

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 20: Media and Misinformation

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MIT

1. Peer Review

2. Readings

Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*

Alcott and Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”

Guess, “(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans’ Online Media Diets”

Peer Review

Next Steps

- You will be assigned your peer review groups today (3 people)
- Please complete your peer reviews by recitation on Friday and circulate them (over email) with your group; discussion in recitation section
- 1-2 double-spaced pages per essay
- Please also attach your peer reviews to your final paper submission; they will be part of your overall assignment grade
- **Meetings with Kate:** 4/27, 4/28, 5/2, and 5/4

Suggestions for Effective Peer Reviews

- Summarize the argument in 1-2 sentences
- Say what the paper did well
- Start with broad suggestions, then narrow
- Ask questions, highlight points of confusion
- See here for more information

Readings

Readings

Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*

The Media Environment over Time

1. 1935

- No commercial television; 2/3 of households had radio
- Print media: > 2000 daily newspapers, with combined circulation of one per three Americans

2. 1970

- Television universally available; on for six hours per day in the average household
- Three broadcast networks captured 80% of all viewership

3. 2005

- Vast array of choices: Americans follow the news on phones, cable TV, and online
- News available anytime, anywhere — for every interest and political persuasion

Introduction

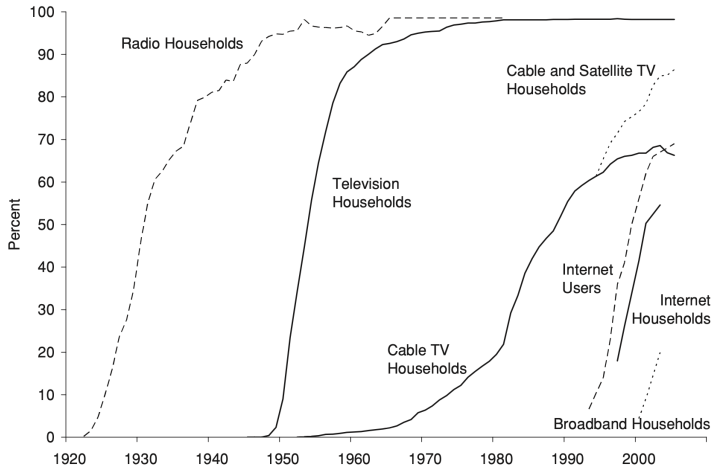


Figure 1.1. The Media Environment, 1920–2005.

How does the media environment change political behavior?

1. By-product learning

- What do we mean by “inefficient” media environments and why does it matter for political exposure?

2. The floating voter

- On average, voters who float in and out of political parties and elections are less educated, less interested, less knowledgeable about politics
- What factors may drive these uncommitted voters to participate?
- How is electoral volatility related to information flow?

What political outcomes do we expect to be shaped by the media environment?

How do people end up in their media environments?

Availability

- Internet access
- Cable infrastructure

+

Preferences/Choices

- Adoption of new technologies
- Costs (cable channels, high speed Internet, new TV)

Inferential challenges: What is correlated with availability? What is correlated with preferences/choices?

How to study the causal effects of media on voter behavior

What is the ideal experiment? What is the “media” treatment?

Research design 1: Same geographic units, changing media environments over time

- Advantages?
- Challenges?

Research design 2: Similar people, different media environments at a single snapshot in time

- Advantages?
- Challenges?

Readings

Alcott and Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”

1. What do we mean by “fake news”?
2. Who was exposed to fake news about politics on social media in 2016?
3. Who believed the fake news posts?
4. Did the fake news affect people’s voting decisions?

What is fake news?

“Fake news” refers to articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers. It excludes:

- unintentional reporting mistakes
- rumors that did not originate from an alleged news source
- conspiracy theories
- satire
- false statements by politicians
- reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false

Motivations to produce fake news are 1) pecuniary, 2) ideological.

Findings

The authors construct an original database of 156 fake news articles that circulated in the run-up to the 2016 election:

- 41 pro-Clinton; shared 7.6 million times on Facebook
- 115 pro-Trump ; shared 30.3 million times on Facebook

They find:

- The average American adult saw and remembered 1.14 fake news articles from this database
- But rate of recall of seeing/believing is about the same as placebo articles

Readings

Guess, “(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans’ Online Media Diets”

To what extent do citizens meet the basic requirements for informed collective decision making?

Prerequisites for democratic deliberation may include:

- Exposure to competing viewpoints
- Shared experiences within a polity
- Quality and availability of information about public affairs

Widespread concern that these requirements are undermined by selective exposure online.

People can be “nudged” toward:

- Serendipitous encounters vs. predictive personalization
- Reinforcing vs. challenging information
- Moderation vs. polarization
- Fact vs. fiction

Guess seeks to understand what kinds of democratic citizens are (passively) created by digital choice architecture.

Data + Research Design

1. Survey data + study participants' full (anonymized) internet browsing history
2. Participation is voluntary, and participants can leave anytime
 - What inferential concerns does this raise? How might a researcher address such concerns?
3. Measuring the ideological slant of website
 - How would you go about this? What does Guess do?
4. Classification of political vs. non-political content
 - Machine learning
5. Aggregating to a respondent-level measure
 - Average over site visits to compute a single ideological score per person

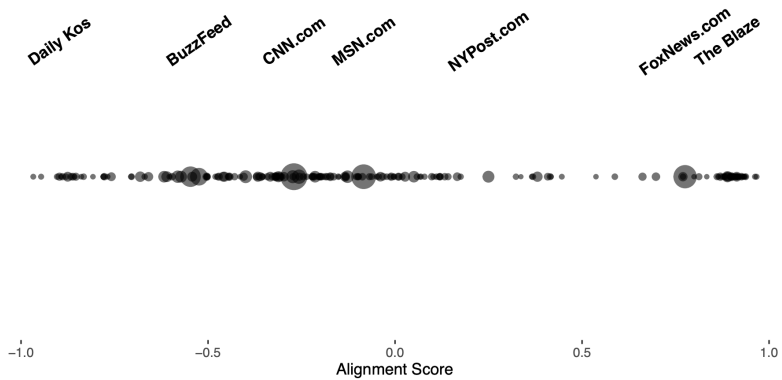
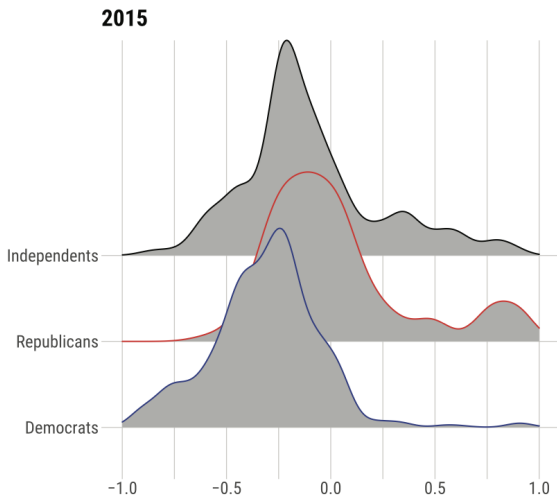
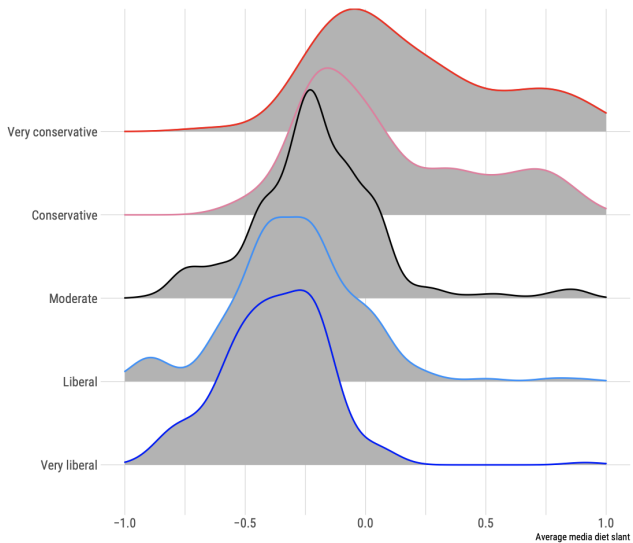


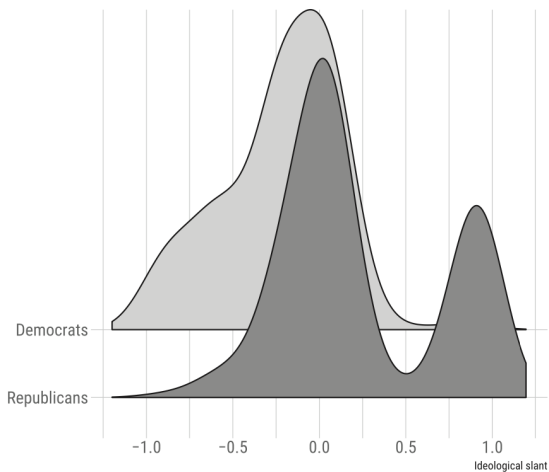
FIGURE 1 Americans' Online Media Diets by Partisanship





(a) 2015

FIGURE 2 Slant of Site Visits by Respondent Partisanship



2015

TABLE 3 2016 Voter Turnout by Average Media Diet Decile

Decile	$E[P(\text{Voted}_i D = d)]$	
	General	Presidential primary
1	0.585	0.179
2	0.552	0.170
3	0.473	0.124
4	0.561	0.141
5	0.529	0.119
6	0.490	0.083
7	0.589	0.140
8	0.595	0.116
9	0.642	0.168
10	0.684	0.256