent over counterattitudinal messages, which strengthened the political self-concept through increased accessibility.*

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The idea that individuals may prefer attitude-consistent messages has long been a concern, as this pattern would hinder an informed opinion formation according to democratic ideals. The term *selective exposure*[1] traditionally refers to this phenomenon (e.g., Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967). More recently, the issue has attracted new attention as the Internet and ever-rising media offerings increase the available choices and make them easily accessible. Oftentimes, selective exposure is viewed as a key factor in protecting existing predispositions and favorable views of the self. Along these lines, it has been argued that the media mostly have effects that reinforce the status quo, which may lead to underestimating the total mass communication impacts (e.g., Klapper, 1960). Empirical evidence on these self-reinforcement phenomena still defines a void (Slater, 2007). The current investigation aims to shed more light on how exactly selective exposure bolsters media users' preexisting views as well as their self-concept. In the following, we review research on selective exposure to political information and its implications before we present empirical tests of hypotheses derived from this review.

Corresponding author: Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick; e-mail: knobloch-westerwick.1@osu.edu

Most prior work has been concerned with *predictors* of selective exposure to political messages. In spite of ample research on selective exposure as a preference for attitude-consistent messages, usually embedded in the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), the debate on the coherence and strength of the empirical evidence has been on-going for decades. A recent meta-analysis by D'Alessio and Allen (2007) judged the evidence as consistent but weak. Yet it focused on postdecisional dissonances, which are not the typical context of media use. With regard to selective exposure in an actual media use context, existent investigations are somewhat scarce (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Recent media use studies suggest that respondents do prefer attitude-consistent messages or channels and avoid counterattitudinal material (e.g., Garrett, 2006; Graf & Aday, 2008; Stroud, 2008). In our own work, we recently found consistent and clear-cut evidence for selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages across different indicators, different topics, and based on behavioral data. Before we examine further consequences of such exposure in the current investigation, a replication of these earlier findings will be pursued.

**H1:** Media users prefer attitude-consistent topic information over counterattitudinal information.

Research about the exposure bias toward attitude-consistent messages often mentions problems for democratic ideals as a result of this bias. It may hinder an informed opinion-formation, polarize the electorate, and reduce political tolerance (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Mutz, 2002; Sunstein, 2001). However, a research focus on *outcomes* of selective exposure along these lines is scarce and faced with some methodological issues. If selective exposure primarily fosters the status quo, then evidence of such outcomes may be difficult to capture. After all, changes are more easily demonstrated than stability, similar to testing H1 versus H0. Another methodological concern is self-selection effect, which is usually considered a problem in determining causation but is "the nature of the beast" in this context.

Prior research has demonstrated differences between individuals with varying levels of attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal exposure. Mutz (2002) found that having interpersonal networks with greater political disagreement resulted in a lower voting intention at the U.S. presidential elections compared to individuals with more homogeneous networks. Likewise, research by Brynin and Newton (2003) suggests that U.S. citizens who read a newspaper in line with political-party preference are significantly more likely to vote in general elections than those who read a paper that is incompatible with their party preferences. Stroud (2007) found that those who viewed the anti-President George W. Bush documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* had significantly more negative attitudes toward Bush compared to those who intended to view the film.

In other content contexts, reinforcement of the self has been suggested to be a crucial motivation for selective exposure (Knobloch, Callison, Chen, Fritzsche, & Zillmann, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Slater, 2007), for example, for gender identity or ethnic identity. In

the context of political messages in which the issue of selective exposure emerged as a communication research topic, the political self as party partisan is of key interest (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and highly relevant for voting outcomes. Cognitive dissonance theory has been guiding much research in this area; yet it has not been connected with self-concepts in the context of mass communication use.

However, within psychology, connections between cognitive dissonance theory and self-concepts have been discussed extensively. For example, Aronson (1968) presented a self-consistency model that predicts that inconsistency of information or actions with the self-concept will produce dissonance (instead of *any* inconsistent cognitions). According to this view, individuals will prefer information that corroborates their self-concept, even if the particular aspect is negative (e.g., someone who believes to have poor math skills should prefer a poor math test result). Many other propositions about the self exist that have also been linked to cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., self-verification theory by Swann, 1987; self-affirmation theory by Steele, 1988; the New Look at dissonance theory by Cooper & Fazio, 1984), as reviewed by Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999). It has been suggested that self-esteem is just a special case of an attitude that happens to have the self as the object of evaluation (DeMarree, Petty, & Brinol, 2007). This matches Festinger's (1957) proposition that the magnitude of dissonance relates to the importance attached to the involved cognitions—if the self is the object of inconsistent cognitions, then dissonance will be intense, as the self is naturally of crucial importance.

In light of these considerations, it is important to examine how selective exposure to political media messages actually affects the political self in the sense of party partisanship. Yet it is unlikely that such exposure will have a tangible impact in terms of *change* in the sense of conversion (Klapper, 1960). In other words, after reading some political messages even over an extended period, a conversion from Republican to Democrat and vice versa will be quite rare. However, reinforcement could be detected through implicit measures (Fazio & Olson, 2003) such as accessibility of party partisanship as political self-concept (Markus, 1977). If a preexisting political view or view of the self becomes more accessible, this type of *change* could actually capture a reinforcement effect. Accessibility measures are frequently used in attitude research (e.g., Fazio, 1995), but many parallels exist between attitude strength and strength of self-concepts, in particular with regard to accessibility (DeMarree et al., 2007).

Thus, the current study draws on accessibility of attitudes and of political partisanship as the "political self" to examine any impacts of selective exposure. Greater accessibility of preexisting attitudes is thought to indicate reinforcement. In this regard, the current approach relates to work on media priming and political priming in particular (see for an overview Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009), even though this body of literature utilizes forced-exposure designs only. Priming research studies short-term impact of exposure to the media on judgments and behaviors. These impacts are said to result from increased accessibility of constructs primed by the media message. It is also argued that priming can foster chronic accessibility of constructs portrayed in the media and thus produce long-term

shifts in information processing. Hence, as media recipients attend selectively to messages, they can employ them to prime themselves in line with any ideas they value and thus *reinforce* them. The cognitive processes that then evolve, once the message selection has occurred, can be described along the lines of network models of memory or mental models (Carpentier, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008).

On a cautionary note, the operationalization of reinforcement through accessibility may not be perfect, as this implicit measure may be subject to other influences in addition to the targeted reinforcement effect. From an information processing perspective, it is possible that additional information received during selective exposure, even if consistent with preexisting attitudes or partisanship and thus reinforcing, instigates elaborations and reorganization of political knowledge and associated viewpoints. In other words, even exposure to attitude-consistent information could reduce accessibility, as recipients aim to incorporate the newly received information into their mindset. Such elaboration and knowledge reorganization would reduce accessibility of one's attitudes and political self-concept, at least in the short term. Despite this concern, accessibility of attitudes and self-concepts appears very suitable to operationalize a phenomenon as subtle as reinforcement.

Thus, the current study draws on accessibility of attitudes and of political partisanship as the "political self" to examine reinforcement impacts of selective exposure. Theoretical notions about cognitive consistency motivations (outlined above) imply that media users will prefer attitude-consistent messages to foster attitude strength. Such reinforcement, if successful, should be reflected in increased accessibility of the related attitudes. Similarly, a preference for political information that is consistent with one's political partisanship should serve the reinforcement of one's political self-concept. If successful, the reinforcement would be reflected in greater accessibility of the political self-concept. The suggested pattern should apply in particular to topics for which the political parties have clearly different stances and if individuals' topic attitudes converge with parties' stances. The current study aims to demonstrate these patterns based on the following hypotheses:

**H2:** Selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages increases accessibility of corresponding attitudes.

**H3:** Selective exposure to attitude-consistent political messages increases accessibility of the political self.

## Method

### Overview

An experiment with two sessions, with complete data from both sessions for 157 participants, was conducted in a lab and online ($n = 66/91$). In the first session, participants responded to a computerized questionnaire about 12 political issue attitudes, attitude certainty, attitude importance, political self-concept, political interest, and news use habits. Accessibility data were collected based on attitude response times.

In the second session, approximately 4 weeks later, participants were asked to browse through an online news magazine. Four policy issues (target issues) chosen from the 12 issues were covered by the eight displayed articles, with two articles featuring opposing topic perspectives. Selective exposure time to specific news reports was unobtrusively logged by software. After the browsing period, participants completed a questionnaire that repeated measures for attitudes and political self-concept.

**Respondents**

Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a large university in the Midwestern United States and received extra credit for participation. The sample consisted of 157 complete data sets with data from both sessions (after excluding 14 individuals that had clicked on one or less of the available articles and thus did hardly engage in news reading). The two methods of data collection, lab and online ($n = 66/91$), led to different gender proportions in the two samples (43% males in the lab sample and 25% males in the online sample). Age did not differ by data collection method and was 21.4 ($SD = 2.6$) on average.

**Procedure**

The main experiment consisted of two sessions that were either conducted in a computer lab or online. The first data collection part was performed from 23 January 2008 to 2 February 2008, the second from 20 February 2008, to 29 February 2008, hence during the onset of the presidential primaries 2008.[2] In the following, we describe the lab procedure and then point out the differences of the online procedure.

*Lab procedure*

Participants signed up for session times on instructors' in-class invitation to earn extra credit. The lab sessions were both run in a facility with five identical personal computers in separate rooms. When arriving for the first lab session, the respondents received general verbal instructions that were then reiterated via computer screen. Respondents were led to individual research rooms and started the computerized session, which was programmed with MediaLab and DirectRT. The questions (displayed on separate screens) pertained to attitudes, attitude certainty, attitude importance, demographics, and self-descriptions including politically relevant adjectives, political interest, and news use habits; additional variables were derived from these responses (see details in the sections about measures). To link the data from the two sessions, the last four digits of participant social security numbers were recorded, which ostensibly served as backup for proper recording of extra credit.

About 4 weeks later, students recruited from the same classes were invited to the computer lab again, yet without knowing the connection between the two sessions. After the general greeting, they were instructed as follows:

> In the following, you will see a test-version of the magazine. Please browse through to gain an impression of the articles. The scheduled time does not allow

> reading all articles. So please read what you find interesting, just as you normally would. There is no assigned number of articles that you should read, and you don't have to read the articles as a whole. After the scheduled browsing time is over, a questionnaire will upload automatically, and you will be asked about your impressions of the articles.

Then participants were asked to start the computerized experiment (programmed with MediaLab, DirectRT, and Authorware). The first instruction page presented the same information as the verbal instruction; the online magazine was displayed for 5 minutes, until a news evaluation questionnaire was uploaded to provide closure for the browsing part. These questions asked how "credible/important/biased/interesting/timely/well-written/relevant" the articles were; the items were rated on 7-point scales, ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. Finally, the parts of the first session about attitudes (dichotomous and Likert measures) and self-descriptions were essentially repeated (see details in sections on Independent and dependent measures).

*Online procedure*

For the online procedure, potential participants received an e-mail invitation from their instructors with the same information as featured in the in-class announcement for the lab procedure. They were informed of some technical requirements, as the online procedure was set up so that a Windows PC with an Internet browser (typically Internet Explorer) had to be used and a Web player had to be downloaded to execute the application programmed in Authorware7. The first screen page instructed the participants that the session required full attention and allowed them to quit if they wanted to take the session at a later point. The specific instructions were as follows:

> Thank you for accessing this research application. Before you start, please be informed that it is absolutely crucial that you are not distracted while taking the session. Distraction will be reflected in the data and will result in unusable scores. The session will take about 10 minutes. If this is not a good time for you to take the session, please return later. *<Press "X" to exit and return later>* If you'd like to proceed now, please ensure that you won't be distracted (e.g., turn off your cell phone/TV, shut the door). *<Press SPACEBAR to continue>*

The rest of the procedure was equivalent to the lab procedure. The Authorware application mimicked all the details of the look from the MediaLab and DirectRT application used in the lab procedure and also recorded response times (regarding reliability of such measures recorded in Authorware, see Tew and McGraw, 2002). For the second session, participants received another e-mail invitation and completed the same procedure as in the lab online, set up in Authorware. The only difference was that they were again informed that the session required full attention, similar to the instruction quoted above, yet with an announced time span of 15 minutes.

**Measures pertaining to attitudes, self concept, and other recipient characteristics**

*Attitude (dichotomous)*

Before providing attitude data in both sessions, participants completed a practice trial to become familiar with the task and were instructed as follows:

> The first task serves to show you how things work and to familiarize you with the procedure. In this task, words will be presented for you to classify into groups—positive and negative adjectives. This task requires that you classify items as quickly as you can while making as few mistakes as possible. Going too slow or making too many mistakes will result in an uninterpretable score.
>
> Press one of two keys to categorize the displayed word.
>
> The key with the symbol "Z" indicates NEGATIVE adjective.
>
> The key with the symbol "/" indicates POSITIVE adjective.
>
> It works best to keep one index finger above both these keys for quick responses.

Six adjectives (marvelous, superb, pleasure, painful, terrible, and awful) showed up on each new screen in a random sequence. On each screen, the adjective appeared in the center with "negative" and "positive" at the left and right bottom, respectively. Once a participant pressed "Z" or "/," the procedure continued to the next screen. A parallel practice trial was used in the second session, with insects and flowers to be categorized (tulip, bee, ant, orchid, beetle, daisy, with "insect" and "flower" shown at the left and right bottom of the screen, respectively).

For the actual dichotomous measurement of attitudes, eight political filler issues were presented first in randomized sequence and then the four target issues relevant for the later exposure measurement were displayed (see Table 1 for the target issues) in randomized sequence, with three words for each topic. Respondents were asked to choose either "oppose" or "support" by pressing corresponding keys. The specific instruction over several screen pages was as follows:

> In the following, you will be asked about topics where people can have very different opinions. Please keep in mind that there are no "right" or "wrong"

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Measures

| | Attitude (1 = *support* or 2 = *oppose*) | Attitude (1 = *support*, 5 = *oppose*) | Certainty (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) | Importance (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stricter gun control | 1.26 (0.44) | 2.1 (1.4) | 4.0 (1.1) | 3.8 (1.2) |
| Legal abortion—prochoice | 1.38 (0.49) | 2.6 (1.6) | 4.3 (1.0) | 4.2 (1.1) |
| Universal health care | 1.14 (0.35) | 1.7 (1.1) | 4.1 (1.1) | 4.1 (1.0) |
| Increase minimum wage | 1.17 (0.38) | 1.8 (1.2) | 4.1 (1.0) | 4.0 (1.2) |

answers for these questions and that we are only interested in your personal views and various aspects of your opinion.

All collected information is anonymous. Only information that cannot be linked to you as a person will be collected.

We are interested in your spontaneous reactions. Thus please answer each question as quickly as possible, but not so quickly that you might make errors.

Press one of two keys to indicate whether you support or oppose a policy. The key with the symbol "Z" indicates that you *oppose* a policy. The key with the symbol "/" indicates that you *support* a policy. Please keep your index finger above these two number keys to increase response speed. Again, please answer each question as quickly as possible, but not so quickly that you might make errors.

*Attitude accessibility*

The attitude measures in dichotomous format also served to gather accessibility data through response times for indicated support regarding each political issue. The computerized procedure recorded the response latency as a measure of attitude accessibility (Fazio, 1995).

*Attitude (Likert scale)*

In the first session, respondents were asked to rate how strongly they oppose or support the policies on a 5-point Likert scale, with *strongly support/somewhat support/neither support nor oppose/somewhat oppose/strongly oppose* as response options. In the second session, respondents were asked to rate how strongly they oppose or support the policies on a 6-point Likert scale, with *strongly support/overall support/rather support/rather oppose/overall oppose/strongly oppose* as response options.

*Attitude extremity*

An attitude extremity measure was derived from the attitude Likert scale from the first session, with *strongly support* and *strongly oppose* being coded as 3, *somewhat support* and *somewhat oppose* coded as 2, and *neither support nor oppose* coded as 1.

*Attitude certainty*

Participants indicated in the first session how certain they were about their opinions toward the policies on a 5-point Likert scale, with *not at all certain/somewhat certain/fairly certain/very certain/extremely certain* as response options.

*Attitude importance*

Participants were asked in the first session how important the issues were to them personally on a 5-point Likert scale, *not at all important/somewhat important/fairly important/very important/extremely important*.

*Political self*

In both sessions, self-descriptions were collected. The approach was in line with procedures by Markus (1977) and more recently, in communication research,

Comello and Slater (2009). The instructions were displayed over several screens as follows:

> In the following, you will be asked about yourself based on characteristics that may or may not apply to you. We'd like to get your spontaneous responses, so please press the response key quickly to indicate whether a characteristic applies to you or not.
>
> The key with the symbol "/" indicates that the characteristic applies to you; it equals "ME." The key with the symbol "Z" indicates that the characteristic does not apply to you; it equals "NOT ME."
>
> It works best to keep one index finger above both these keys for quick responses.

Then, 24 adjectives concerning personal characteristics were displayed on separate screens, with the adjective displayed in the center, and "me" and "not me" shown at the right and left bottom of the screen, respectively. Once a participant pressed "/" or "Z," a new screen was automatically uploaded. First, 16 filler items such as "moody," "sympathetic," and "imaginative" were presented in a randomized sequence. Then, the four target adjectives "conservative," "liberal," "Republican," and "Democrat," embedded in four other politically relevant descriptions (e.g., "patriotic"), were shown in randomized order. The response times in this task were recorded in milliseconds.

*Political self-accessibility*

Political self-accessibility was derived from averaged response times for the four target adjectives.

*Political interest*

Two questions in the first session were concerned with political interest and asked how closely respondents followed news about government and public affairs and news about a recent election on a 4-point scale, *very closely/not too closely/somewhat closely/not at all closely*.

*News use habits*

Participants rated their news use frequency in the first session for online news, daily newspaper, TV news, political Web sites, and talk/comedy shows about news and politics on a 6-point scale, *every day/several times a week/once a week/several times a month/once a month/less often*.

**Experimental Internet magazine**

*Display of available articles*

The experimental Web magazine was programmed with Authorware specifically for this study. This online news magazine had a similar look and feel to popular news magazines currently on the Internet (a screenshot of the same platform was included

by Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). A masthead of the name and logo of the experimental platform—"American's national forum—online opinion"—was displayed across the top of the Web site. In addition, a navigation bar was placed on the left-hand side of the page. Although it was deactivated, the displayed navigation bar contained newspaper section headings such as Economics, Science, and so forth, which would be commonly found on a news site. The main frame initially contained an overview, which listed news leads for all available articles in two columns.

The overview page showed eight news leads that each contained a headline, a news lead, and a hyperlink to access the actual article. The news leads were about the same length with 24–28 words. The positions of news leads on the overview page were randomized for each participant to prevent position effects. However, the two articles about the same issue were never displayed next to or above each other. The respondents made their reading selections by clicking on the hyperlinks to articles, scrolling through the selected articles and reading as much of them as they cared to, clicking to return to the overview, selecting other articles (or returning to the abandoned ones), and so forth, until the end of the reading period. Whenever a participant accessed or exited an article page via hyperlinks, Authorware logged the activity to accumulate selective exposure times.

*News leads and article texts*

The news leads and articles were adopted from an earlier study (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). For this prior study, a pretest of news leads had been conducted (with participants from the same population as used for the current study) to select two opposing leads that were perceived as different in political stance while being equally interesting. These criteria led to the selection of the four target issues. A separate stimuli test with participants from the same population had established that (when controlling for readers' attitudes) text pairs for all topics did not differ significantly for level of interest.

The four policy issues and the eight headlines of the displayed articles were (a) "universal health care," "personalized health coverage"; (b) "firearm threat," "self-defense rights"; (c) "cruelty of prochoice," "abortion is prolife"; and (d) "increase minimum wage," "wage raising hurts." The eight employed articles were pulled from partisan and lobbying Web sites of heritage.org, nraila.org, and others. All articles were minimally edited, essentially shortened, to equalize their length to about 705–719 words ($M = 716$, $SD = 5.2$). Readability scores within each pair of articles were comparable, based on Flesch reading ease scores (which can range between 0 and 100): 36 and 36 for minimum wage, 33 and 37 for health care, 53 and 47 for gun control, and 56 and 51 for abortion. Sans-serif typeface Verdana was used for all articles. Regular scrolling allowed access to the full text of the articles.

The articles used not only rhetoric but also featured ample topic-related details to make a case regarding the issue in question, such as statistics, dates, budgets, descriptions of policies in specific U.S. states or abroad; none of the articles

employed exemplars. Sources mentioned in the articles often came for research circles (researchers, institutions, and journals) or represented other fairly neutral institutions such as the Census Bureau, the World Health Organization, or Federal Bureau of Investigation crime reports. However, lobbying sources such as the *Center to Prevent Handgun Violence* or a union movement *America Needs a Raise* were also referred to. In the context of minimum wage, one article mentioned both Democrats and Republicans in the first article paragraph, whereas the other article talked about a Congress bill in the middle of the text (after 316 body text words) and used the word "Democrats" three times in this paragraph. It is worthwhile to note these details to highlight that the references to the Republican and the Democrat party carried negligible weight in the presented text material. Hence, it is very unlikely that any increased accessibility of political partisanship could result from simple priming instead of the suggested attitude-related reinforcement and the resulting political self-concept reinforcement.

### Selective exposure measures

The software application tracked participants' exposure in seconds by logging every hyperlink use. Exposure was operationalized as article choice (clicked on hyperlink leading to article or not) and reading time in seconds. More specifically, the key dependent measure was exposure to news articles with either attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal perspective. For each political issue, the dichotomous measurement of attitudes from the first data-collection session was employed to code articles and exposure to them as attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal on an individual basis. The following measures were generated from hyperlink clicks for individual articles to test the hypotheses: selection of (a) attitude-consistent articles and (b) counterattitudinal articles; exposure time in seconds dedicated to (c) attitude-consistent articles and (d) counterattitudinal articles. For (a)–(d), measures were generated not only for each specific article but also for accumulated selections and exposure times.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

*Respondent characteristics*

A condensed measure was created for political self-concept. After reversing two of the four target self-descriptions, the reliability of the responses for these yielded a Cronbach's $\alpha$ of .86. Hence, the scores could be condensed as a mean index (higher scores represented a more liberal orientation). Based on this measure, 46 individuals identified themselves consistently as Republican/conservative and 17 leaned toward this category but gave one inconsistent response. In total, 50 individuals identified themselves consistently as Democrat/liberal and 20 leaned toward this category with one inconsistent response out of four. Twenty-one individuals' responses were inconsistent to the effect that they could not be classified.

An index for political self-accessibility was derived from averaged response times for the four target self-descriptions. The average response time was 1,326 ms

($SD = 485$). Due to the nature of the index (in contrast to a scale), a reliability score was not computed; accessibility is commonly measured with response time for just one item, which does not allow computing reliability scores in the first place.[3] However, greater accessibility was associated with greater consistency in the responses as explained in the prior paragraph ($r = .27$, $p = .002$) and lower within-subject standard deviation ($r = .22$, $p = .012$), which speaks to concurrent validity of the measure.

The reliability for the news use habits items was .67 and thus sufficient to create a news use frequency index. The political interest index consisted of the mean of two items that were correlated at $r = .66$ ($p < .001$). News use and political interest were correlated at $r = .55$ ($p < .001$).

*Descriptive statistics for attitudes*

On average, participants indicated that they supported an increase in the minimum wage and favored universal health care as well as stricter gun control; opinions on abortion were somewhat more diverse (see Table 1). Participants' certainty of their abortion attitude was significantly higher than that for minimum wage, $t(151) = 2.0$, $p = .050$, and gun control, $t(151) = 3.8$, $p < .001$. Gun control was significantly less important to participants than universal health care, $t(151) = 2.8$, $p = .006$, and abortion, $t(151) = 3.4$, $p = .001$; the minimum wage issue was less important than abortion, $t(151) = 2.1$, $p = .038$.

*Convergence of attitudes with political party stances*

For the examination of H3, the assumption that individuals' topic attitudes converge with parties' stances regarding these topics is of crucial importance. After all, it is possible that someone who thinks of himself/herself as a Republican favors pro-choice abortion policies nonetheless. In that case, attitude-consistent exposure for this particular topic could actually undermine partisanship as political self-concept. However, individuals' attitudes for the four target topics were generally highly consistent with the viewpoints supported by the favored party. This was demonstrated by an inter-item reliability analysis that employed the dichotomous attitude responses for the four issues (which were all worded in proliberal terms) and the four target adjectives for political self (two of them recoded). Cronbach's α was .79 for this analysis.

*Selective exposure*

As mentioned above, 14 individuals had been excluded from the sample as they had clicked on one or less of the available articles and thus did not appear to have engaged in news reading. For the remaining sample, participants spent 61 seconds ($SD = 55$) on the overview page that displayed the news leads. The minimum time for the overview page was 7 seconds, the maximum 232 seconds. On average, participants clicked on 3.5 articles ($SD = 1.9$), with a range from zero to eight. On average, participants spent 98 seconds ($SD = 82$) on the topic of abortion, 54 seconds ($SD = 64$) on gun-related articles, 47 seconds ($SD = 52$) on texts pertaining to the

minimum wage, and 40 seconds ($SD = 60$) on articles about health insurance. With regard to potential multicollinearity issues in later regression analyses, it is relevant to note that the selective exposure indicators (as described per a–d under "dependent measures") were only moderately correlated, with significant correlations ranging from |.19| to |.59|.

*Comparison of lab and online sample*

Extensive tests were run to detect if the two data collection approaches yielded differences in the variables of interest. No differences were found for news use habits, political interest, attitudes (baseline), attitude accessibility (baseline), attitude importance, attitude extremity, political self (baseline), and political self-accessibility (baseline; $p = .20$ for one variable, $p > .43$ for the other characteristics). The only difference worth mentioning was a generally higher attitude certainty reported in a lab setting ($M = 4.25$ vs. 4.02, $SD = .6$ vs. .8), $t(169) = 2.3$, $p = .026$.

**Impact of attitudes on selective exposure**

Participants clicked on 2.0 ($SD = 1.0$) articles that featured attitude-consistent views and on 1.7 articles ($SD = 1.1$) with a counterattitudinal stance. This difference was significant in an ANOVA with the article choices as repeated measures, $F(1, 157) = 10.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .063$, and data collection method as between-factor (*n.s.*). For exposure times, participants spent 139 seconds on average ($SD = 74$) on attitude-consistent information and 95 seconds ($SD = 70$) on counterattitudinal messages. The difference was again significant, $F(1, 157) = 14.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .085$, whereas the data collection method was irrelevant (*n.s.*) when applying the same ANOVA model to exposure times. The ANOVA model was extended using the four topics as another within-factor. Both the topic dimension, $F(3, 471) = 15.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .090$, and the dimension of the attitude-consistent versus counterattitudinal choices, $F(1, 157) = 10.6$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .063$, had significant impact on selections. The same ANOVA design with the same within-factors but exposure time as repeated measures yielded that, for amount of exposure, both topic, $F(3, 471) = 17.9$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .102$, and the contrast of attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal, $F(1, 157) = 14.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .085$, mattered. More importantly, both ANOVAs did not yield an interaction ($p > .76$) between the two within-factors, which shows that the preference for attitude-consistent information was uniform and applied regardless of topic. These findings support H1. Method of data collection had been included as between-group factor but did not show an impact (*n.s.*).

Finally, we compared for how many topics participants accessed through (a) only attitude-consistent messages, (b) only counterattitudinal messages, or (c) both types of messages. On average, participants looked at .98 topics ($SD = .92$) only based on attitude-consistent information. Both sides were viewed for 1.06 ($SD = 1.05$) topics. Only counterattitudinal exposure for a topic was less common, with .67 topics on average ($SD = .72$); the difference was significant compared to (a) and (b) in paired $t$ tests, $t(158) = 3.1/3.5$, $p < .002$.

**Implications of selective exposure on attitude accessibility**

Examinations of selective exposure effects on attitude accessibilities were conducted for issue-specific accessibility and across the four issues (condensed by averaging response times). The regression analyses employed exposure times for attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal messages, attitude importance and certainty, as well as a variable that indicated whether an attitude change had occurred when considering the dichotomous attitude measures from the first and the second research session,[4] finally the baseline response time and mode of data collection as controls.

These analyses did not yield consistent effect patterns. No selective exposure effects were found for attitude accessibilities regarding health care and abortion. For gun control, longer exposure to counterattitudinal content increased the response time for the corresponding attitude ($\beta = .17$, $p = .040$). For minimum wage, attitude-consistent exposure tended to reduce the response time ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .095$). Details are reported in Table 2. No exposure effects on accessibility were found for the condensed variables across issues.

**Implications of selective exposure on political self accessibility**

Effects of selective exposure on the accessibility of political self-concept were examined through three regression analyses, using (a) article choices for attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal messages, (b) exposure times for attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal messages, and (c) number of topics accessed for attitude-consistent or counterattitudinal message *only*. Results of these three analyses are summarized in Table 3. The 21 participants who did not clearly identify themselves as partisan of a political party were excluded from this analysis. The following variables served as controls: data collection mode, baseline accessibility of the political self, average

**Table 2** Impacts of Selective Exposure to Messages Related to Political Attitudes on Accessibility of Political Attitudes

| | Topic | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Abortion | Health Insurance | Minimum Wage | Gun Control |
| Selective exposure to attitude-consistent message | — | — | $-.13^{+}$ | — |
| Selective exposure to counterattitudinal message | — | — | — | $.17^{*}$ |
| Base-line accessibility | $.49^{**}$ | $.34^{**}$ | — | — |
| $R^2$ | .25 | .15 | .11 | .05 |

*Note:* β weights from topic-specific regression analyses. Dash indicates nonsignificant β. None of the additional four control variables (not listed) showed significant impact.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .001$. $^{+}p < .10$.

**Table 3** Impacts of Selective Exposure to Messages Related to Political Attitudes on Accessibility of Political Self-Concept (β Weights)

| | Regression Models by Selective Exposure Measures Used as Predictors | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Article Choices | Exposure Times | Topics |
| Selective exposure to attitude-consistent message | .33** | — | — |
| Selective exposure to counterattitudinal message | — | −.24** | −.24** |
| Number of topics accessed | — | — | .18* |
| Base-line accessibility | .51*** | .54*** | .51*** |
| $R^2$ | .42 | .40 | .42 |

*Note:* Dash indicates nonsignificant β. None of the additional seven control variables (not listed) showed significant impact. For the model that employed "topics" as selective exposure measure, the number of topics for which only the attitude-consistent or only the counterattitudinal message was accessed served as predictors.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

attitude importance, average attitude certainty, average attitude extremity, news use habits, political interest, political self as political partisanship, and how many of the four topics were accessed.

The regression model with choices of counterattitudinal and attitude-consistent messages as predictors yielded a significant impact of frequency of attitude-consistent message choices on the response times for political self-descriptors in the second session ($\beta = .33$, $p = .003$). Hence, the more often attitude-consistent content was clicked on, the faster participants responded to politically relevant self-descriptions. The only control variable that had significant impact was the baseline accessibility of the political self (see Table 3).

A parallel analysis was run using exposure *times* for counterattitudinal and attitude-consistent messages as predictors. The more time participants spent on counterattitudinal content, the slower they were when responding to politically relevant self-descriptions ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .027$). For the control variables, data collection mode was again irrelevant (*n.s.*) but response times for political self-descriptors from the first session had, of course, a significant impact (Table 3).

To look into effects of different exposure constellations, such as reading only the attitude-consistent message on a topic or only the counterattitudinal text on an issue, an additional analysis was performed. It utilized the number of topics for which participants had accessed only attitude-consistent or only counterattitudinal messages. These indicators could vary between zero and four. It revealed that reading about more topics—and maybe none in depth—led to greater accessibility of the political self-concept ($\beta = .18$, $p = .034$). It also demonstrated that more reading topics with counterattitudinal exposure only, the lower the accessibility of the political

self ($\beta = -.24$, $p = .003$). As in the prior analyses, the baseline accessibility had a significant impact, whereas data collection mode did not (see Table 3).

## Discussion

It has long been argued that much of media use is motivated by an interest to bolster existing attitudes, including attitudes regarding the self. The present findings replicate evidence (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) that media recipients prefer messages in line with preexisting political attitudes over counterattitudinal content. This impact was again found to apply regardless of political issue and media use context (lab situation vs. individual online use context).

More importantly, selective exposure to attitude-consistent messages in general increased accessibility of the political self-concept, whereas exposure to counterattitudinal messages decreased it. This is an impressive corroboration that selective media exposure allows bolstering one's self-concept. This phenomenon is generally difficult to capture, as it represents stability and reinforcement but not change in the sense of conversion. However, by looking at reinforcement as a change and increase of accessibility, empirical demonstration was successful.

Yet, evidence for reinforcement of specific preexisting attitudes through selective exposure was inconsistent. We believe that the information related to specific topics may occasionally have produced longer response times and thus lower accessibility as participants were trying to integrate the information received during exposure into their views. The positive impact of number of accessed topics, with more topics signaling more superficial reading, on accessibility of the political self-concept speaks for that notion. Or participants may have encountered additional issue information in the media between the first and the second session (during the onset of the presidential primaries in early 2008). As a result, even if a preference for attitude-consistent messages is exhibited, this may encourage recipients to reconsider an issue when asked about their views right after exposure. Hence, attitudes could be reinforced in the long run, but the measures collected right after exposure were not suited to show that. Yet the political self-concept, which can be seen as a much broader attitude regarding the self, was strengthened by attitude-consistent selective exposure for particular issues related to this self-concept domain; it was thus apparently not affected by processing of specifics.

We have focused on one particular domain of the self-concept—the political self. It is interesting that the self-bolstering pattern could be observed for an identity facet that appears to have comparatively low importance for self-descriptions. Smith (2007) reports that political party preference ranked lowest by far (4%) when people were asked to select the 3 most important of 10 categories to describe who they are (family status, occupation, religion, region, gender, age, social class, race/ethnicity, nationality, and party preference by percent mentioning a category among the three most important). Obviously, facets of the self can be rendered salient by the given context (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), which was a political messages Web site in the

current study. Yet it is likely that greater impacts on media use will occur for aspects of the self that are generally more accessible.

Gender, for instance, is generally considered crucial for self-perceptions and even general psychological adjustment (e.g., O'Heron & Orlofsky, 1987). In line with the idea of self-bolstering media use, children have long been said to prefer same-sex media characters (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; Knobloch et al., 2005), which most likely serves a motivation to develop a gender-based identity in the first place. Further examples include women's preference for relationship issues and melodramatic fiction on one hand and men's preference for sports and other competition-related content and violent entertainment on the other hand (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Alter, 2007; Oliver, Sargent, & Weaver, 1998). Most likely without any awareness, media users may strive to sustain internalization of gender-typed norms to match those expectations. Experimental evidence for these selection patterns and subsequent impacts on behavior has been provided by Knobloch-Westerwick and Alter (2006). But clear indications of selective exposure effects on gendered self-perceptions define a void in existing research.

Obviously, the current analysis leaves many questions unanswered regarding selective media exposure in the interest of reinforcement of the self. As the current study employed a student sample, which presents problems to the generalizability, additional research with a more diverse sample is in the making. This follow-up work might also reveal to what extent the political climate and context of the data collection time period affects selective exposure and its consequences in any way. Furthermore, how long do these self-reinforcement effects last? What ceiling and floor effects exist? In other words, can self-concepts be too strong or too weak to evoke reinforcing selective exposure? Do the patterns demonstrated for the political self also affect categories that relate to ethnicity, family status, occupation, age, and so on that have been found to be more salient than political categories (Smith, 2007)?

Reinforcement of the self may well be the type of effect that media users seek most frequently and habitually. If individuals strive for self-consistency and stability, even though their selves are dynamic and subject to continuous fluctuation and adaptation (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987), media use may offer great tools for "consistency maintenance" ( Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 300). This motivation might be the origin of those overwhelmingly strong media use patterns that have become "common sense" knowledge about media preferences. On the other hand, media use may not only serve "self maintenance" but also render self facets salient as deemed useful per situational circumstances. The complexity and dynamics of the self may be crucial for many media use situations, though difficult to tackle as a psychological process.

## Notes

1 Nowadays, it usually coins observations that media users do not allocate their media choices and time equally to the available cornucopia of media messages and demonstrate

preference and avoidance patterns due to situational circumstances and personality factors (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006, 2008; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985).

2 Major political and economic events right before and during data collection (Pearson Education, n.d.; Federal Reserve Board, 2008): Presidential primaries begin with Iowa (1/3) and New Hampshire (1/8). McCain emerges as Republican frontrunner in primaries and caucuses held in 24 states (2/5). A week later, Democrat Obama wins three states, strengthening his lead over H. Clinton (2/12). President Bush proposes $145 billion stimulus package (1/18) and delivers last State of the Union (1/28). The Federal Reserve Bank cuts interest rates by .75% (1/22) and then .5% (1/30). Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that economy loses jobs first time in 52 months (2/1). Senate passes stimulus package (2/7).

3 E-mail correspondence, March 24, 2009, with Dr. David Ewoldsen, an expert in accessibility measures and communication research methods.

4 Recipients' attitude change, based on these measures, could range from 0 to 4, as there were four target topics. The average attitude change was 0.48 ($SD = .79$).

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# 论政治信息的选择性接触对自主政治观的强化

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick,
俄亥俄州立大学
Jingbo Meng
南加州大学

【摘要：】

受众更倾向于接受和自身态度、观念相一致的信息，对此，传播学研究领域已经展开了广泛讨论，但关于信息选择性接触的涉及却为之甚少。因此，本研究将围绕选择性接触这一课题对 157 名受试者进行两个阶段的实验。第一阶段的实验通过电脑化的问题对受试者在 12 项政治议题的态度和自我观念上进行数据采集。同时，受试者回答问题的反应时间作为信息可接近性的数据指标。第二阶段的实验中，受试者将在网络杂志上阅读 12 项中的 4 项政治议题；每一项议题都以两篇持相对观点的文章予以呈现。同时，受试者的选择性接触将以顺态度或逆态度的类型记录下来。受试者重复回答一份关于政治议题态度和自主观的问卷。研究结果显示受试者更倾向于顺态度而非逆态度的政治信息。而顺态度的政治信息能通过信息的更可接近性强化自主政治观。

关键词: 选择性接触，态度，自主观念， 特性，媒体，自主政治观，可接近性

**Le renforcement de l'image politique de soi par l'exposition sélective à des messages politiques**

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick & Jingbo Meng

L'idée selon laquelle les récepteurs préfèrent les messages qui renforcent leurs attitudes pré-existantes et leur image d'eux-mêmes est répandue dans la recherche en communication, mais les *effets* de l'exposition sélective sont rarement examinés. Cette expérience en deux sessions (n = 157) étudie ces effets. La première session a présenté des questions automatisées portant sur les attitudes et l'image politique de soi en regard de 12 enjeux politiques. Les données d'accessibilité ont été amassées à partir des temps de réponse. Dans la seconde session, les participants ont feuilleté une revue en ligne couvrant quatre des douze enjeux. Chaque enjeu était traité par deux articles prenant des points de vue opposés. L'exposition sélective était notée et catégorisée comme étant en accord ou en désaccord avec l'attitude envers cet enjeu. Enfin, un questionnaire a repris la mesure des attitudes et de l'image de soi. Les résultats montrent que les participants préféraient les messages en accord avec leurs attitudes aux messages en désaccord, ce qui renforçait leur image politique d'eux-mêmes par une hausse de l'accessibilité.

Mots clés : exposition sélective, attitudes, image de soi, identité, médias, soi politique, accessibilité

# Bestärkung des politischen Selbst durch die selektive Wahrnehmung von politischen Botschaften

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick & Jingbo Meng

Die Idee, dass Rezipienten Nachrichten präferieren, die ihre bestehenden Einstellungen und Selbstwahrnehmungen verstärken, hat umfangreiche kommunikationswissenschaftliche Forschungsarbeiten nach sich gezogen. Die *Wirkung* von selektiver Wahrnehmung wurde bislang allerdings eher selten untersucht. Dieses Experiment mit zwei Sitzungen (n=157) untersucht solche Effekte. In der ersten Sitzung wurden automatisierte Fragen zu Einstellungen gegenüber 12 politischen Themen präsentiert und das politische Selbstkonzept erfasst. Zugänglichkeitsdaten wurden mittels Antwortzeiten gemessen. In der zweiten Sitzung surften die Teilnehmer durch ein Online-Magazin mit 4 dieser 12 Themen, wobei jedes Thema in zwei Artikeln mit gegensätzlichen Standpunkten dargeboten wurde. Selektive Wahrnehmung wurde erfasst und als meinungskonsistent oder meinungsinkonsistent kategorisiert. Zum Schluss wurden die Einstellungs- und Selbstkonzeptfragen mittels Fragebogen erneut erfasst. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Teilnehmer meinungskonsistenten gegenüber -inkonsistenten Botschaften den Vorzug gaben, was ihr politisches Selbstkonzept durch erhöhte Zugänglichkeit stärkte.

Schlüsselbegriffe: selektive Wahrnehmung, Einstellungen, Selbstkonzept, Identität, Medien, politisches Selbst, Zugänglichkeit

# 정치적 메시지들에 대한 선택적 노출을 통한 정치적 자아의 재강화

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, The Ohio State University

&

Jingbo Meng, University of Southern California

## 요약

수신인들이 미리 존재하는 태도들과 자기 인지들을 재강화하는 메시지들을 선호한다는 생각들은 많은 커뮤니케이션 연구들에서 지배적인 것이었으나, 선택적 노출의 효과들은 거의 연구되지 않았다. 본 연구 (n=157)는 그러한 효과들을 조사하였다. 첫번째 세션은 12 가지의 정치적 이슈태도들과 정치적 자기 개념에 대한 컴퓨터화된 질문들을 제시하였다. 두번째 세션에서는 참여자들이 12 가지 이슈들중 4 가지를 포함하는 온라인 메거진을 훑어보게 하였는데, 각 이슈들은 반대되는 견해들을 포함하는 두개의 기사들에 의해 보도된 것들이다. 선택적인 노출이 태도 일치, 또는 반 태도적으로서 기록되고 분류되었다. 마지막으로 설문지를 태도들과 자기 개념을 위한 측정도로서 사용하였다. 결과들은 참여자들은 반태도적 메시지들보다는 태도 일치를 선호하는 것을 보여주었는데, 이는 증가된 접근도를 통해 정치적 자기개념을 강화한 것이다.

# El Refuerzo del Ser Político a través de la Exposición Selectiva a los Mensajes Políticos

Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, The Ohio State University

&

Jingbo Meng, University of Southern California

## Resumen

La idea que los destinatarios prefieren los mensajes que refuerzan las actitudes preexistentes y las auto-percepciones ha dominado mucha de la investigación en comunicación, pero los *efectos* a la exposición selectiva son raramente examinados. Este experimento de 2 sesiones (n = 157) investiga esos efectos. La primera sesión presentó preguntas computarizadas sobre 12 asuntos de actitud política y de auto-concepto político. Los datos de accesibilidad fueron colectados de los tiempos de respuesta. En la segunda sesión, los participantes miraron una revista online que incluía 4 de los 12 asuntos, cada asunto estuvo cubierto por dos artículos representando puntos de vista opuestos. La exposición selectiva fue registrada y categorizada como consistente con la actitud o contra-actitudinal. Finalmente, un cuestionario repitió las medidas de actitudes y de auto-concepto. Los resultados muestran que los participantes prefieren actitudes consistentes por encima de los mensajes contra-actitudinales, los cuales fortalecieron el auto-concepto a través del incremento de la accesibilidad.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Exposición selectiva, actitudes, auto-concepto, identidad, medios, el yo político, accesibilidad.