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Looking the Other Way

Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent and Counterattitudinal Political Information

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An experiment with two computer-based sessions (complete data for 156 participants) examined selective exposure to attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal media messages. In the first session, participants indicated interest in politics and news, political attitudes, with four target issues embedded, along with attitude certainty and importance. Attitude accessibility data were derived from response latencies. In the second session, participants browsed an online opinion forum with eight texts about four issues, each with a pair of articles presenting opposing views. Selective exposure was unobtrusively recorded by software and coded as attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal based on individual participants' attitudes. Results show that attitude-consistent exposure dominated regardless of particular issue, with 36% more reading time. Higher habitual news use and attitude certainty both fostered attitude-consistent exposure. Selection of counterattitudinal articles was more likely among participants with greater interest in politics, conservative party preference, stronger party preference, more accessible attitudes, and higher attitude importance.

Keywords: *selective exposure; cognitive dissonance; attitudes; attitude strength; accessibility*

In an era of ever-increasing media choices, the question of how citizens select political messages is becoming even more relevant. If citizens favor messages in line with their views and avoid opinion-challenging content, the cornucopia of media choices, on the Internet in particular, could hinder informed opinion formation, lead to a more polarized and fragmented electorate, and also reduce political tolerance (e.g., Mutz, 2002; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). Selective exposure to political messages has long been of interest to communication research and goes back to Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) classic Erie County study. Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance dominated beginnings of selective exposure research (see overview by Sears & Freedman, 1967) and basically defined the term of selective exposure until the 1980s (for different interpretations, see Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). The current research also tests assumptions of cognitive dissonance theory. Yet it differs from prior work in several ways. First, consonant and dissonant

messages are defined by political topics, instead of general party or candidate preferences. Second, exposure to several issues (instead just one issue) is considered to examine robustness of effects across topics. Third, actual exposure is measured in time units through unobtrusive observation, instead of relying on self-reports or contrived selection measures (e.g., rating interest in news headlines). Most importantly, we draw on current attitude theory and political communication research to examine factors that may influence levels of selective exposure and that may have veiled such preferences in earlier investigations. After reviewing the relevant literature, we state hypotheses and research questions that are then examined with an experimental design.

Research on the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance and Media Use

The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) postulates that individuals strive for cognitive equilibrium. Cognitive dissonance will produce motivation to dissolve the conflicting perceptions, for example, through reinterpreting the information or through selective exposure to information that helps to resolve the cognitive conflict. The “limited effects” model (Klapper, 1960), guided by the assumption that media use can hardly instill attitude changes and mostly helps bolstering existing attitudes, goes back to these ideas. According to the theory, media users prefer attitude-consistent messages and circumvent counterattitudinal content. This pattern avoids dissonances but also prevents encountering alternative views that might inspire one’s opinion formation. Thus, attitude changes because of media consumption are unlikely to begin with. Such selective behavior poses problems for a democratic system in that the avoidance of counterattitudinal messages inhibits an opinion formation that builds on diverse input. The media audience would persist in preexisting viewpoints even if an opinion change was more rational in light of additional information or arguments (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

After a whole host of studies about Festinger’s (1957) theory had been presented, an influential synopsis by Sears and Freedman (1967) judged the evidence about avoidance of counterattitudinal information as inconsistent and contradictory. Recent reviews suggest a weak tendency to avoid counterattitudinal messages and indicate some inconsistency in the findings (Chaffee, Nichols, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2001; D’Alessio & Allen, 2007; Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008). Yet although the theory of cognitive dissonance served as basis for hundreds of social-psychological studies (Bagby, Parker, & Bury, 1990; Irle & Möntmann, 1978), only very few investigations pertained to selections in the context of mass media use. Many studies focused on effects of postdecisional dissonance; but this does not pertain much to selective media use, as only very little of the available editorial content will relate directly to a decision that the recipient made recently. Forming a voting preference comes close to a scenario that lends itself to postdecisional dissonance impacts.

Indeed, a set of studies examined selective exposure to campaign messages (Barlett, Drew, Fahle, & Watts, 1974; Freedman & Sears, 1965; Iyengar et al., 2008, with theory-consistent results for conservatives; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Rhine, 1967). These investigations corroborated Festinger's notions, but the selection contexts cannot be equated with typical media use situations and may not even relate directly to the ideal of an informed citizen and voter. After all, this ideal draws on exposure to diverse ideas and arguments and not to campaign messages of competing parties.

A few studies investigated preferences for information in line with one's party preference by using media use contexts instead of campaign messages. For example, Atkin (1971) employed eight versions of a campus newspaper that differed by political leaning and format of one news headline and found that partisans of both Democrats and Republicans were more likely to read the article if the headline featured the position of their preferred party. These results from an experiment with a fairly authentic media use situation support cognitive dissonance assumptions. Donsbach (1989, 1991) surveyed 1,400 participants regarding their exposure recollections for 350 newspaper articles from 3 consecutive days. In spite of the great amount of data collected, avoidance of counterattitudinal information was hardly evident. Jonas, Graupmann, Fischer, Greitemeyer, and Frey (2003) presented news synopses that shed either positive or negative light on the two dominant political parties in Germany. Partisans of the conservative party showed a stronger tendency to prefer attitude-consistent information compared to partisans of the socialist party (similar findings were presented by Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). Other research about selective media use (e.g., Chaffee et al., 2001) found support for the theory of cognitive dissonance but was based on general survey data, which may be considered somewhat less reliable when it comes to actual message choices (Zillmann, 1985), or looked at partisan media channel use on a more general level (Stroud, 2008).

Extending Existing Cognitive Dissonance Research

This review shows that the evidence for dissonance avoidance in media use has been mixed. However, given the importance of exposure to counterattitudinal information in a democracy (e.g., Chaffee et al., 2001; Mutz & Martin, 2001), the question of how dominant exposure to attitude-consistent information is and what fosters counterattitudinal information is highly relevant. The current study examines the predictions of cognitive dissonance theory differently than prior work did in several ways. First, attitudes are conceptualized as topic based instead of drawing on preferences for political parties or candidates. Given that voter turnouts and party affiliation are declining (Patterson, 2002), it makes little sense to think of attitudes only in terms of party or candidate preferences. Second, several political issues are considered at the same time. As media users follow the news, they typically encounter many different

topics almost simultaneously. In a given situation, they may seek more consonant information regarding one issue, which might make them more tolerant of dissonance resulting from messages about another issue. Overall, however, exposure to attitude-consistent information should dominate, at least according to Festinger. Yet if an investigation happens to focus on a particular topic (as discussed by Stroud, 2008), Festinger's assumptions may not find support simply because such context effects can weaken any avoidance of counterattitudinal messages. In light of these considerations, the current study examines exposure to several topics simultaneously. Third, selective exposure to online news is recorded unobtrusively through software in seconds. This allows observation of actual message choices in a natural reading situation. Thereby, higher ecological validity and reliability should be attained than through self-reports or Starch tests, which may suffer from impaired recall and social desirability (Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Zillmann, 1985). Furthermore, it is worthwhile noting that our design avoids measuring attitudes in the same research session in which exposure is recorded because this can lead to biased behaviors in the message selections, as participants may strive for consistent behavior. In light of these considerations, it seems worthwhile to put Festinger's (1957) classic assumption once more to a test.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Media users prefer attitude-consistent topic information over counterattitudinal information.

Predictors of Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent Messages

Obviously, the concept of attitude is of key importance in Festinger's theory and has been elaborated further since much of the research on the theory has been conducted. Much discussion in psychology has differentiated aspects of attitude strength, which should help to predict and examine processes that are involved in selective information exposure. An attitude as such has been defined as "an association in memory between a given object and a given summary evaluation of the object" (Fazio, 1995, p. 247). Strength-related attributes of attitudes can be grouped into four categories (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). First, aspects of the attitude itself are relevant, in particular its extremity. Second, aspects of attitude structure, such as accessibility or related knowledge and its consistency with the attitude, matter. Third, people's subjective beliefs about their attitude are relevant, in particular their certainty about the attitude and how important the attitude is to them. Last, the process through which an attitude was formed may be considered. It is important to note that although the facets of attitude strength are almost always correlated, these correlations are typically modest in size (Krosnick & Abelson, 1992) because they have different causes. To name just a few of these causes—attitude extremity varies by salience of group conflict, attitude importance is influenced by self-interest, and attitude certainty is a function of social consensus (Bizer & Krosnick, 2001).

Research on effects of these attitude facets on selective exposure to attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal information is surprisingly rare. Only a set of studies by Brannon, Tagler, and Eagly (2007) focused on the question of whether greater attitude strength leads to a more pronounced preference for attitude-consistent information about abortion. Their participants showed a greater preference for such headlines if they held a stronger and more extreme attitude regarding abortion. Yet their studies analyzed only one topic for selective information intake, drew on reported interest in headlines instead of actual reading, and did not differentiate aspects of attitude strengths further. The attitude strength measure was a composite of certainty, importance, knowledge, likelihood to change, and relevance to the self. However, possibly not all these attitude components foster avoidance of counterattitudinal information. Hence, different facets of attitude strength are examined through research questions in the current study. Our tentative considerations on the facets to be examined here are structured by the grouping that Krosnick and Petty (1995, explained above) suggested: (a) extremity, (b) accessibility, (c) attitude certainty and importance.

Regarding (a), a more extreme attitude could create greater dissonance if counterattitudinal information is encountered, leading to greater avoidance thereof (in line with Brannon et al.'s [2007] findings for extremity). On the other hand, individuals with an extreme attitude might feel less "shaken" by counterattitudinal messages and better prepared to dismiss it and thus experience actually less dissonance. Regarding (b), high accessibility of an attitude might result in almost automatic avoidance of counterattitudinal information. Or its effect on exposure could follow the impacts of attitude importance, as accessibility can serve as a cue for the individual on how important an issue or attitude is (Fabrigar, Priester, Petty, & Wegener, 1998). Last, for (c), from a rational point of view, individuals should be motivated to consume all available information about a highly relevant topic and thus invest the cognitive resources to do so. This consideration corresponds with the notion of informational utility (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2008; already discussed by Sears & Freedman, 1967). Hence, attitude importance should lead to generally higher exposure to messages about the topic in question (as demonstrated by Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005). Yet cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and other approaches do not conceptualize information consumers as necessarily rational but motivated to avoid unpleasant emotions. Hence, if counterattitudinal arguments relate to an issue of high personal relevance, dissonance may be particularly high, resulting in avoidance of the information. Likewise, when individuals are not certain about their attitude, they should be motivated to learn about the counterarguments as well and thus turn to counterattitudinal information to a greater extent than individuals with greater attitude certainty. In the case of low attitude certainty, counterattitudinal exposure might also result in less dissonance because the individual is not highly committed to the attitude to begin with. On the

other hand, high certainty about an attitude may lead to greater ease with counterarguments, resulting in greater exposure to counterattitudinal messages. In light of these considerations, the following research question is examined.

Research Question 1: How do attitude extremity, attitude accessibility, attitude certainty, and attitude importance affect selective exposure to counterattitudinal information?

Aside from attitude-related impacts, we take a look at factors that were found to influence selective exposure as assessed in surveys. Hence, the current investigation explores whether political preference (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Sears & Freedman, 1967), political interest (Chaffee et al., 2001), and commitment to a political party predict exposure to counterattitudinal messages in a controlled experimental setting as well. Moreover, we examine possible impacts of habitual news use because frequent newsreaders might be either more tolerant of counterattitudinal messages or, on the other hand, more adept in avoiding them.

Research Question 2: How do political leaning and political party commitment, interest in politics, and habitual news use affect exposure to counterattitudinal information?

Method

Overview

An experiment with two sessions was conducted in a computer lab, with complete data from both sessions for 156 participants. In the first session, participants responded to a computerized questionnaire about attitudes regarding 17 political issues. In the second session, 6 weeks later, participants were asked to browse an online news magazine. The experimental Internet news magazine was created to look like those available on the World Wide Web. Four policy issues (target issues) chosen from the 17 issues were covered by the eight displayed articles, with two articles featuring opposing perspectives. Selective exposure to specific articles was unobtrusively logged by software. After the browsing period, participants completed a questionnaire.

Respondents

Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a large Midwestern university and received extra credit for participation. In the first session, 194 students attended to the study, of which 60% were female. For the second session, 221 participants were recruited, with 62% females. Any participants who participated in only one session were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a

sample size of 156, with an average age of 22.0 years ($SD = 3.6$), 97 females (62%), and 59 males (38%).

In addition, 18 participants, 13 females and 5 males, with an average age of 21.7 years, were recruited from the same population for a news leads pretest. An additional 67 participants, 32 males and 35 females, with an average age of 22.3 years, served for a posttest. For each specific text, ratings were collected from 14 to 18 individuals who each read two of the texts.

Pretest

In the main experiment, the chosen news leads were to be displayed on an overview page and thus governed news selections. Hence, perceptions of news leads were examined in a pretest in order to select leads with an unambiguous stance while being equally “interesting” for the pro and contra view of an issue or policy. A paper–pencil questionnaire presented 20 news headlines and news leads, pertaining to the issues of minimum wage increase, universal health care, abortion, gay marriage, gun rights, nuclear power, policy preference for Blacks, “zero tolerance” crime punishment, and U.S. intervention in world politics, with pro and anti perspectives for each issue. The news leads ranged from 23 to 30 words in length ($M = 26$, $SD = 2.2$), and each news headline contained two or three words ($M = 2.4$, $SD = .5$). Participants indicated whether the news lead signaled opposition or support for the target policy, for example, “In your impression, is the portrayal of abortion in the article strictly neutral, or does it take sides with supporters or opponents of abortion?” based on an 11-point scale ($-5 = strongly opposing$, $5 = strongly supporting$). Participants also rated their level of interest in the article on a 7-point scale ($1 = not at all interesting$, $7 = extremely interesting$). All 20 news leads were arranged so that the pro and anti perspectives of the same policy were not displayed in a row.

Four target issues with eight news leads with an unambiguous stance were selected for the manipulation in the main experiment—gun control, universal health care, abortion, and minimum wage (see Table 1 for full news leads). Ratings for the eight news leads from 18 pretest participants showed that, for each of the four chosen topics, stimuli featured two news leads that were perceived as different in political stance while being equally interesting. Table 2 reports results from paired t tests.

Stimuli Texts Posttest

The articles associated with the chosen news leads were furthermore subjected to a posttest (on reviewer request) to investigate how “interesting” they were perceived to be in their entirety, as writing style and other details within the actual article texts could also influence selective reading times. Paper–pencil questionnaires presented two of the articles about different topics to participants, with four different questionnaire versions to collect data for all eight articles. After each article, participants answered questions about interest level and stance perceived in the article (parallel to

Table 1
Presented News Leads

Issue	"Pro" News Lead	"Contra" News Lead
Gun ownership	Self-defense rights: Gun storage laws would allow massive government invasion of gun owners' homes. A wholesale attack on private gun ownership and the fundamental right to self-defense.	Firearm threat: Guns at home are definitely a threat to household members. More kids, teenagers, and adult family members are dying from firearms in their home than criminal intruders.
Abortion	Abortion is prolife: There are many legitimate reasons for an abortion. What banning abortion means for human life—not for embryos or primitive fetuses, but real, living, breathing, thinking women.	Cruelty of prochoice: Abortion is a cruel and nasty method of easing a person's burden. Arguments about health, economic conditions, and ethics all speak against "playing God" and terminating life.
Health care regulation	Universal health care: Health care players profit from "free market" game, patients lose out. United States only industrialized country without guaranteed care. Public regulation must secure Americans' health.	Personalized health coverage: Excessive health insurance regulation leads to high costs. Examples abound of how government policy has disrupted insurance markets and increased prices in many states.
Minimum wage	Increase minimum wage: A study shows that raising the minimum wage does not cause job loss as extremist critics claim. Raising the minimum wage is the right thing to do.	Wage raising hurts: Raising the minimum wage is a step in the wrong direction. It leads our nation further astray from the limited government and market-liberal order.

pretest) as well as their own attitude (same as attitude Likert-type scale in main experiment).

As reported in Table 3, the article texts had the desired characteristics for the topics of minimum wage, gun ownership, and abortion, as the text pairs were equally interesting but differed in presented political view. The two articles about health care regulation differentiated less well regarding political view and were significantly different in level of interest in a *t* test. However, in ANOVAs controlling for respondents' attitudes, text pairs for all topics did not significantly differ for level of interest.

Procedure

The main experiment consisted of two sessions, both of which were conducted in a computer lab with five identical personal computers in separate rooms. In the first session, the respondents received general verbal instructions that were then reiterated

Table 2
Pretest Results on Perceptions of Presented News Leads

Issue News Lead Heading	Perceived Issue Support			Interest		
	<i>M</i> (–5 to 5)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> Test	<i>M</i> (1 to 7)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> Test
Gun ownership			3.9 (17)***			<i>ns</i>
Self-defense rights	1.5	3.0		3.6	1.6	
Firearm threat	–2.8	3.0		3.9	1.3	
Abortion			6.4 (17)***			<i>ns</i>
Abortion is prolife	2.5	3.0		4.4	1.9	
Cruelty of prochoice	–3.4	2.9		3.9	1.7	
Health care regulation			6.6 (17)***			<i>ns</i>
Universal health care	2.9	2.1		3.5	1.7	
Personalized health coverage	–2.7	2.6		3.2	1.7	
Minimum wage			7.5 (17)***			<i>ns</i>
Increase minimum wage	3.8	2.1		4.5	1.2	
Wage raising hurts	–3.1	3.1		4.1	1.5	

****t*-values indicate that means differ at $p < .001$.

via computer screen. Respondents were led to individual research rooms and started the computerized survey.

The questionnaire, programmed with MediaLab, displayed each question on a new screen. The first sets of questions pertained to attitudes, attitude certainty, and attitude importance; additional variables were derived from these responses (see details in the method section about independent measures). In addition to the four issues featured in the newsmagazine from the second session, 13 issues served as distracters. The sequence of issues within each set of questions was randomized on an individual basis. Finally, information about demographics, political interest, political affiliation, and news use habits was collected. To link the data from the two sessions, the last four social security number (SSN) digits were recorded, which ostensibly served as a backup for proper recording of extra credit.

Six 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:

You will see a test version of an online 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 so you can evaluate the magazine, and you will be asked about your impressions of the articles.

Table 3
Posttest Results on Perceptions of Articles Available for Selection

Issue News Lead Heading	Perceived Issue Support			Interest		
	<i>M</i> (–5 to 5)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> Test	<i>M</i> (1 to 7)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> Test
Gun ownership			3.0 (34)**			<i>ns</i>
Self-defense rights	1.5	3.4		4.5	1.0	
Firearm threat	–1.5	2.5		4.8	1.5	
Abortion			2.6 (30)*			<i>ns</i>
Abortion is prolife	1.8	3.5		4.4	1.7	
Cruelty of prochoice	–1.3	3.1		5.1	1.6	
Health care regulation			2.2 (29)*			2.5 (29)**
Universal health care	2.8	1.8		4.7	1.5	
Personalized health coverage	0.9	2.8		3.5	1.3	
Minimum wage			6.9 (33)***			<i>ns</i>
Increase minimum wage	2.7	1.9		4.1	1.4	
Wage raising hurts	–2.6	2.6		4.4	1.3	

a. This difference was not significant when controlling for respondents' attitude in ANOVA.

t*-values differ at $p < .05$. *t*-values differ at $p < .005$. ****t*-values differ at $p < .001$.

Then participants were asked to start the computer-based experiment. The instruction page essentially presented the same information as the verbal instruction. After participants entered their age, their gender, and the last four digits of their SSN (again explained as a backup for extra credit recording), the screen displayed the online magazine. After 5 minutes of browsing, a questionnaire was uploaded to provide closure. 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*.

Independent Measures

Attitude (dichotomous). In the first set of questions in the first session, 17 political issues were presented in three words each (see Table 1 for the target issues), and the respondents were asked to choose either “oppose” or “support.” 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” 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 number 1 indicates that you *support* a policy. The key with the number 2 indicates that you *oppose* 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 MediaLab procedure recorded the response latency as a measure of attitude accessibility (Fazio, 1989). Response latencies for the four target attitude questions were subjected to a reciprocal transformation (see Fazio, 1990). Response latencies for other questions were subjected to reciprocal transformations and averaged to yield an index of baseline speed of responding. This index was subtracted from each of the transformed attitude response latencies, and the results were averaged (larger numbers indicated greater attitude accessibility; Holbrook et al., 2005).

Attitude (Likert-type scale). Respondents were asked to rate how strongly they oppose or support the policies on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with *strongly support*, *somewhat support*, *neither support nor oppose*, *somewhat oppose*, and *strongly oppose* as response options.

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

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

Attitude/issue importance. Participants were asked how important the issues were to them personally on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with *not at all important*, *somewhat important*, *fairly important*, *very important*, and *extremely important* as response options.

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 congress election on a 4-point scale, with *very closely*, *not too closely*, *somewhat closely*, and *not at all closely* as response options.

Political preference. Two levels of questions were adopted from the American National Election Studies (n.d.) to derive a one-dimensional measure of political party preference. First, the participants were asked, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?" If the participant chose Independent, he or she was asked whether he or she thought of himself or herself as closer to the Republican (1) or Democratic Party (-1), with a "no preference" (0) at all option. If the participant chose either the Republican or the Democratic Party, he or she was asked to rate how strong his or her political preference was on a dichotomy (3 = "strong" Republican, 2 = "not very strong" Republican, -3 = "strong" Democrat, -2 = "not very strong" Democrat).

Political preference strength. The strength of the political party preference was derived from the measure described in the preceding paragraph, with $|3|$ for very strong, $|2|$ for not very strong, $|1|$ for closer to one of the two parties, and 0 for no preference.

News use. Participants rated their news use frequency for online news, daily newspaper, TV news, political Web sites, and talk or comedy shows about news and politics on a 6-point scale, with *every day*, *several times a week*, *once a week*, *several times a month*, *once a month*, and *less often* as response options.

Preliminary Analyses of Independent Measures

Descriptive statistics for attitudes. On average, participants indicated that they opposed a decrease of the minimum wage and favored universal health care as well as stricter gun control, whereas attitudes were diverse regarding abortion (see Table 4). Participants' certainty of their health care attitude was significantly lower than that for abortion, $t(142) = 2.29$, $p = .024$, and minimum wage, $t(142) = 2.12$, $p = .034$. Gun control was significantly less important to participants than minimum wage, $t(142) = 3.48$, $p = .001$, and abortion, $t(142) = 2.18$, $p = .031$.

Condensing variables. The five news use items were condensed in an index for habitual news use, based on sufficient interitem consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$). As the two questions about interest in government and public affairs and the recent congress election showed considerable overlap ($r = .60$, $p < .001$), they were condensed in an indicator for political interest. Furthermore, condensed measures for attitude extremity, accessibility, attitude importance, and attitude certainty were derived by utilizing scores for all four political issues displayed in the online news-magazine. Correlations among these predictors were small to moderate, with the highest correlations occurring between news use and political interest ($r = .55$, $p < .001$) and certainty, importance, and extremity of attitudes (r ranging between

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of Attitude Measures

	Attitude (1 = <i>support</i> , 0 = <i>oppose</i>)		Attitude (5 = <i>support</i> , 1 = <i>oppose</i>)		Certainty (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)		Importance (1 = <i>not at all</i> , 5 = <i>extremely</i>)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Decrease minimum wage	0.11	0.32	1.62	1.10	4.15	1.10	4.16	0.99
Abortion restriction policies	0.45	0.50	3.02	1.69	4.18	1.05	4.05	1.15
Universal health care	0.86	0.35	4.25	1.13	3.92	1.12	3.99	1.06
Stricter gun control	0.80	0.40	3.96	1.26	3.99	1.09	3.81	1.07

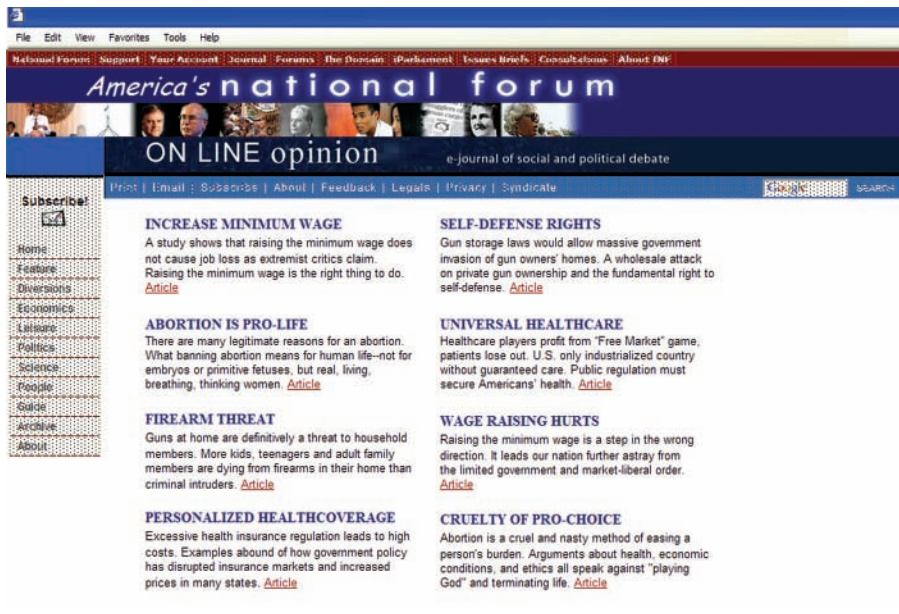
.50 and .58, $p < .001$). Political interest and attitude certainty were correlated at $r = .30$ ($p < .001$); all other correlations were lower than .23.

Experimental Internet Magazine

Display of available articles. The experimental Web magazine was programmed with AuthorWare specifically for this study. It had a similar look and feel to popular news magazines currently on the Internet. 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 containing 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 (see Figure 1) showed eight news leads that each contained a headline, a news lead, and a hyperlink to access the actual article. 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 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.

Article texts. The four policy issues and the eight headlines are listed in Table 2. The articles were culled from partisan and lobbying Web sites of heritage.org, nraila.org,

Figure 1
Screenshot of Online Magazine



and others. All articles were minimally edited, essentially shortened, to equalize length to about 705 to 719 words ($M = 716$, $SD = 5.2$). The sans serif typeface Verdana was used for all articles. Regular scrolling allowed access to the full text of the articles.

Dependent Variables

The software application tracked participants' exposure in seconds by logging every hyperlink use. In addition to the selective exposure for the entire browsing time of 5 minutes, reading behavior was also recorded for each 30-second interval. Exposure was operationalized as article choice (clicked on hyperlink leading to article or not) and reading time in seconds.

Preliminary analyses showed that, on average, participants spent 37 seconds ($SD = 33.6$) on the overview page that displayed the news leads. The minimum time for the overview page was 4 seconds, the maximum 300 seconds. On average, participants clicked on 3.2 articles ($SD = 1.6$), with a range from 0 to 8. The 13 participants who clicked on no or only one article were excluded from further analysis because they did not appear to have indeed engaged in news browsing or reading.

For hypotheses testing, 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 and exposure time in seconds dedicated to (c) attitude-consistent articles and (d) counterattitudinal articles. For (a) to (d), measures were generated for each specific article but also accumulated selections and exposure times.

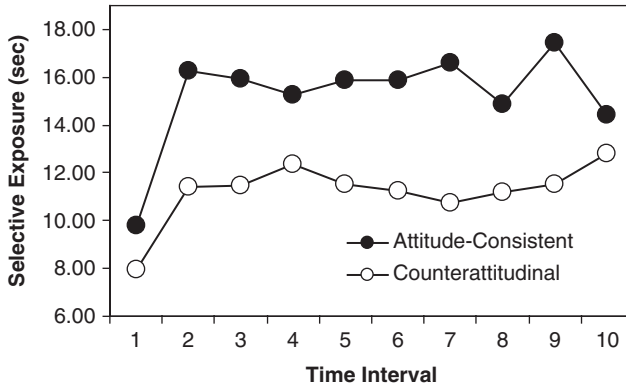
Results

Impact of Attitudes on Selective Exposure

Participants clicked on 1.9 ($SD = 1.0$) articles that featured attitude-consistent views and on 1.4 articles ($SD = 1.0$) with a counterattitudinal stance. This difference was significant in a paired t test, $t(142) = 4.4$, $p < .001$. The proportions were 58% likelihood of picking an article with an attitude-consistent message versus 43% for counterattitudinal news stories. For exposure times, participants spent 152 seconds on average ($SD = 74$) on attitude-consistent information and 112 seconds ($SD = 76$) on counterattitudinal messages. The difference was again significant in a paired t test, $t(142) = 3.2$, $p = .002$. Interestingly, the proportion between attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal information exposure was the same as for article choices (even though the measures were only moderately correlated, with $r = .44$, $p < .001$, and $r = .41$, $p < .001$, for attitude consistent and counterattitudinal, respectively). Hence, news readers spent 58% of their reading time on attitude-consistent messages and 43% on counterattitudinal messages.

When subjecting the article choices to an ANOVA with repeated measures, with attitude-consistent versus counterattitudinal choices as one within factor and the four topics as another within factor, both factors emerged as significant. The dimension of attitude-consistent versus counterattitudinal choices, $F(1, 142) = 19.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, explained slightly more variance than the topic, $F(3, 426) = 19.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. The same ANOVA design with the same within factors but exposure time as repeated measures yielded that, for amount of exposure, the topic, $F(3, 426) = 22.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$, was more important than the contrast of attitude consistent and counterattitudinal, $F(1, 142) = 10.3$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .07$. 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.

Figure 2
Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent and
Counterattitudinal Information Across Browsing Time



To examine if the time limit or the related instructions had any bearings on the preference for consonant information, we also examined selective exposure across time by extending the ANOVA model explained above with another within-subjects factor for 30-second interval. In addition to the effects reported above, interval also had a significant effect, $F(9, 1269) = 13.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, which was because of the fact that participants spent less time on actual articles and more time on the overview page during the very first interval. Overall, the preference for consonant information was remarkably stable across time, as illustrated by Figure 2 (see the discussion section for further interpretation).

Impacts of Attitude Strength Facets on Selective Exposure

Regression analyses were conducted with the following predictors: habitual news use, interest in politics, party preference, and party preference strength as respondent characteristics and attitude extremity, accessibility, importance, and certainty as issue-related variables. For the latter group of predictor variables, scores were averaged across the four target issues to condense the variables and increase reliability. The first two criteria were number of attitude-consistent articles selected and number of counterattitudinal articles selected. The second pair of criteria were exposure times for attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal articles. Although these analyses could be condensed by examining the differences between attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal articles, analyzing preference on the one hand and avoidance on the other should offer more insight.

Table 5
Impacts of Attitude Strength Facets on Selective Exposure (Beta Weights)

	Article Choices		Length of Exposure	
	Attitude Consistent	Counterattitudinal	Attitude Consistent	Counterattitudinal
Attitude extremity				
Attitude accessibility		.20*		
Attitude importance		.20*		
Attitude certainty		-.23*	.24*	
Habitual news exposure	.20*	-.31**	.27*	-.25*
Interest in politics		.23*		
Party preference		.18*		
Party preference strength		.17*		
R ²	.06	.19***	.12*	.08

*Beta values differ at $p < .05$. **Beta values differ at $p < .01$. ***Beta values differ at $p < .001$.

The results of these regression analyses are reported in Table 5. Overall, the strongest impact resulted from habitual news use, which applied across all four criteria. More frequent news use led to greater preference of attitude-consistent messages and greater avoidance of counterattitudinal content, based on article choices as well as exposure times. Attitude certainty affected both preference and avoidance in that less certain participants were more likely to click on counterattitudinal articles and spent more time on attitude-consistent messages. All other predictors essentially affected only selection of counterattitudinal articles in that interest in politics, conservative party preference, party preference strength, attitude accessibility, and importance all fostered selecting them more frequently.

Additional regression analyses with attitude extremity, accessibility, certainty, and importance averaged across the other 13 presented political issues as additional predictors did not yield different patterns in the results. This indicates that indeed the issue-specific attitude components matter and not the overall tendency of a person to be more or less certain about attitudes or to attach more or less importance to attitudes.

Exploratory Analyses of Exposure per Topic

In addition to addressing hypotheses and research questions, we examined how often participants looked at both views regarding a topic or only attitude-consistent or only counterattitudinal views. Overall, participants read about 2.5 ($SD = 0.86$) topics on average. This was typically attitude-consistent exposure only, as exposure for 1.1 ($SD = 0.95$) topics on average consisted of reading of attitude-congruent

information only. Articles with both views on an issue were at least clicked on for 0.86 ($SD = 0.98$) topics on average. Purely counterattitudinal exposure for a topic was the exception, as it occurred for only 0.58 ($SD = 0.69$) topics; it was significantly less frequent than exposure to attitude-consistent information, $t(142) = 4.4, p < .001$, and than exposure to both views, $t(142) = 2.4, p = .017$. The difference between exposure to both views and attitude-consistent information fell short of significance ($p = .14$).

These measures—number of topics for which (a) both counterattitudinal and attitude-consistent messages, (b) only counterattitudinal, or (c) only attitude-consistent messages had been clicked on—were employed in regression analyses with the same predictors as for the models described above. For (a), political interest ($\beta = .23, p = .020$) and accessibility ($\beta = .18, p = .037$) were significant predictors, whereas negative impacts of habitual news use and attitude certainty fell short of significance. No significant effects emerged for (b). For criterion (c), only habitual news use had a significant impact, which was quite large ($\beta = .41, p < .001$); political interest had a weak negative effect that failed to reach significance.

Discussion

The current study extended ideas originating from Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance by considering modern elaborations of the concept of attitude and attitude strength and aimed to overcome some methodological shortcomings of prior research. We found that exposure to attitude-consistent messages exceeded exposure to counterattitudinal messages and that this pattern was remarkably consistent across exposure indicators and issues, supporting H1. The current findings may be one of the strongest demonstrations of selective exposure patterns in line with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) presented thus far. For instance, participants spent 36% more time on attitude-consistent messages than on counterattitudinal content. However, there was still ample room for consumption of information contradicting one's own views, as 43% of the choices or of the reading time were allotted to counterattitudinal messages. Exploratory analyses showed that reading only attitude-consistent topic information and reading both views about an issue were significantly more common than reading only counterattitudinal topic information. Furthermore, the preference for attitude-consistent messages was remarkably consistent across the browsing time. Toward the end of the browsing period, average exposure to counterattitudinal material increased somewhat—probably because many readers had exhausted attitude-consistent messages and would normally simply leave the news outlet at this point.

When examining causes for variation in preference of attitude-consistent messages and avoidance of counterattitudinal content, habitual news use and attitude certainty

emerged as the most important predictors. Participants who indicated higher levels of habitual news consumption preferred attitude-consistent information more strongly and avoided counterattitudinal information more strongly than did participants with lower news consumption. This converges with survey findings on news consumers' preference for news outlets that match their political orientation (e.g., Stroud, 2008); less frequent news users may not have strong habits of attitude-consistent information consumption.

It is interesting to note that the two exposure indicators—article choices and reading times—did not follow the same patterns with regard to causal factors. Participants obviously clicked on some articles but then did not engage in actual reading. Choices of counterattitudinal articles stood out by being affected by many respondent characteristics. Higher attitude accessibility and importance were associated with more frequent choices of counterattitudinal messages. This corroborates the notion that accessibility might also indicate importance to the individual and thus affect exposure along the same lines as well as the interpretation that in case of counterattitudinal messages about important issues, utility considerations may reduce dissonance avoidance. Furthermore, conservative political views, greater interest in politics, and a stronger party affiliation fostered choices of counterattitudinal articles. It appears as if individuals with these characteristics felt greater confidence in their views and were thus more inclined to at least take a quick look at counterarguments. Maybe they did not anticipate dissonance from counterattitudinal exposure because of this confidence. This interpretation relates to work by Albarracín and Mitchell (2004), who developed a scale for defensive confidence to explain why people differ in the extent to which they turn to attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal information (a sample item is, "Compared to most people, I am able to maintain my own opinions regardless of what conflicting information I receive"; p. 1569). These authors presented evidence that individuals with greater defensive confidence expressed greater interest in counterattitudinal information. Possibly, this feature accounts for an overarching influence that produced the impacts on choice of counterattitudinal messages. This could also provide a tentative explanation for conservative media users' frequent counterattitudinal choices—conservatives are said to be generally more resistant and opposed to change in the first place (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Hence, even if they click on a counterattitudinal message, they may not do so to look for opinion-swaying insights.

On the other hand, lower attitude certainty fostered selection of counterattitudinal articles and reduced reading times for attitude-consistent messages. We suppose that individuals who are uncertain regarding their attitude are willing to look at least briefly at counterattitudinal information, probably in hopes of developing a more secure point of view. This, however, should be a process that is unrelated to defensive confidence, which might be reflected in the fact that attitude certainty did not relate only to message choice but also to exposure time.

These considerations point to possibly different motivations that govern exposure to attitude-consistent and counterattitudinal information. Overall, the attitude-bolstering exposure dominates but occasionally counterattitudinal information may be sought out because of one's confidence that no dissonance or opinion change will result from it or because of an interest in forming a more certain position. Aside from theoretical frameworks that emphasize attitudes, other approaches could guide future research on factors that foster counterattitudinal exposure. For example, informational utility (for an overview, see Knobloch-Westerwick, 2008) has long been suggested to override dissonance avoidance under certain circumstances (Cotton, 1985; Sears & Freedman, 1967), such as anticipation of a debate in which knowledge about counterarguments has utility. Mood management (Zillmann, 1988) could also explain why occasionally media users might enjoy looking at counterarguments when they are in a state of boredom and seek out messages that can increase the arousal level.

The experimental design of the present study offers a clean context to detect the patterns under investigation and yielded clear evidence for a general preference of attitude-consistent information. However, the findings need to be interpreted with several considerations in mind. First, given that opposite views were presented side by side, exposure to counterattitudinal information was probably higher than in some media use situations. In everyday life, people will often turn to an outlet that offers mostly attitude-consistent views; for example, a partisan of the Republican Party tends to favor a conservative newspaper (Stroud, 2008). Second, levels of counterattitudinal information will depend on how strong the contrast between the message and one's own views appears to be. A counterattitudinal message could still be acceptable if the tone is moderate but utterly offensive if the tone is more drastic. This aspect is illustrated by the pretest ratings of our stimulus material, showing that the differences between the pro and the contra messages were not the same for all four topics (e.g., the minimum wage news leads presented a stronger contrast than the gun control news leads). Future research could include not only opposing views about a topic but also a moderate message to see if information recipients still prefer attitude-consistent information or if they are more intrigued by a more balanced perspective (Garrett, 2006).

The current findings demonstrate that media users generally choose messages that converge with preexisting views. If they take a look at "the other side," they probably do not anticipate being swayed in their views. This fuels concerns about citizens' thorough opinion formation that *should* entail weighing and monitoring diverse arguments. The observed selective intake may indeed play a large role for increased polarization in the electorate and reduced mutual acceptance of political views in an era of unprecedented media outlets quantity (e.g., Mutz, 2002; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). This selectivity can certainly be viewed as an attempt to reduce the cognitive load and sign of media users' hedonic orientations because

effortful and unpleasant cognitive dissonances are avoided. Yet it may also be considered functional from an individual's point of view in an age of low voting rates and a competitive media environment.

With regard to voting decisions, there is empirical evidence that points to an increase of voting uncertainty and ambivalence because of exposure to conflicting points of view (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2008). Hence, even though this type of exposure is often believed to support opinion formation, in practice it may well leave the individual too confused and hesitant to come to a voting decision. Regarding the media environment, the increasing number of information outlets has also led to unprecedented competition among the channels, which may have hampered the information quality overall. Bennett (2001), for example, suggests that the competition among news outlets has led to an emphasis on conflict and confrontation to make news more exciting and dramatic. At the same time, news organizations strive to lower costs and thus reduce background reporting and extend coverage on "manufactured" pseudo-news. Hence, according to Bennett, analysis and in-depth reporting get replaced with clash and controversy in the news. If political disagreement is portrayed along these lines, the opposing views may indeed often seem irreconcilable, and news consumers may oftentimes not see the point of filtering out the scarce substantial insight from all the conflict rhetoric. From this perspective, clinging to the congenial may be a subjectively rational response to a media environment that does little to support the opinion formation processes envisioned in democratic ideals.

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