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Examining predictors of online news use: perceived bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news

Woohyun Yoo and Dong-Hee Shin

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to examine, in the context of online news use, the predictive values of two factors: perceived bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This study used data collected as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project between December 28, 2009, and January 19, 2010. The data were analyzed using linear regression analysis.*

Findings – *The findings provide evidence of the values of two potentially significant predictors of online news use: a perception of bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news. In addition, higher levels of political partisanship were shown to intensify the positive effect of perceived bias in traditional media on online news use in new media outlets, reinforcing the impact of preference for partisan news on participatory online news use.*

Research limitations/implications – *Depending on individual decisions, the internet can either help to empower deliberative democracy (where diverse and different voices coexist) or lead to an extremely polarized society.*

Originality/value – *With the explosive growth of the internet as a news source, media scholars have explored the factors that encourage people to rely on the internet for news and information. Nevertheless, certain attributes of online news consumption originating from individual attitudes about and perceptions of the media environment remain underspecified. This research helps advance an understanding of the types of people who seek news online and how they use various sources.*

Keywords News consumption, Online news, Partisan news, Perceived bias

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The number of people using the internet to find and read news online is constantly rising. In 2013, 50 per cent of Americans identified the internet as their primary source of news compared with 69 per cent who identified television (Pew Research Center, 2013). Given the explosive growth of the internet as a news source, some media scholars have explored the factors that encourage people to rely on the internet for news and information. Traditionally, research into media "uses and gratifications" has focused on why people seek and consume media content, including news content. Such studies assume that news consumers are motivated individuals who actively seek media content to fulfill cognitive and affective needs (Katz *et al.*, 1999). Active audiences tend to select offline news sources that best meet their needs for information, entertainment, social interaction, and escapism (Henke, 1985; Lin, 1993; McDonald, 1990; Vincent and Basil, 1997). In the case of online news sources, studies have identified similar patterns of need and gratification. Kaye and Johnson (2002) identified guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment and social utility as four primary motivations for using the internet to seek political information. Lin *et al.* (2005) found that entertainment, interpersonal communication, information skimming and information scanning contributed to audience's adoption of online news. Diddi and LaRose (2006) showed that, among college students, the need for (and the

strength of habits related to) escapism, surveillance, entertainment and news was positively related to the consumption of forms of online news.

Nevertheless, certain attributes of online news consumption originating from individual attitudes about and perceptions of the media environment remain underspecified. Media researchers have argued that, as it grows to meet a wide variety of different needs, the internet could displace traditional media as the main news provider (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2000). In particular, it could displace functionally similar traditional media if people perceive that the internet gratifies more fully their need for news with superior content in a less costly and more convenient way (Dimmick et al., 2000; Kang and Atkin, 1999; Lin, 2001). Supporting this suggestion, Dimmick et al. (2004) found the internet to have a competitive displacement impact on traditional media by satisfying a wider range of audience needs. A research conducted by Gaskins and Jerit (2012) found that people were replacing traditional outlets, especially newspapers, with the internet.

From this perspective, we pose a research question on why many people increasingly turn to the internet for news and information instead of traditional media news sources. One possible explanation is that the perception of bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news could be important inherent orientations, causing dissatisfaction with the news provided by traditional media and encouraging people to rely on the internet for news that fits their perceived needs. In other words, the internet could be the best news source for people who consider traditional media biased and/or prefer partisan news. These characteristics influence not only levels of online news use but also the pattern of online news consumption. However, the predictive values are likely to differ in terms of the strength of political partisanship because political partisans tend to go diverse outlets online for confirming their political predispositions (Brundidge, 2010).

Thus, the purpose of this study attempts to examine:

■ whether perceived bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news predict online news use; and

■ how the predictive relationships differ depending on online news users' political partisanship.

This research will help advance an understanding of the types of people who seek news online and how they use various sources.

2. Literature review

2.1 Perceived bias in traditional media and online news use

In the US media environment, the presence of politically biased news media is taken for granted. Only 26 per cent of Americans believe that news organizations are careful to ensure that their reporting is not politically biased, whereas 60 per cent assume that news organizations are politically biased (Pew Research Center, 2009). Although there is little real evidence of such bias in traditional media (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000), media pundits, politicians and the public believe that most mainstream media frequently distort reality and the truth in accordance with their own perspectives. For this reason, media scholars have conducted research focused on audience's perception of bias in traditional media. Tsfati and Cappella (2003) described such perceived bias as a crucial component of the public's mistrust of and skepticism about traditional media. The public tends to criticize journalists for not being fair and objective and not telling the whole story, as well as for sacrificing accuracy and precision for personal and commercial gains (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). In addition, people believe that mainstream media organizations slant their reports to reflect the beliefs of their own customers to build a reputation for quality (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2008). People who trust traditional media are likely to consume more news from that source, but those who perceive traditional media as biased will seek alternative sources. Hwang et al. (2006) argued that the concept of "traditional media bias" basically derives from each

individual's perception of a discrepancy between his or her own opinion and the traditional media position on an issue. They define this perception as "media dissociation", which may lead to cognitive dissonance. For this reason, people have a tendency to believe that the traditional media are biased; they therefore rely on other information sources to reduce the feeling of dissonance that occurs when a traditional media stance differs from their own.

The logic of this argument may be particularly applicable in the online environment, where audiences can more actively choose their information sources and decide how to process the information received from such sources. In support of this argument, Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found that negative evaluations of mainstream media news were positively related to the use of non-mainstream news media, including political talk radio and campaign information on the web. Hwang et al. (2006) found that the more strongly individuals felt their views differed from those expressed in traditional media reports, the more motivated they were to use the internet and online discussion groups as a source of information. In the same way, skepticism about traditional media influences online news use. Tsfati (2010) found that people with a higher level of skepticism about traditional media were more likely to use the news sites of non-traditional media. Because the perceived bias in traditional media is a key factor by which to evaluate their credibility, and the extent to which the public feels trust or skepticism, we can assume that the perception of bias in traditional media can predict online news use. Given earlier findings and considering the literature in this field, it is reasonable to expect that perceived bias in traditional media may predict online news use. Thus, the present study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1. Perceived bias in traditional media will be positively related to online news use.

H1a. Perceived bias in traditional media will be positively related to online news use in new media outlets.

H1b. Perceived bias in traditional media will be positively related to participatory online news use.

At the same time, researchers studying hostile perceptions of the media suggest that this response is intensified by strong partisanship. In other words, "partisans" (people with strong opinions about or deep involvement with a controversial issue) are prone to systematic bias in their evaluations of news coverage (Vallone et al., 1985). Gunther and Liebhart (2006) explained that the biased perceptions of partisans result from two cognitive mechanisms. According to the selective categorization mechanism, a partisan categorizes "individual passages within a text as less sympathetic to his or her own side and more supportive of the opposing point of view" (Gunther and Liebhart, 2006, p. 451). Similarly, each partisan uses a different standard to judge whether a particular piece of information supports or undermines his or her own issue. Partisans are significantly more likely than other people to consider information perceived as unfavorable to their own position inaccurate. For this reason, partisans may be prone to perceive information as "biased" in a mass media context even when it is neutral or mildly favorable. A growing body of experimental and survey studies have found that opposing groups of partisans can perceive the same news story as biased in favor of the other side (Arpan and Raney, 2003; Christen et al., 2002; Chia et al., 2007; Gunther and Christen, 2002; Hartmann and Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012; Vallone et al., 1985).

Gunther and Schmitt (2004) concluded that this tendency was only prevalent in a mass media context; partisans perceived information as disagreeably biased when it was presented in a news story format but not when it was presented in a student-essay format. Partisans tend to view other audiences as less well-informed and potentially vulnerable to misleading or erroneous information (Gunther and Liebhart, 2006). In particular, they are very concerned about the effect of inaccurate information on public opinion, and thus may perceive traditional media bias as much greater than it is as a means of defending their own position on controversial issues. Accordingly, this study evaluates the moderating role of

partisan intensity (which exaggerates the perceived bias in traditional media) on online news use. For this purpose, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2. The association between perceived bias in traditional media and online news use will be contingent on levels of partisan intensity.

H2a. The association between perceived bias in traditional media and online news use in new media outlets will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

H2b. The association between perceived bias in traditional media and participatory online news use will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

2.2 Preference for partisan news and online news use

According to the notions of selective exposure, individuals prefer to be exposed to information that reinforces their own positions (Sears and Freedman, 1967). People experience positive feelings when presented with information that supports their own views but feel discomfort and unease when confronted with information that challenges their position. For this reason, they are drawn to opinion-reinforcing information (Festinger, 1957). This psychological mechanism leads news consumers to select news outlets or stories that reinforce their own opinions in the contemporary news media environment, where a variety of viewpoints exist (Mutz and Martin, 2001). For instance, a liberal person seeks information from more liberal news sources, and a conservative person seeks information from more conservative news sources. In practice, individuals whose media environment affords more control over their news exposure are likely to use news outlets that offer more opinion reinforcement and are likely to be more familiar with news and information that support their own points of view (Mutz, 2006; Mutz and Martin, 2001).

The explosion of online media outlets may bolster this cognitive tendency because the internet provides an opportunity for people to reinforce their existing beliefs in a way that is different from traditional media (Melican and Dixon, 2008). In the past, there were only a few news outlets and they all presented similar information, but modern audiences can access a variety of news sources on the internet with minimal effort. Given this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, there is no doubt that the partisan preference for news that reinforces previously held views can greatly influence online news use. The internet encourages greater number of people to search for news online by providing "echo chambers" in which the only viewpoints they encounter will be their own (Sunstein, 2001). Those individuals who want opinion-reinforcing information can transfer their allegiance to partisan alternative news media, which are readily available online. In practice, Americans use online information sources to increase their exposure to opinions consistent with their own viewpoints (Garrett, 2009a). The tendency to prefer opinion-reinforcing information increases both the frequency and length of exposure to online news stories (Garrett, 2009b).

However, some arguments stand in contrast to people's selective exposure to online news. According to the biased assimilation theory, individuals focus on information with which they disagree to criticize and find flaws in it (Lord et al., 1979; Munro et al., 2002). In particular, informed and thoughtful individuals may wish to know the counterarguments to be able to refute the opposing position. In practice, people spend more time looking at opinion-challenging news items because of a willingness to engage with other perspectives (Garrett, 2009b).

The internet provides individuals with ample opportunities to encounter a variety of news stories that contradict their own positions. In embracing this freedom of choice, people can use opinion challenging and like-minded online content. In addition, people can readily encounter cross-cutting perspectives and challenging information on the internet because of the blurring of boundaries that cyberspace offers (Kim, 2011). In this sense, the internet

is an attractive news source for people who seek stories that express different or opposing points of view. According to the 2000 General Social Survey, people use sites that are neutral or challenging as often as they use sites that support their own views (DiMaggio and Sato, 2003). Similarly, Horrigan *et al.* (2004) found that internet users do not avoid counter-attitudinal partisan messages online. Garrett (2009a) found that most individuals do not exhibit a systematic bias against opinion-challenging online information. Furthermore, people discussing politics online tend to enjoy hearing diverse views (Stromer-Galley, 2003). In terms of the type of partisan news, there are theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that confirm two opposing relationships between preference for partisan news and online news use. Taken together, the following hypotheses are designed to examine the association between preference for partisan news and online news use:

H3. Preference for partisan news is positively related to online news use.

H3a. Preference for partisan-reinforcing news is positively related to online news use in new media outlets.

H3b. Preference for partisan-reinforcing news is positively related to participatory online news use.

H3c. Preference for partisan-challenging news is positively related to online news use in new media outlets.

H3d. Preference for partisan-challenging news is positively related to participatory online news use.

Beliefs that affect an individual's own interests or self-identity are more likely to influence individual news exposure (Donsbach, 1991). From a cognitive perspective, personally relevant beliefs are more readily activated from memory and are therefore more likely to guide people's media selections. Political partisanship may be one such belief (Green *et al.*, 2002; Lau, 1989). In other words, a tendency toward selective exposure will be more evident in a case of strong partisanship given that this factor generally has a greater impact on information processing and behavior. For example, strong partisans having a political issue are more likely to engage in selective exposure to related news. More specifically, those with strongly held political beliefs tend to approach media outlets that reinforce their beliefs (Stroud, 2007). Similarly, people who feel strongly about the correctness of a particular cause or policy are likely to use the internet to seek out information that is consistent rather than inconsistent with their preferences (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). Given these assumptions, Stroud (2007) found that people with more strongly held political predispositions were more likely to select politically congenial media outlets such as newspapers, political talk radio shows, cable news programs and political websites. Garrett (2009a) also showed that strongly committed political supporters were more likely than less committed supporters to use opinion-reinforcing sites at the expense of opinion-challenging sites. More specifically, Iyengar *et al.* (2008) examined the relationship between the extent of partisanship and selective exposure to information about both major party candidates running in the 2000 presidential election. They found that strong Republicans and Conservatives chose to access information about George W. Bush at the expense of information about Al Gore to a greater extent than Independents or Moderates. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that strong partisans are inclined to prefer partisan news and that they are more likely to access news online.

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that individual confidence and certainty may be negatively related to selective exposure to opinion-reinforcing information (Albarracín and Mitchell, 2004; Cannon, 1964; Festinger, 1964). Confident or opinionated individuals may not feel any dissonance when encountering opinion-challenging information. Rather, they may seek out discordant information because they believe that their own positions are correct and feel sure that they could refute opposing arguments.

People who feel doubtful about the validity of their own views may seek confirmatory information to maintain their positions. Partisan intensity can be one of the many criteria used to measure confidence and certainty about a political party or candidate. For instance, an individual who completely supports one candidate and completely opposes another has a very high level of confidence and certainty about his or her preferred candidate (Stroud, 2010). Albarracín and Mitchell (2004) found that people with higher levels of confidence in their ability to defend their own views were more likely to seek out uncongenial information. Therefore, strong partisans tend to prefer partisan-challenging news and are more likely to access news online.

As discussed above, political partisanship can moderate the relationships between two different types of partisan news (i.e. partisan-reinforcing news and partisan-challenging news) and online news use. Thus, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

H4. The association between preference for partisan news and online news use will be contingent on the level of partisan intensity.

H4a. The association between partisan-reinforcing news and online news use in new media outlets will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

H4b. The association between partisan-reinforcing news and participatory online news use will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

H4c. The association between preference for partisan-challenging news and online news use in new media outlets will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

H4d. The association between preference for partisan-challenging news and participatory online news use will be more pronounced among people with higher levels of political partisanship.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

This study conducted secondary analyses of data collected as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Landline telephone and cell phone interviews were conducted with a national sample of 2,259 adults, 18 years of age or older, between December 28, 2009, and January 19, 2010. Because the analysis presented in this study was limited to respondents who used the internet, 1,675 internet users were selected from the total sample.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Online news use in new media outlets. This category consisted of three sub-variables. New media website use was an additive measure based on respondent reports of getting news or information from a website offering a mix of news and commentary, such as the Drudge Report or Huffington Post, or a news website, such as Digg or NewsTrust, where users rank stories ($M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.75$, inter-item $r = 0.25$). The use of social networking sites was formed as an additive scale based on respondent reports of gaining news from a news organization or an individual journalist followed on a social networking site such as Facebook or from another individual or organization (including personal friends and family members) followed on social networking sites ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.76$, inter-item $r = 0.59$). Similarly, Twitter use was measured as an additive scale based on respondent reports of getting news from Twitter updates from a news organization or individual journalist or from another individual or organization, including personal friends and family members ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.74$, inter-item $r = 0.60$).

3.2.2 Participatory online news use. This measured the degree of participation in the creation of online news. Thus, this study used a single additive scale based on respondent reports of commenting on a news story or blog; contributing an article, opinion, picture or video to an online news site; customizing a homepage; e-mailing a link to a news story; and/or tagging or categorizing online news content (M = 2.51, SD = 1.76, Cronbach's α = 0.69).

3.2.3 Perceived bias in traditional media. This was measured by adding together the scores for two questions (M = 2.69, SD = 0.64, inter-item r = 0.29). Respondents were asked to use a four-point scale (ranging from 1 = completely agree to 4 = completely disagree) to indicate the extent to which they believed major news organizations did a good job in covering all important news stories and subjects that mattered to them and whether they believed that most news sources today were biased in their coverage (reverse coded).

3.2.4 Preference for partisan news. This characteristic was measured through one question. Respondents were asked to indicate which source of news they preferred:

■ getting news from sources that share your point of view;

■ getting news from sources that don't have a particular point of view; and

■ getting news from sources that differ from your point of view.

Based on the responses, we created two dummy variables representing preference for partisan-reinforcing news (0 = no preference for partisan-reinforcing news, and 1 = preference for partisan-reinforcing news) and preference for partisan-challenging news (0 = no preference for partisan-challenging news, and 1 = preference for partisan-challenging news).

3.2.5 Control variables. Demographic variables were included in the analysis as control variables. The age of respondents was an open-ended continuous item (M = 47.35, SD = 16.51). Gender was coded such that "female" was equal to 0 and "male" was equal to 1 (54.9 per cent female and 45.1 per cent male). Education was measured by asking respondents to list the final grade or class completed in school. Respondents had a diverse educational background, with 27.2 per cent having some sort of college degree (not including four-year degrees), 23.6 per cent having a college degree, 23.1 per cent having a high school diploma, 20.2 per cent having attended graduate school, 3.2 per cent not having completed high school, 2.4 per cent having attended a vocational school and 0.3 per cent having no or very less education (either not at all or grades 1-8). Income was based on the previous year's total reported family income. As was the case with levels of education, income had a normal distribution ranging from less than $10,000 to 150,000 or more (*Mdn* = $50,000 to under 75,000).

In addition, this study reported on the frequency of internet use (at home, work and in other places) and partisan intensity. The frequency of internet use at home was measured by one item (M = 5.47, SD = 1.79). Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used the internet or e-mail at home by using a seven-point scale (ranging from 1 = never to 7 = several times a day). The frequency of internet use at work and elsewhere was measured in the same way. (M = 3.71 and SD = 2.79 for work; and M = 2.48 and SD = 2.00 for other places). Partisan intensity was deduced from respondent reports of ideology characteristics. A very conservative or very liberal ideology was coded as 3 (strong partisan intensity), whereas a conservative or liberal ideology was coded as 2 (weak partisan intensity). Finally, moderate ideologies were considered equivalent to no partisan intensity and were coded as 1 (M = 1.76, SD = 0.67).

4. Results

To test our hypotheses, we used several hierarchical regression models to separately predict dependent variables. For each analysis, demographic variables and a set of additional control variables were entered as an initial block. Predictors were entered as a

second block. Finally, interaction terms of partisan intensity and predictors were entered as a third block in each model.

Tables I and II present the results of the regression analyses predicting online news use through new media outlets and participatory online news use. *H1*, which posited a positive relationship between perceived bias in traditional media and online news use, was not supported. *H2*, which predicted the moderating effect of partisan intensity on the relationship between perceived bias in traditional media and online news use, was partially supported. As predicted by *H2a*, we found that there was an interaction effect of partisan intensity and perceived bias in traditional media on new media website use ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). Strong partisans who perceived a higher level of bias in traditional media were most likely to use new media websites for getting news or information as presented in Figure 1.

H3, which posited a positive association between preference for partisan news and online news use, was partially supported. Consistent with *H3a*, the preference for partisan-reinforcing news was positively related to new media website use ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.05$), social networking site use ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$) and Twitter use ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, the preference for partisan-challenging news was also positively associated with social networking site use ($\beta = 0.18$ and $p < 0.001$ for *H3c*) and participatory online news use ($\beta = 0.09$ and $p < 0.01$ for *H3d*).

At last, *H4* posited that partisan intensity would have a moderating effect on the association between preference for partisan news and online news use. As predicted by *H4b*, we did find an interaction effect between partisan intensity and the preference for partisan news on participatory online news use ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$). In particular, strong partisans who preferred partisan-reinforcing news were most likely to participate in creating online news as shown in Figure 2. Therefore, *H4* was partially supported.

Table I Hierarchical regression analyses for predicting online news use in new media outlets[a]

Criterion variable	New media website (N = 1,199)	Social networking site[b] (N = 720)	Twitter[b] (N = 258)
Block 1: control variables			
Age	−0.02	−0.03	−0.002
Gender (male = 1)	0.06	−0.07	−0.03
Race (white = 1)	−0.03	−0.06	*−0.17***
Education	0.05	−0.07	0.04
Income	0.03	*−0.12***	−0.06
Internet use (home)	−0.12***	0.07	*0.22***
Internet use (work)	0.04	*0.08**	0.02
Internet use (other places)	0.03	0.04	0.12
Partisan intensity	*0.11****	0.05	−0.05
Incremental R^2 (%)	*4.5***	*3.7***	*8.6***
Block 2: main effects			
Perceived bias in traditional media	0.04	0.03	−0.11
Preference for partisan news (reinforcing = 1)	*0.07**	*0.11***	*0.18***
Preference for partisan news (challenging = 1)	0.04	*0.18****	0.12
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.05	*3.1****	*4.3****
Block 3: interactive effects			
Partisan intensity × perceived bias in traditional media	*0.06**	0.06	0.10
Partisan intensity × preference for partisan-reinforcing news	0.05	−0.02	0.09
Partisan intensity × preference for partisan-challenging news	−0.05	0.05	−0.003
Incremental R^2 (%)	*0.07**	0.05	1.3
Total R^2 (%)	4.6	5.3	8.9

Notes: [a]Cell entries are before-entry standardized regression coefficient for Block 3 and final standardized regression coefficients for Blocks 1 and 2; [b]regression analysis for social networking site use and Twitter use was limited to social networking site users (N = 828) and Twitter users (N = 263) among internet users (N = 1,675); *$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table II Hierarchical regression analyses for predicting participatory online news use

Criterion variable	Participatory online news use (N = 1,256)
Block 1: control variables	
Age	−0.12***
Gender (male = 1)	−0.02
Race (white = 1)	−0.04
Education	−0.03
Income	0.01
Internet use (home)	0.31***
Internet use (work)	0.12***
Internet use (other places)	0.13***
Partisan intensity	−0.01
Incremental R^2 (%)	17.7***
Block 2: main effects	
Perceived bias in traditional media	0.02
Preference for partisan news (reinforcing = 1)	0.04
Preference for partisan news (challenging = 1)	0.09**
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.08**
Block 3: interactive effects	
Partisan intensity × perceived bias in traditional media	0.05
Partisan intensity × preference for partisan-reinforcing news	0.06*
Partisan intensity × preference for partisan-challenging news	0.01
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.05*
Total R^2 (%)	18.1

Notes: Cell entries are before-entry standardized regression coefficient for Block 3 and final standardized regression coefficients for Blocks 1 and 2; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Figure 1 Interaction between partisan intensity and perceived bias in traditional media on new media website use
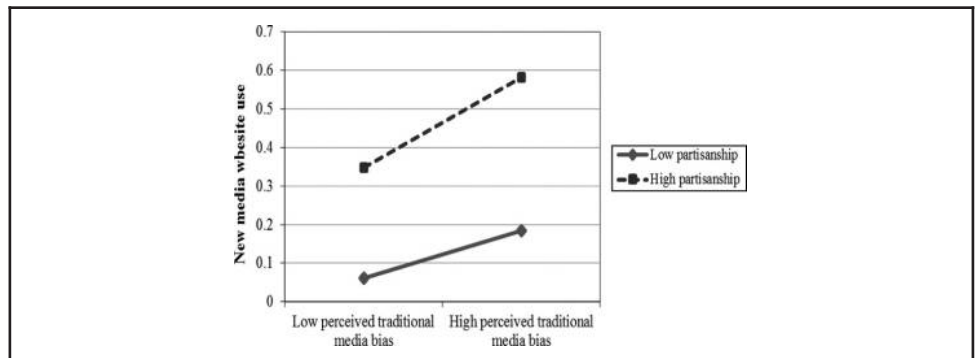
Figure 2 Interaction between partisan intensity and preference for partisan-reinforcing news on participatory online news use
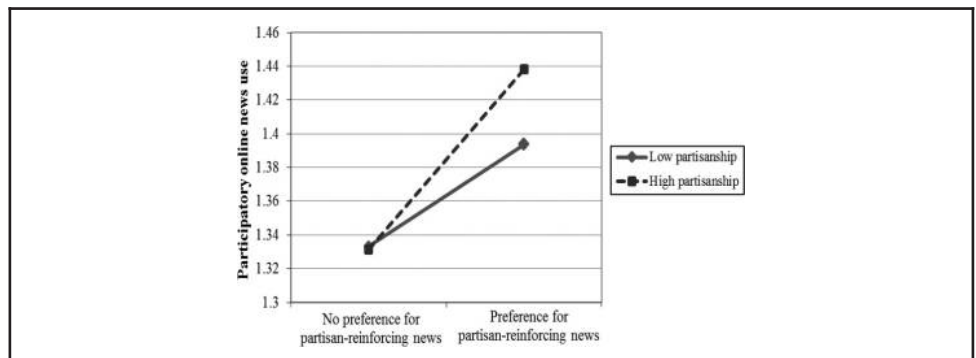
5. Discussion

This article explores how perceived bias in traditional media and preference for partisan news can predict online news consumption. Overall, the findings of this study provide clear evidence that preference for partisan news can be used to predict online news use but not the effect of perceived bias in traditional media on online news use. Specifically, the preference for partisan-reinforcing news has a positive relationship with online news use in new media outlets. In addition, the preference for partisan-challenging news has a positive association with participatory online news use. Most selective exposure studies have argued that individuals tend to seek opinion-reinforcing news and avoid opinion-challenging news (Fischer *et al.*, 2005; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Shin, 2016; Mutz, 2006). The internet strengthens this form of selective exposure to online news and information by allowing people to control the focus of their news consumption in accordance with their own interests. However, this tendency can lead to more polarized and fragmented audiences and may also reduce political tolerance by bypassing or ignoring other opinions (Mutz, 2002; Sunstein, 2001), thereby threatening the development of deliberative democracy.

Our findings support this suggestion to a degree, proving that people who prefer partisan-reinforcing news are more likely to access news or information through new media websites, social networking sites and Twitter. However, partisans are not the only people who use the internet as a source of news to support their point of view. Those who prefer partisan-challenging news are also more likely to obtain news through social networking sites. Social networking sites contribute to expanding the users' exposure to a variety of beliefs and perspectives, including contrasting viewpoints (Kim, 2011). The advantage might be one of significant motives that lead them to seek news through social networking sites.

More interestingly, they tend to participate in creating online news content by commenting on a news story; submitting their own opinions, pictures or videos to online news sites; e-mailing a link to a news story; and tagging or categorizing online news content. The internet is therefore a good news source for both people who prefer partisan-challenging news and people who prefer partisan-reinforcing news. These results offset concerns that the internet could render the public more polarized and fragmented in its political predispositions. Although not all people choose news or information based on their own preferences, the evidence strongly suggests that people access not only partisan-reinforcing but also partisan-challenging news online. Previous research found that people were exposed to opinion-reinforcing online news (Garrett, 2009a, 2009b) but not that people went beyond non-avoidance to actively seek opinion-challenging news online. Our findings therefore imply that the great diversity of online news sources has the potential to ultimately increase political tolerance and play an important role in democratic systems.

Other results of the present study identify additional unresolved problems. As expected, the level of political partisanship intensifies the effect of a perception of bias in traditional media on new media website use. Among people who believe that the traditional media are biased, strong partisans are more likely to use new media websites to gain new information. Appearing to believe that most traditional media organizations are negatively biased in relation to their own positions, partisans look to new media websites to provide an alternative to traditional news providers. We need to ask whether new media websites really offer a more unbiased, balanced, accurate and trustworthy perspective on social issues than traditional media. Some people believe that web-based information is less reliable than that offered by traditional news organization websites because special interest groups and personal social networking sites that distribute it have political and public relation agendas that might be considered somewhat biased (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007).

At the same time, the strongest partisans (among those who prefer partisan-reinforcing news) are most likely to participate in producing online news content. They probably create their own news content to support their political identification. This tendency may reinforce concerns that selective exposure to participatory online news could produce more polarized partisans by increasing deeper convictions and strengthening passionate partisanship. Such partisans may also be less likely to recognize counter-attitudinal news or information, thereby hindering the development of group deliberation processes.

The present study has some limitations. First, there is the general problem of secondary data analyses and the use of measures based on the adaption of available items. In particular, most of the measures used consist of only two items, so the degree to which our measures fully capture the concepts is limited. Second, this study is based on cross-sectional sample data; thus, the relationships between predictors and online news use may not imply causality or may be susceptible to reverse causality. Third, this study does not consider online news credibility as a significant predictor of online news use. Several studies have acknowledged a conceptual and empirical link between online news credibility and selective exposure to online news (Johnson and Kaye, 2013, 2014; Melican and Dixon, 2008).

6. Conclusions

This study reveals important implications for media scholars in the field of new media technology and public opinion. The academic debate over the role of the internet in the realm of public sphere has been prevalent for years. One view suggests that much online news use facilitates information sharing among like-minded people, resulting in a fragmented public sphere. In contrast, the other perspective argues that online news consumers readily seek out a variety of views and deliberate with individuals who have different opinions, thus expanding the public sphere. In other words, the focus of the debate exists around the question of whether the internet contributes to or ruins pluralistic democracy. The findings of this research provide evidence to either support or reject both sides of the debate. People use online news sources selectively in terms of their different purposes. For example, they use several kinds of sources, such as new media outlets, social networking sites and Twitter, to gain opinion-reinforcing information. However, they utilize only social networking sites for getting opinion-challenging viewpoints. In addition to obtaining the opposing opinions through social networking sites, they actively participate in creating and disseminating news content through social networking sites.

In conclusion, the development of the internet enables the public to approach news from various perspectives, but the choice is always the responsibility of the individual. Depending on such individual decisions, the internet can help to empower deliberative democracy, where diverse and different voices coexist, or lead to an extremely polarized society.

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