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BROADBAND ACCESS HEIGHTENS POLITICAL POLARIZATION, STUDY SAYS

In a study that looks at differences in broadband access and partisanship, researchers argue that more access to high-speed Internet leads to greater political divisions among Americans.

If your rural community has inadequate broadband access, look on the bright side. That might lessen the level of partisan rancor in your community.

NEWS BRIEF

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A new study asserts that increased broadband access creates more partisanship.

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This is an ongoing debate. On one side, it's undeniable that we have greater access

to information than we did before the Internet became widespread. We can

research candidates' policies, find alternative perspectives on news events, even get in

discussions with journalists and newsmakers online. In theory, more information

means better informed voters, and that's good for democracy — at least according

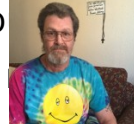
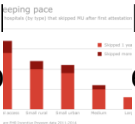
to Mr. Palahunich, my eighth grade social studies teacher.



But the other side of the coin is that broadband access also makes it easier for us to find only the news and information that matches our preconceived political leanings. Don't like conservatives? No problem. You can find plenty of folks who agree with you over at Crooks and Liars, Alternet, and scores of other blogs and news sites that cater to the left. Can't stand liberals? You're covered. To find your people, head over to RedState or Newsbusters and many more.

We can find whatever "news" fits our predilections. And, perhaps more important,

when we hang out with people who share our beliefs exclusively, we're more likely to become more hardlined in our opinions, others say.



The new study about "partisan rancor" and broadband takes an indirect route to reach its conclusions. Instead of trying to measure the impact of broadband on specific individuals, the study looks at geographical groupings. It defines places that

have more and less broadband access. It controls for other factors, so there's a better chance they are measuring only broadband's effect on polarization. Then it measures polarization and looks at the relationship to broadband access.

The key to such a research "experiment" is to control for the many other factors that might affect partisanship or political belief other than access to broadband. People who have broadband tend to have higher incomes, are more likely to be white, and share other similarities. Those characteristics affect partisanship, too, so you can't tell whether broadband access or something else is causing the level of partisan hardliners.

To get around this problem, the researchers needed a "pure play" — a variable that affected broadband access but did not affect polarization in another way.

Yphtack Lelkes, Gaurav Sood, and Shanto Iyengar, in a **study to be published in the American Journal of Political Science** (<http://www.gsood.com/research/papers/BroadbandPolarization.pdf>), found what they were looking for in state laws that regulate the use of public rights of way. They say that the way states regulate utilities' access to public rights of way has a direct bearing on the number of broadband providers an area has. In turn, they say, the number of Internet providers affects the broadband adoption rate (whether people use broadband). With this logic, they measured broadband use in an indirect way. And with this information, they were able to factor out variables like income levels, geography, and race that might affect partisanship. (The study even controlled for state politics.)

Next the researchers looked at data from large public opinion polls from 2004 and 2008 and created a measurement for partisanship.

The findings show that people with more broadband access (as they defined it) are more likely to have higher levels of partisanship.

The impact doesn't appear to be huge. The impact of broadband availability on partisanship is about half the impact of one's political interest. But it's real, the study says. In fact, if all states loosened their regulation of public rights of way (which theoretically leads to more broadband providers and greater broadband penetration), the polarization level in the United States would increase by 2 percent, they say.

So where does this leave rural, with its 13 to 15 point gap in broadband access compared to urban and suburban communities? Personally, I'd risk a little more partisanship to get my home Internet access up to the Federal Communications Commission's broadband level. With the time I save on downloads and uploads, I could spend more time talking to my neighbors down at the post office. It's much harder to be extreme when all those "damn liberals" or "heartless conservatives" are real people — not just bits and bytes on the computer screen.

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