



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:
The 16th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

WHERE LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES MEET: A NETWORK ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL NEWS SITE AUDIENCES

Jacob L. Nelson
Northwestern University

James G. Webster
Northwestern University

Political polarization is increasing in this country, and its effects are many and far reaching. Many assume that a primary cause of political polarization is the increasing availability of ideologically tinged political news (Sunstein 2001; Shanto, 2009). Some scholars believe that selective exposure leads people to choose media outlets sharing their political predispositions, and this leads citizens to become less willing to consider alternative points of view (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2005; Garrett, 2009). Recently, a report from Pew Research Center found that the increasing availability of ideological news outlets has resulted in extreme levels of political polarization. Conservatives get their news from Fox, while liberals get their news from sources like MSNBC, NPR, and the *New York Times* (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Eva Matsa, 2014). This conclusion, however, is not the whole story. Many other scholars who have examined political polarization in news consumption have found that news audiences predominantly consume centrist or moderate news and for the most part ignored ideological news sources altogether (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; LaCour, 2012; Prior, 2013). Yet the myth of ideologically driven news consumption doggedly persists.

This paper will, we hope, finally dispel that myth by providing an examination of audience duplication among the fifty most popular political news sites in the month leading up to the November 2014 election. Using network analysis and web data provided by comScore, we argue that political news sites share more audiences than many realize, and that this holds true regardless of the political ideologies of either the audience or the outlet. We argue that a site's popularity, rather than its ideology, is what drives political news consumption.

Method

Network analysis can be used to assess the links among a set of entities (Monge & Contractor, 2003). In network analytic terms, these entities are referred to as "nodes" and the relationships between them are called "ties." "Degree" is a standard network

Nelson, J. & Webster, J. (2015, October 21-24). *Where Liberals and Conservatives Meet: A Network Analysis of Political News Site Audiences*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

metric that refers to the number of links a node exhibits. Scholars are increasingly applying network analysis to media systems to understand the relationship between media outlets and audiences (Taneja, 2014; Ksiazek et al, 2010).

The network is defined here as a set of political news websites (the nodes) and the audience duplication that occurs between them (the ties). As Ksiazek (2010) points out, large media outlets tend to have audience duplication in all other outlets, making it important to adjust for the size of media outlets. This is done by using absolute random duplication as a threshold for determining the existence of a tie. If the observed level of audience duplication exceeds the expected level of duplication, that is evidence that a tie exists. Assuming a tie exists, its strength is defined as the sum of observed – expected duplication.

The data for this analysis comes from comScore, a web analytic company that uses panel-based audience measurements to release monthly web audience data. comScore has two million consumers worldwide in 170 countries under continuous measurement. Data are collected from U.S. panelist's computers, which includes about one million people ages 18 and older. We examined the twenty most visited political news websites in October 2014. As Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter observed (2013), news audiences exercise more interest in political news as Election Day nears, so this month was chosen because it was a month leading up to political elections throughout the country.

Discussion

The results of the network analysis indicate that political polarization is not happening to the extent that some would have you believe. Contrary to Pew's report on political polarization, liberals and conservatives tend to inhabit the same worlds. Nearly all of the political news sites in the network have ten or more ties, indicating that their audiences go to many sites for news rather than just one that corresponds with their political ideology. The fact that the strongest ties are among the most popular political news sites – Huffington Post Politics, CNN Politics, and Fox News Politics – indicates that a site's popularity appears to be more of a draw than any other characteristic. And the fact that the tie between the liberal Huffington Post Politics and Fox News Politics is as strong as it is suggests that liberals and conservatives are actively pursuing news that comes from sources with ideologies that don't correspond with their own.

The results also indicate that the demographic profiles of these sites are not nearly as ideologically homogenous as one might expect. Fox News Politics, for example, is known nationwide for its conservative slant the same way that MSNBC is known for its liberal slant, yet neither site is overwhelmingly composed of audiences with one ideological preference over another. MSNBC TV surprisingly attracts more conservatives than it does liberals, and at least about ten percent of each ideological demographic comprises the top twenty the sites included in the network.

These findings indicate it might be time to look for other causes of political polarization. Perhaps rather than looking at the media choices that audiences make, it is time to start more closely analyzing the content of the media that many audiences are consuming.

There is no question that the political system within the United States is increasingly partisan. This study demonstrates that this polarization is not occurring at the level of political news media choice.

References

Boczkowski, P., & Mitchelstein, E. (2013). *The News Gap*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Garrett, R. K. 2009. Politically Motivated Reinforcement Seeking: Reframing the Selective Exposure Debate. *Journal of Communication*, 59, 676-699.

Gentzkow, M. & Shapiro, J. M. 2011. Ideological Segregation Online and Offline. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126, 1799-1839.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Kyusup Hahn. "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use." *Journal of Communication* 59, no. 1 (2009): 19-39.

Ksiazek, T. B., Malthouse, E. C., & Webster, J. G. (2010). News-seekers and Avoiders: Exploring Patterns of Total News Consumption Across Media and the Relationship to Civic Participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 54 (4), 551–568.

Lacour, M. J. 2012. A balanced news diet, not selective exposure: Evidence from a real world measure of media exposure. *Midwest Political Science Association*. Chicago.

Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Kiley, J., & Eva Matsa, K. (2014, October 21). *Political Polarization & Media Habits*. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from Pew Research Journalism Project: <http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarizationmedia-habits/>

Monge, P., & Contractor, N. (2003). *Theories of Communication Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mullainathan, S. and A. Shleifer. 2005. "The Market for News." *American Economic Review* pp. 1031– 1053.

Prior, M. 2007. *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in*

political involvement and polarizes elections, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Sunstein, Cass R. *Republic.Com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Taneja, H. (2014). *Media Consumption on the World Wide Web: Integrating Theories of Media Choice and Global Media Flows to Explain Global Cultural Consumption. Dissertation*. Northwestern University.