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The New Personal Influence: How Our Facebook Friends Influence the News We Read

NICOLAS M. ANSPACH 

Has the introduction of social media into the information landscape changed the heuristics individuals use when selecting news? Social media allow users to easily share and endorse political content. These features facilitate personal influence, possibly increasing the salience of partisan information, making users more likely to read endorsed content. To test this possibility, I utilize snowball sampling to conduct a survey experiment featuring mock Facebook News Feeds. These feeds contain different levels of social media activity attributed to different sources, varying from fictional individuals to subjects' own friends and family members. I find that online endorsements and discussions serve as heuristics when deciding which content to consume, outweighing partisan selectivity. This effect is only significant when the activity comes from friends or family members, as social influence attributed to fictional individuals has no effect on information selectivity.

Keywords selective exposure, social media, personal influence, social influence, inadvertent exposure

Introduction

This article examines how the social media information environment shapes the dynamics of seeking, receiving, and consuming political information. More than 60 years ago, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argued that because most individuals do not pay attention to political affairs, the news media are unable to directly influence large segments of the electorate. As entertainment options have proliferated and more individuals forego political news in favor of entertainment programs, the media's reach is further limited (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2005, 2007). In this context, it is only through the personal influence of news-seeking friends and family members that those uninterested in politics receive the media's message at all (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948).

Because social media provide entertainment and news options in the same space, entertainment-seekers often encounter political news that they would avoid in traditional contexts. Indeed, more than 75% of entertainment-seekers read political news on social media when they are logged in for entertainment purposes (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2013). In addition to directing entertainment-seekers to political news, sites like Facebook and Twitter also expose partisan news-seekers to news from counter-attitudinal

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sources, facilitating the consumption of news from ideologically diverse sources (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015).

Why are social media users less likely to ignore political (and counter-attitudinal) content on social networking sites than in traditional media contexts? In this article, I argue that social media's attributes differ from those of traditional media (see Eveland, 2003), specifically their ability to facilitate personal influence through the sharing, endorsement, and discussion of content. This personal influence serves as a selection heuristic, raising topic relevance while dampening partisan selectivity (Mummolo, 2016). An individual who might ignore news about politics from traditional media sources may opt to read such information on Facebook if she sees her friends discussing the article on her News Feed (the name given to the string of posts made by friends that greets individuals when they log onto Facebook).

To investigate whether personal influence contributes to the selection rates of both pro- and counter-attitudinal content, I implement a survey experiment in which subjects, in a series of exercises, select articles from mock Facebook News Feeds. Each exercise features a different News Feed, each containing different articles. The articles consist of a blend of entertainment and political posts, the latter of which come from both pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal sources. In order to test partisan selectivity absent any personal influence, the first exercise (dubbed News Feed A) does not feature any social endorsements on any of the posts. In the latter exercises, however, a randomly selected post is treated with social influence (i.e., likes and comments) in order to determine whether subjects select content based on that influence. Although Facebook is centered on personal connections, it is not uncommon to see strangers' comments on posted items. Therefore, News Feed B investigates the effect of social influence attributed to fictional individuals, while News Feed C features endorsements and comments made by the subjects' actual friends and family members.

If personal influence is a contributing factor to how individuals select political news, then it follows that familiarity with those who are endorsing the content is an important part of the process. In order to leverage personal influence in its truest form for News Feed C, I employ a snowball sample in which subjects' own friends and family members provide the shares, likes, and comments for each post in the mock News Feed. I integrate this information into News Feed C, not only by attaching them to a randomly selected post, but also by inserting the actual names and Facebook profile pictures of those in the snowball sample.

After comparing the selection rates of political content for the News Feed B (featuring fictional individuals) and News Feed C (featuring actual friends and family members), I find that personal familiarity with those endorsing the posted content outweighs partisan selectivity. When peers share and interact with political news on social media, audiences are more likely to read it, regardless of ideological congruency. This personal influence is only effective when friends or family share the news, as activity attributed to fictional individuals does not change selection habits.

Inadvertent Exposure and the Role of Personal Influence

The proliferation of news choices over the past few decades has driven communication scholars to investigate how media fragmentation influences the heuristics individuals use to select their news. The advent of 24-hour news networks and the Internet means that individuals no longer have to rely on the major networks' nightly news broadcasts or mainstream newspapers to receive news about politics. Instead, media fragmentation presents audiences choices, allowing news-seekers to engage in selective exposure—the tendency to seek sources of information that align with their preexisting attitudes and interests (Klapper, 1960, p. 19).

Individuals engage in selective exposure for a variety of reasons. Selective exposure preempts cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), creates a favorable bias toward information from pro-attitudinal sources (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), fills a need to draw conclusions that fit with individuals' worldviews (Kruglanski, 1989; Kunda, 1990), and lessens the cognitive resources needed to understand or rationalize the information gathered (Stroud, 2011). Without exposure to a fair treatment of the opposing side's arguments, some worry that individuals will become entrenched in their own attitudes, resulting in political polarization (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Slater, 2007; Sunstein, 2001).

This media fragmentation and the resulting selective exposure have led to a new era of minimal media effects scholarship. Because audiences can self-select into ideologically congruent news sources that simply reinforce their opinions (Pariser, 2011; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2001), increased choice lowers the news media's ability to meaningfully change audiences' attitudes (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Furthermore, the proliferation of entertainment options also contributes to the media's decreasing influence. In the early days of television, many individuals watched the nightly news broadcasts as entertainment, simply because there was little else to watch (Prior, 2005). Today, however, it is increasingly easy to opt out of news altogether in favor of more entertaining alternatives. Indeed, news media effects are mitigated when audiences have the option to watch entertainment programs (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). In these contexts, the media mostly reinforce existing attitudes, to the extent that they reach audiences at all (see also Levendusky, 2013; Zaller, 1992).

However, much of the research from the minimal effects paradigm focuses on purposive news-seeking behaviors and therefore underestimates the news media's influence when individuals encounter political news unintentionally. Entertainment-seekers can learn about political issues inadvertently through entertainment programs (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Holbert et al., 2003) or soft news media (Baum, 2002), which influence the attitudes of politically inattentive individuals (Baum, 2003) and increase their political acumen (Baum & Jamison, 2006). However, despite the fact that entertainment media can also influence political attitudes through agenda-setting (Holbrook & Hill, 2005) and priming (Holbert et al., 2003), many communications scholars are dismissive of the effects of inadvertent news exposure from entertainment television shows, claiming that such exposure is not consistent enough to warrant serious consideration (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2010). Yet given the rise of social media and their ability to regularly channel partisan news to the politically uninterested (Mitchell et al., 2013), it is worth investigating whether this new media landscape changes the heuristics individuals use when encountering political news inadvertently (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Social networking sites such as Facebook consistently expose users to political news, even if that exposure is incidental. Despite this inadvertent exposure (or perhaps because of it), social media are increasingly seen as a viable source of news. Consider that approximately half of Internet users use Facebook to access news (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014), and that 78% of those users encounter that news while logged on for other reasons (Mitchell et al., 2013). Given that most social networking site users have friends who post political news (Halberstam & Knight, 2014), social media provide partisan news to millions of individuals who may not have otherwise received it.

Despite concerns that online audiences would be surrounded by overwhelmingly like-minded information (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001), partisan news encountered on social media is actually ideologically heterogeneous (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014). Self-reports suggest that audiences encounter more counter-attitudinal perspectives through social media than through any other platform (Figure 1).¹ These numbers may even underestimate the amount of counter-attitudinal exposure that

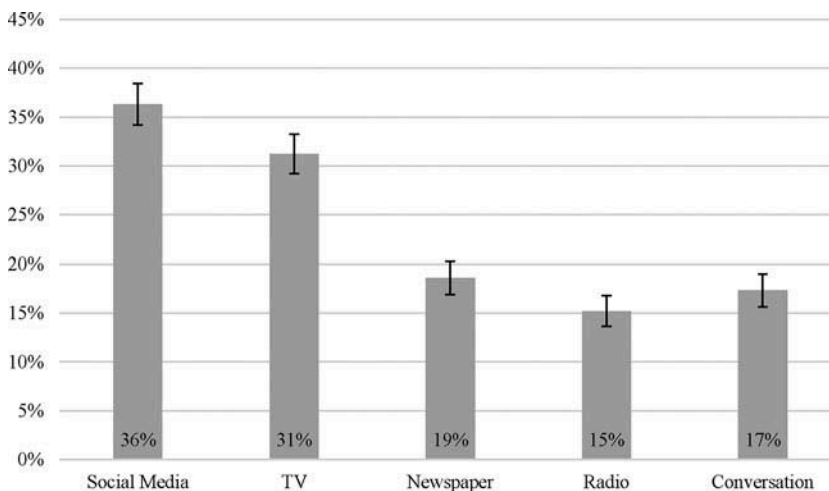


Figure 1. Encountering counter-attitudinal information “often” by medium (%).

occurs, as individuals often disagree with their Facebook friends’ political attitudes more than they realize (Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010).

The nature of social media’s networks may explain why users regularly encounter an array of political perspectives. Social media connections are often based on weak ties (Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009), such as relationships with friends from high school or distant relatives (Granovetter, 1973). Because individuals connected via weak ties introduce new perspectives to the social network (Weimann, 1982), these networks feature more political heterogeneity (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Mutz, 2006) than those characterized by strong ties between close friends or family. It should be no surprise, then, that political discussions on sites like Facebook expose participants and audiences to political difference, further contributing to network heterogeneity (Brundidge, 2010).

Although evidence indicates that social media *exposes* audiences to more political content (especially from counter-attitudinal sources) than traditional media outlets, it is important to consider whether that exposure leads to the *consumption* of such information. The distinction between exposure and consumption is important, as traditional media studies find that individuals tend to either forego political information in favor of entertainment options (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2007) or attune to information from mostly pro-attitudinal sources (Stroud, 2011; Taber & Lodge, 2006). And yet, such partisan selectivity is mitigated in the social media context: rather than ignoring counter-attitudinal posts, Facebook users tend to read such items at greater rates than those associated with traditional media (Bakshy et al., 2015; Messing & Westwood, 2012). One reason for this diminished partisan selectivity may be that social media users employ a different heuristic when deciding which content to consume. Instead of basing such decisions on the ideological leanings of a news source as traditional selective exposure theory predicts, social media audiences may evaluate content based on the social influence of their networks—specifically, whom has shared, endorsed, or commented on the articles.

For more than a century, scholars have argued that seemingly individualistic actions are best understood as the result of social influence (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee,

1954; Durkheim, 1897; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Key, 1949), and exposure to political information is no exception. Seeking political information is costly in terms of both time and cognitive resources. Citizens therefore look for shortcuts to reduce the costs associated with sifting through the countless options available (Downs, 1957). While partisan cues can serve as one heuristic for the quality of information (Kruglanski, 1989; Kunda, 1990; Stroud, 2011), peers can also reduce these costs by facilitating the diffusion of elite-driven information (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Zaller, 1992), and increasing the salience of issues (McCombs, 2004). Before the advent of social media, entertainment-seekers would often receive their political information from opinion leaders (e.g., pastors, union bosses, or other community organizers) who were attentive to such matters (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). In traditional media environments, it is mostly through this two-step flow of communication that political information reaches the inattentive.

Social media represent the latest iteration of opinion leadership and the two-step flow of communication. Indeed, highly active social media users consider themselves influential in their social network, and regularly engage in online behaviors aimed to politically persuade others (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015). While much of the media effects scholarship focuses on the content of the media's message (McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991, p. 247), it is also important to note social media's other attributes (see Eveland, 2003). One of the most important of these attributes is *interactivity*, or the "extent to which communication reflects back on itself, feeds on and responds to the past" (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996, p. 6). Because most social networking sites allow users to share, endorse, and comment upon content, social media have the highest interactivity of all media platforms. Users who post political content can have their views endorsed or challenged by their networks. The public endorsement (or derision) of political news by online peers can serve as a signal of the quality of the information (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005). In addition, discussions surrounding political posts may increase the salience of that topic for both the discussions' participants and their audiences, and topic relevance often eclipses ideological congruency as a selection heuristic (Mummolo, 2016).

Another attribute important to social media is *curation*, or "the production, selection, filtering, annotation, or framing of content" (Thorson & Wells, 2015, p. 2). Of course, traditional news outlets possess the ability to post directly to social media, but Facebook's News Feed algorithm prioritizes content shared by friends and family over such organizations (Mosseri, 2016). This competition between journalists and average citizens does not exist in television or newspaper contexts. Social media give users the greatest ability to curate content, streamlining opinion leadership and the two-step flow of communication.

By providing a more efficient platform for opinion leadership, social media likely change the criteria audiences use when selecting content. Audiences tend to enjoy reading news stories more, and regard them as higher in quality, when they perceive the source to be an average person rather than a news editor (Sundar & Nass, 2001), especially if that person is considered an opinion leader (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). In this case, trust of certain opinion leaders (Turcotte et al., 2015) or the expected pleasure derived reading an article shared by a friend or family member (Cappella, Kim, & Albarracín, 2015) become the heuristics used when selecting content, dampening partisan selectivity.

In fact, Messing and Westwood (2012) argue that social media's distinctive feature, social endorsements, serve as an important heuristic when selecting content. In their

investigation of the subject, the authors demonstrate that individuals are more likely to select information based on such endorsements rather than the partisan affiliation of the information's source. The authors randomly assign social endorsements to one of four news article headlines, two of which have partisan sources. They then ask participants to select one of the four articles, and find that social endorsements trigger several decision heuristics that suggest utility, increasing the rate at which individuals select counter-attitudinal items.

In an extension of Messing and Westwood's work, I investigate whether the unique attributes of social media make people more open to consuming political news, whether from like-minded or counter-attitudinal sources. In doing so, I expand upon Messing and Westwood's research question and design in two theoretically and substantively important ways. First, I replicate parts of Messing and Westwood's design, but with the inclusion of entertainment options. Because many individuals select entertainment options over political information (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2005, 2007), and because no entertainment choices were offered in Messing and Westwood's experiments, it is possible that their findings results from forcing subjects to select news items that they would have ignored in a real-world context. If individuals select endorsed partisan content despite having entertainment options available, we can be more confident in the explanatory power of personal influence.

Second, I examine whether the source of a post's activity matters. This article's experiments include endorsements and comments made by both fictional individuals and by subjects' actual friends and family members, both common scenarios on Facebook. The anonymous endorsements in Messing and Westwood's experiments have a significant, positive effect on article selection, but again, with a design that did not allow participants to opt out of political news. Still, if audiences use anonymous endorsements as a heuristic when selecting news, it is likely that endorsements made by actual members of one's social network have even greater explanatory power. Together, these two additions better capture how social networking sites operate in the real world.

Hypotheses

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first goal is to determine whether personal influence increases the rates at which social media audiences select news. The second is to determine whether personal influence can dampen partisan selectivity. But before investigating endorsements' effect on selective exposure, it is important to establish that selective exposure exists. When a user posts an article to Facebook, a small preview of the article and the source of the article is displayed. These cues are usually enough to identify the partisan bias of a posted news item, allowing individuals to use that bias as a selection heuristic (Messing & Westwood, 2012). This produces the first hypothesis:

H1: Absent personal influence, individuals will select posts from pro-attitudinal sources over counter-attitudinal sources.

The second and third hypotheses of the study stem from the idea that personal influence serves as a heuristic when selecting content (Cappella et al., 2015; Downs, 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Messing & Westwood, 2012; Mummolo, 2016; Turcotte et al., 2015; Zaller, 1992). Social media users who avoid political (or counter-attitudinal) news in traditional contexts may opt to read such content on social media if it has generated a large amount of activity.

However, it is not enough to know that personal influence compels social media audiences to consume partisan news. It is also desirable to understand the ideological congruency of the articles users are selecting. If audiences are already more likely to select information from pro-attitudinal sources absent any social influence (see H1), then the social influence heuristic, working in concert with the partisan selectivity, should increase the rates at which users read pro-attitudinal news (H2).

H2: Individuals will select pro-attitudinal content at a higher rate if it features endorsements or comments.

But what if the social influence heuristic and partisan selectivity are working at odds with each other? Preliminary evidence suggests that social influence can often trump partisan selectivity (Messing & Westwood, 2012; Mummolo, 2016), but refined tests that better simulate the social media environment are warranted. To that end, H3 tests whether individuals are more likely to select news from counter-attitudinal sources if their social media networks are discussing the articles.

H3: Individuals will select counter-attitudinal content at a higher rate if it features endorsements or comments.

Social influence theory contends that individuals are most influenced by those in their social circles (Hong & Rojas, 2016; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). While H2 and H3 test whether any social activity—even that from strangers—serves as a heuristic when selecting news, the final hypothesis examines whether personal familiarity with those discussing the articles better explains selectivity. Specifically, H4 tests whether social influence from close friends or family members better predicts a social media user's article selection than commentary attributed to strangers.

H4: Individuals will select content at a higher rate if the endorsements or comments are attributed to familiar individuals rather than strangers.

Research Design

The experiments used in this research emulate Facebook's interface for several reasons. Facebook is the largest social networking site, and at roughly 1.8 billion unique monthly visitors, it is the second-most visited website in the world. In addition, Facebook allows for more flexibility in how users can share content than other platforms such as YouTube or Twitter. Although Twitter is widely used in political communication research involving social media, its 140-character limit does not represent the social media landscape at large (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, & Bae, 2014). Finally, Facebook has come to be seen as a viable source for political news: 48% of Internet users gather news about politics and government from Facebook. Only 9% of Internet users use Twitter to do the same. In fact, people turn to Facebook for news much more than sites like Yahoo News (24%) or Google News (22%), and nearly as much as local television broadcasts (49%; Mitchell et al., 2014).

On Facebook, individuals create profiles and can "friend" one another. Users can make posts onto their Timelines, which are visible to their friends. These posts can be anything from status updates to pictures, videos, or links to articles. Beyond choosing whom to be friends with and having the ability to hide the activity of certain friends, users

have little control over what information is displayed in their News Feeds. Instead, Facebook’s complex algorithm determines which posts appear when users log on. Despite charges that Facebook’s algorithm filters out cross-cutting content (Pariser, 2011), research has shown such claims to be unfounded (Bakshy et al., 2015).

To see under which conditions subjects choose to read partisan news, I conducted two waves of experiments, each using a different subject pool. I conducted the first round of experiments using subjects recruited from a large, ethnically diverse urban research university. The second wave of experiments consisted of subjects from a mostly White, suburban liberal arts college. In addition to differences in race and setting, subjects in the first wave tended to identify as more liberal, while the second study contained more conservatives (Table 1).

While the subjects in each study differed, both waves of experiments followed the same protocol. In each, I recruited subjects under the guise of a simple political science survey. In addition to measuring subjects’ political fundamentals, the survey also offered small monetary incentives for subjects to construct a snowball sample by recommending friends or family members who might also want to participate in the survey. I recruited those named in the snowball sample in order to construct mock Facebook News Feeds tailored to my subjects, complete with the profile pictures and activity attributed to those named friends and family members.

After I had created the mock News Feeds (the details of which follow), I administered a survey experiment to the original subjects under the guise of a follow-up survey. Of the original 121 subjects in the two waves, 105 participated in the main experiment (an 86.8% retention rate). The survey experiment featured three mock Facebook News Feeds (referred to here as A, B, and C), presented in random order. For each News Feed, subjects selected the article that they most wanted to read in full. The basic structure of each News Feed was the same: each contained two entertainment articles and two political articles. For each feed, the political articles were both about the same issue, but originating from sources at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. For example, one News Feed’s partisan articles addressed voter identification laws: one from conservative Fox News and the other from the left-leaning *Huffington Post*, while the entertainment articles came from *Rolling Stone* and *Buzzfeed* (see Table 2 for details).

In addition to displaying different articles, each News Feed also tested the aforementioned hypotheses by varying each post’s activity and the source of that activity. News Feed A displayed each post as shared by a fictional individual, and its posts did not include any likes or comments. This allows a simple test of selective exposure (H1) to determine whether, absent any social influence, subjects make their selections based on the

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of subjects

	Wave 1			Wave 2		
	Stat	SD	N	Stat	SD	N
Mean age	19.24	1.45	49	18.17	1.29	56
Proportion female	0.69	–	49	0.73	–	56
Proportion White	0.61	–	49	0.91	–	56
Proportion Republican	0.31	–	49	0.54	–	56
Mean political knowledge ^a	3.12	1.39	49	4.32	1.01	56

^aMaximum = 5.

Table 2
Design details

	Personal Influence (Treated Article)	Personal Influence (Untreated Articles)	Hypotheses Tested
News Feed A			
Wave 1 Issue: Voter ID Law	None	None	<i>H1</i>
Wave 2 Issue: Electoral Fraud			
News Feed B			
Wave 1 Issue: Foreign Policy	Fictional	None	<i>H2, H3</i>
Wave 2 Issue: Trump's Cabinet			
News Feed C			
Wave 1 Issue: Health Care	Friends & Family	Fictional	<i>H2, H3, H4</i>
Wave 2 Issue: Electoral College			

partisan cues of the articles' sources. Also, it allows us to observe whether individuals are more likely to select political news or entertainment posts.

Like News Feed A, all of News Feed B's posts were shown to be shared by fictional individuals. But unlike News Feed A, one post in News Feed B was randomly assigned likes and comments, also attributed to fictional individuals. The untreated posts in News Feed B received no such activity. By investigating whether subjects select the treated post that includes commentary, this exercise tests whether the social influence of strangers serves as a heuristic when selecting content, be it from pro-attitudinal (H2) or counter-attitudinal (H3) sources.

News Feed C tests whether personal familiarity with those interacting with a post makes audiences more likely to read that article (H4). In News Feed C, all of the posts displayed likes and comments, but one of these posts was randomly selected to attribute those likes and comments (as well as the person who originally shared the article) to the subject's actual friends and family members. It is here that the information gathered from the snowball sample was used. Indeed, the treated post in News Feed C even displayed the friends' and family members' Facebook profile names and profile pictures. This required the intensive process of tailoring each survey to the specific subject in order for the mock News Feed to appear as genuine as possible. Meanwhile, the untreated posts in News Feed C also featured likes and comments, but all attributed to fictional individuals. Like News Feed B, this experiment examines whether social influence serves as a heuristic when determining which articles to read, but uses the data from the snowball sample to create an innovative test for personal familiarity and H4.

In order to create News Feed C, it was necessary to collect Facebook share, like, and commenting activity from subjects' real-life social networks. To do so, subjects provided the names of friends and family members under the assumption they were recruiting individuals for a simple political science survey. Over two waves of experiments, subjects identified 857 recruits for these snowball samples and 270 such recruits participated in the research (a 31.5% response rate).

Recruits in the snowball samples completed a survey that included News Feed C's four article previews. After deciding whether to read each article in full, recruits indicated whether they would like or share each post. They then selected from a list of pre-made

comments and were informed that their choices may be used in a faux Facebook News Feed in future research. Indeed, I later inserted the recorded activity into News Feed C. With recruits' responses, I had a set of likes and comments for each article in News Feed C, cultivated from the friends and family members of each individual subject. Although only one post in News Feed C ultimately received the randomly assigned personal influence treatment, it was necessary to gather comments, likes, and shares for all of its articles in preparation for every possible treatment scenario. In doing so, I avoided the awkward situation in which I might attribute liberal (conservative) comments to a conservative (liberal) recruit. Instead, all activity on each treated post came directly from the subjects' actual social networks.

During administration of the experiment, subjects received News Feeds A, B, and C in random order. For each feed, subjects selected which of the four posts they most wanted to read. To mirror the actual Facebook experience, a fifth option allowed participants to opt out of choosing an article. With this design, each feed tests a different aspect of information selectivity. Partisan selective exposure theory, addressed in News Feed A, predicts that subjects choose articles from the pro-attitudinal sources more often than counter-attitudinal sources (H1). News Feed B examines whether the personal influence of strangers can increase the selection of partisan news, be it from pro- or counter-attitudinal sources (H2 and H3, respectively). News Feed C also examines the role of personal influence, but investigates the role of friends and family members instead of strangers (H4).

Results

In order to leverage more statistical power, data from both waves of experiments are merged and results are presented in a single figure. [Figure 2](#) shows the results of a z-test used to determine whether, absent any likes or comments, subjects exhibited partisan selective exposure (News Feed A; H1). The hypothesis finds support, as subjects are more than 15% more likely to select articles from pro-attitudinal sources than from counter-attitudinal.² In other words, self-identified liberals were more likely to select the article from the liberal source than the conservative source, and vice versa for self-identified conservatives. The difference in these selection rates is statistically significant at conventional levels ($z = 2.54$; $p < .05$). It should be noted, however, that the majority of respondents did not select any political news. Consistent with Arceneaux and Johnson (2013), providing individuals with entertainment choices mitigates media effects, as people tend to opt out of information environments. This is an important consideration, as previous research into the role of social media endorsements on information selectivity does not include entertainment options (Messing & Westwood, 2012).

Despite the presence of partisan selectivity, it is possible that personal influence trumps ideology as a selection heuristic. Ordinary least squares regressions determine whether individuals are more likely to select political news that features likes and comments from strangers (News Feed B), or from friends and family members (News Feed C). The dependent variables of these models are the subjects' selections for each News Feed: pro-attitudinal, counter-attitudinal, or entertainment content. The independent variables indicate which post in each News Feed received the randomly assigned treatment: pro-attitudinal, counter-attitudinal, or entertainment. Again, the expectation is that subjects will select the treated posts, regardless of ideological congruency. [Figure 3](#) shows that Facebook's endorsement features do increase the rate at which audiences select political news from both pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal sources, although only when the activity is attributed to individuals with which the audience is personally familiar.

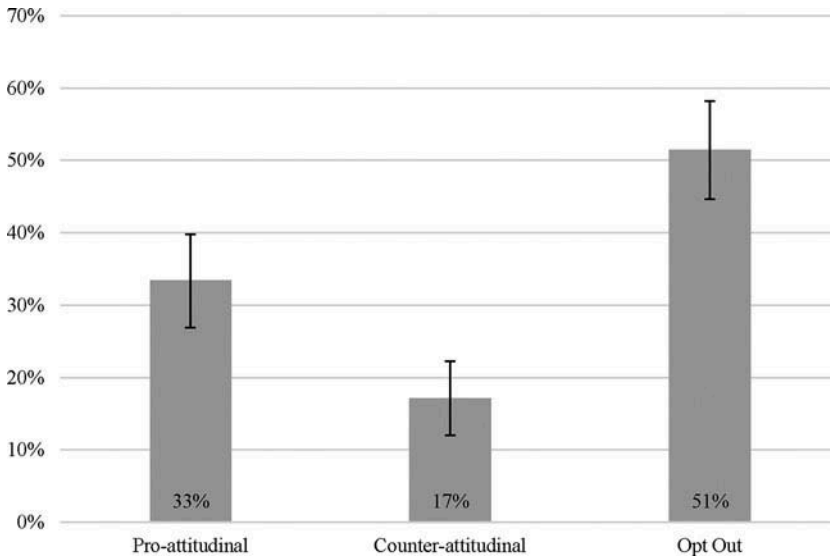


Figure 2. Selection rates of political news (absent commentary; $N = 105$).

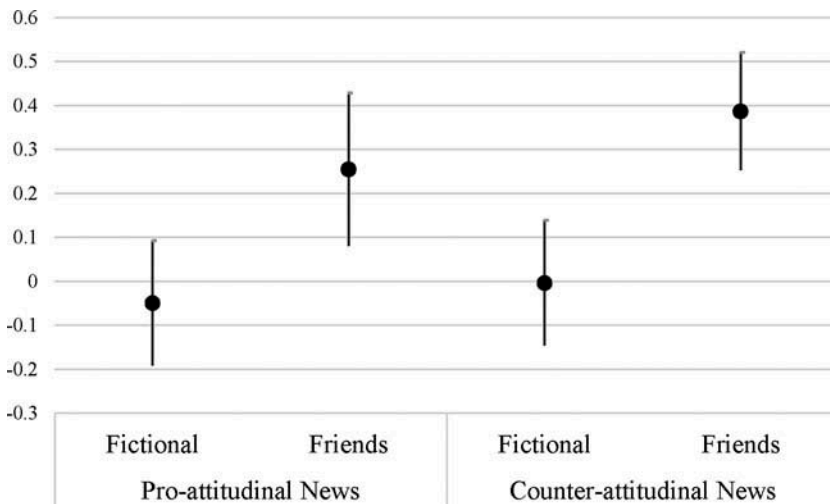


Figure 3. Personal influence's effect on probability of selection ($N = 105$).

Commentary by strangers does not alter the ways in which individuals select news in any significant way.

These findings provide support for H2, H3, and H4, showing that social media users are more likely to select political news when their friends and family post it, irrespective of its ideological slant. In fact, that personal influence causes audiences to cross ideological lines suggests that such influence is a better predictor of selection than the ideological cues conveyed by an article's source.

The lack of significant effects for the social influence of strangers conflicts with the results of Messing and Westwood's (2012) similar experiment, which finds that anonymous endorsements increase counter-attitudinal news consumption. A possible explanation for Messing and Westwood's positive results is the lack of entertainment options in their research design. By not allowing subjects to opt out of political news, Messing and Westwood may be overestimating the influence of unfamiliar endorsements, as anonymous endorsements and a lack of entertainment options do not provide an accurate representation of Facebook. That more than 80% of this study's subjects opted against political news endorsed by fictional individuals illustrates the importance of giving individuals choice (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013), especially given today's fragmented media environment (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Prior, 2005, 2007).

Another explanation for the difference in conclusions may be the number of likes attributed to each post in the two studies. In Messing and Westwood's (2012) design, the treated article received thousands of more likes than untreated posts (i.e., 19,407 versus 106). Although the differences in the number of likes in my exercises were significant (i.e., 155 versus 2 for News Feed B; 25 versus ~4 for News Feed C), they are not nearly as lopsided as Messing and Westwood's.³ The overwhelming nature of Messing and Westwood's design may be tapping into a heuristic that my relatively modest differences do not. However, it should be noted that, in News Feed C, subjects tended to choose *against* the article that had more likes in favor of the article endorsed by their actual friends and family members.

Finally, it is possible that the ideological bias of the comments—not the presence of friends' comments themselves—is responsible for the increased consumption of news from counter-attitudinal sources. If, for example, a subject saw comments on an article from a counter-attitudinal source that disparaged that source, the subject may have selected that post based on the attitude of those comments. In other words, subjects may not be selecting counter-attitudinal articles, but instead selecting pro-attitudinal comments attached to the article. To account for this possibility, I coded the comment balance of each post as either supportive (>0), disparaging (<0), or neutral (0). I then conducted two-stage least-squares regressions with this net balance as the instrumental variables to test whether the comments' direction influenced selectivity. Ultimately, the ideological tone of the comments proved to have an insignificant effect on the selection rates for both pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal sources (Table 3).

Table 3
Comment balance as instrumental variables

Comment Balance	Selection	
	Pro	Counter
Pro-attitudinal post	-0.86 (1.91)	1.32 (1.72)
Counter-attitudinal post	-1.30 (1.95)	0.83 (1.75)
Constant (control)	0.91 (1.22)	-0.58 (1.10)
Observations	105	105

Notes. Standard errors in parentheses. Instrumented variables are the treatments on pro- and counter-attitudinal posts. Instruments are the balance of the number of disparaging comments subtracted from the number of supportive comments on each post.

Concluding Remarks

The research presented in this article provides clear evidence that personal influence, in the form of Facebook's share, like, and comment features, serves as an important heuristic when selecting content on social media. The minimal effects school of thought contends that media effects do not reach entertainment-seekers because those individuals do not pay attention to partisan media (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Zaller, 1992). If we consider entertainment-seekers to be those who opt out of political news when no social influence is present (e.g., in News Feed A), then entertainment-seekers made up 30% of those who selected the partisan posts endorsed by their friends (News Feed C). Through their endorsement features, social media can make partisan news salient to millions of individuals who may have otherwise ignored it, providing an exciting opportunity to test theories of communication and psychology on vast segments of the population often dismissed by traditional media studies. By drawing a wider audience to political news, social media's endorsement features may influence the electorate's political participation, knowledge, efficacy, or discourse.

In addition, recall that the minimal effects literature argues that the media are largely unable to change the minds of news-seekers because such individuals select their information from mostly pro-attitudinal sources, which reinforce their prior attitudes (Stroud, 2011; Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, a surprising 50% of those who selected news from pro-attitudinal sources when social influence was absent (again, in News Feed A) decided to read counter-attitudinal news if their friends had endorsed it in News Feed C. Could, then, social media help liberals and conservatives find common ground? While heterogeneous discussion is associated with increased political sophistication (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), deliberation (Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008), and tolerance (Mutz, 2002), other research on the benefit of exposure to different views is more equivocal. For example, scholars have demonstrated that exposure to conflicting political viewpoints both encourages (MacKuen, 1990; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004) and discourages (Mutz, 2006) political participation, and that it both exacerbates (Levendusky, 2013; Lord et al., 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006) and mitigates (Allport, 1954; Mutz, 2002; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001) political extremism.

Political polarization represents an interesting avenue of research for social media and inadvertent exposure to partisan news. Individuals who only receive pro-attitudinal information have their opinions reinforced (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001), entrenching their attitudes and making compromise more difficult (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Prior, 2007; Slater, 2007). Reading news from counter-attitudinal sources may remedy political extremism, as encountering different perspectives may enlighten audiences, causing them to reevaluate their prior attitudes in light of new information. On the other hand, it is important to remember that individuals are motivated to reach certain conclusions (Kunda, 1990). Because of this, they often evaluate pro-attitudinal information kindly while dismissing information that challenges their priors (Lord et al., 1979; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Motivated reasoning causes counter-attitudinal information to backfire (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), reinforcing political opinions, intensifying partisan attitudes, and widening the ideological gap between liberals and conservatives (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Levendusky, 2013).

Yet, scholars mostly associate motivated reasoning with news-seeking partisans because entertainment-seekers rarely encounter political news in traditional contexts (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Levendusky, 2013; Zaller, 1992). But as this article shows, Facebook's endorsement features compel social media users—the vast majority of which are entertainment-seekers (Mitchell et al., 2013)—to consume more partisan news from both ends of the ideological spectrum. It is worth investigating how partisan media, ignored by many individuals in

traditional contexts, influence the political preferences of social media audiences. Any political news, regardless of the ideological leanings of the source, is likely to polarize motivated partisans, but it is less clear how such information will affect the politically uninterested. Because such individuals' opinions are not as entrenched as those of partisans (Zaller, 1992), are they less inclined to engage in motivated reasoning to defend those positions? Or are entertainment-seekers just as motivated as their partisan counterparts? Social media, through their facilitation of inadvertent exposure to partisan news and social influence, bring political communication to an audience often ignored by political communication scholars. Whether and how those inadvertently exposed to political news differ from partisan news-seekers is an exciting research agenda, and one well worth pursuing.

Notes

1. Original survey data collected in multiple waves from September 2014 through December 2016 ($N = 1,000$) from this study's sample (described later) and from Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform.
2. In order to code sources as pro- or counter-attitudinal, I used the standard 7-point Likert party identification scale, measured in the pre-survey. For those self-identifying as true moderates, I inferred their ideologies based on their partisan identifications and ideological positions on the issues featured in the respective News Feeds.
3. The actual number of likes News Feed C's treated post received was determined by how many of the subject's friends or family members liked the article in the snowball survey.

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