Public Perceptions of Partisan Selective Exposure

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ABSTRACT

Where do citizens believe others turn to for news? This dissertation introduces the idea of *perceived partisan selective exposure*: the perception that others curate media diets featuring primarily like-minded political content. Two studies examine citizens' estimates of others' news habits and provide insight into why individuals might assume others are drawn to ideologically consonant information. In Study 1, a national survey of voters (N= 657) before the 2016 presidential election gauged (a) how opposing partisans judged the political slant of various news sources and (b) how much election news partisans believe their opponents received from those sources. Results demonstrate that voters sense that their political opponents gravitated toward like-minded sources for election news. Respondents reported that the news the "other side" consumed failed to open them up to new ideas, made them more extreme, and reinforced their prior beliefs. In Study 2, a national survey of voters (N=815) reveals that while both Democrats and Republicans describe their own news diets as balanced between attitude-confirming and attitude-challenging news, they also believe that others, especially their political rivals, consume primarily like-minded content.

These findings are then integrated into a broader model of perceived news media effects. People believe media have powerful effects on others. The present studies reveal that citizens believe their political opponents are voluntarily exposing themselves to the very media that is most likely to cause undesirable effects.

To my teachers

Especially my father

who taught me that knowledge is useful

but curiosity is invaluable

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Introduction

In October 2016, my friends and family–like friends and family across the country–were arguing about politics. The U.S. presidential election between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump exposed fault lines in the American public on nearly every issue. On this particular day, my own social circle was arguing about a big one– immigration policy–when one friend boldly declared herself a self-made expert on the topic. Unlike everybody else, she said, she does not get information just from the news that tells her what she wants to hear–rather, she sets her sights across the aisle, consuming news from sources that challenge her views. Intrigued, I asked how she was sure that other people did not have similar news habits. She did not miss a beat before informing me that "everybody knows" that Republicans get their news mostly from Fox News and Democrats get theirs from MSNBC.

Media scholars spend a great deal of time understanding and measuring people's news choices, but to my friend, these choices were abundantly clear: People choose news that fits their views. Scholars call this method of news consumption *partisan selective exposure*: the notion that people select news that reflects their political preferences. What my friend illustrated is that the public may have its own concept of partisan selective exposure; indeed, it is easy to imagine a political liberal accusing a conservative of limiting their media diet to a steady stream of Fox News, or a conservative accusing a liberal of getting information from "the liberal media." Individuals often have theories about the world around them that mirror the ideas that scientists subject to empirical testing (Furnham, 1998; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). In this case, perceivers like my friend

generate a theory about other's media exposure. Without directly observing others' news habits, how are such assessments possible?

This dissertation investigates citizens' perceptions of where others turn to for news, i.e., *perceived exposure*. In two empirical studies, I demonstrate how the assumptions that perceivers make about media and the assumptions they make about other people ultimately produce a perception of *perceived partisan selective exposure*. I test the extent to which citizens believe that they and others engage in selective media habits and examine the cognitive shortcuts that perceivers use to make such assessments. Ultimately, this investigation concludes that citizens believe others, especially their political rivals, gravitate toward like-minded news.

Though this is the first examination of public perceptions of selective exposure, it is not the first study to try and gauge perceptions of others' media use. Capturing beliefs about others' media exposure originated with research into perceived media effects, an avenue of research concerned with the ways in which people believe media impact *other* people. It is easy to see how *perceived exposure* is a core tenet of perceived media effects research: In order to believe others have been affected by a media message, a perceiver must first assume the others-in-question have been exposed to that message. Understanding why citizens believe certain others interact with certain media messages thus requires revisiting the basic principles of perceived media effect research–research that explores how individuals make assumptions other people, about media, and about what happens when other people encounter that media.

Public Perceptions of Media Messages and Media Audiences

The media. A creature with questionable, even nefarious motives. A creature whose tentacles reach across the globe. A creature capable of wielding its power over every sect of society. At least, that is how people often see mass media.

Media researchers have long been interested in the effects of mediated messages. These researchers once asked, "Are audience members vulnerable sponges, passively soaking up the information around them?" The answer emerging from decades of media effects research has been a resounding, "No." As it turns out, audience members are active participants in media consumption. They seek media that satisfies their unique desires and interpret that media from their individual perspectives. But while researchers have moved past the old hypodermic needle model of media effects, there is growing evidence that the public has not. Aware that the messages they see are not just meant for their-eyes-only, media consumers grow concerned about how the messages they encounter will affect everybody else.

The "mass" of mass media can be unsettling when coupled with the belief that audiences are defenseless to media's mighty impact. Citizens believe media messages encourage others to smoke (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Liebhart, & Dillard, 2006), to be more sexually promiscuous (Chia, 2006), or materialistic (Ranxi & Chia, 2009). They believe media can influence others' perceptions of political minorities (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005), public opinion about contentious issues (Lee & Yang, 2010), and even others' voting behavior (Cohen & Tsfati, 2009). Though media do certainly affect certain people in certain contexts, members of the public generally overestimate media's effect on others.

Research into public perceptions of media effects began in earnest with sociologist Phillips Davison's 1983 essay about a fateful experience getting his mail. Inside his mailbox, he discovered a leaflet for a political candidate he did not support and –thinking the leaflet would no doubt sway his neighbors–he distributed leaflets for his own candidate. Davison's story introduced a simple, but critical idea: People believe media are powerful. They believe media have sweeping effects–not on themselves–but on other people. Davison did not change his political preference when he read that pamphlet, but he sure was worried his neighbors would.

Davison's mailbox story features three critical principles that form the foundation of investigations into public perceptions of media effects. First, an impression was formed about a media message. In Davison's case, the assumption was that the message had the power to influence its readers–an assumption that is pervasive among the public (Gunther, 1998). Audience perceptions of a media message's potential for persuasion runs alongside several avenues of communication research that focus on public *impressions of media*, including research that explores how citizens perceive the credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000), bias (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), and prominence (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004) of media messages.

Second, Davison had an impression of the message's audience–his neighbors–which led him to assume that they would be vulnerable to the leaflet's influence. Relying heavily on work from social psychology that explains how individuals form impressions of others (Hamilton & Sherman, 1996) and make assumptions about others' behavior (Nisbett & Ross, 1980) communication scholars have explored public *impressions of the*

media audience. These scholars focus on why citizens believe others are so vulnerable to media influence.

But there is a final, critical principle featured in Davison's story, and it is this overlooked element that is the focus of the present work: Davison assumed his neighbors were going to be exposed to the message. His assumption was likely correct, but what if he had peeked into the neighboring mailboxes to find the leaflets were never delivered? Imagine his relief at discovering that the problematic message had an audience of only one! The perception that others have been exposed to a media message is a precondition to perceptions of media effects. What people believe about a media message (e.g., that a message is powerful, persuasive) or a potential media audience (e.g., that it is vulnerable) ceases to matter if a perceiver does not believe others have encountered that media message in the first place. While research has clearly demonstrated that people believe media have powerful effects on others, these perceived effects are conditioned upon a belief that others have first been exposed to a given media message or set of messages. This principle of *perceived exposure* has received little attention in the realm of literature mapping audience perceptions of media effects, but precisely because the public believes media have effects, it is crucial to understand the sorts of media messages people believe others encounter.

From incidental to intentional exposure. Davison's experience focused on perceived incidental media exposure (i.e., he believed his neighbors would be unwittingly exposed to the pamphlet). Deviating from Davison's experience, the present study affords the neighbors a bit more agency by considering that most of the media messages that audiences encounter are messages they *willingly* encounter.

Imagine Davison's concern if–rather than thinking his peers were inadvertently exposed to the undesirable political pamphlet– he thought his neighbors were in fact seeking out that message. The degree of concern would surely escalate at the sight of his neighbors lined up at a rival candidate's information booth. The idea that others were not only exposed to the message, but that they were actively seeking out the material, would have been a cue to Davison that his neighbors were not just vulnerable to (what Davison considered to be) a problematic media message– they might even be receptive to it.

If Davison thought his neighbors would experience undesirable consequences (i.e., persuaded to vote for an non preferred candidate) after incidental exposure, it seems reasonable to assume he would have thought those consequences even more likely if he believed his peers were actively selecting such messages. In other words, the importance of understanding public perceptions of others' media exposure lies in what it reveals about perceived media effects: If the public believes media are powerful and people are vulnerable to media influence, it follows that the public would believe people will experience the *greatest* effects from messages they actively seek out.

The aim of the present research is to more closely examine the notion of perceived media exposure–specifically, perceived exposure to news media. Using two sets of original survey data, I investigate what political partisans believe others watch and read. I introduce the concept of *perceived partisan selective exposure*, arguing that individuals have taken note of the myriad options for news in today's media environment and that they believe others–especially their political rivals–gravitate toward like-minded political messages. I first present evidence that political partisans believe others expose themselves primarily to attitude-consonant political news, a finding that illustrates that (a)

citizens are able to pair media messes and media audiences based on perceived political preference and (b) citizens believe others actively seek out such messages. A second study shows that citizens believe their political rivals seek out like-minded media more often than they do personally, suggesting partisan selective exposure is driven, at least in part, by negative stereotypes about political out-groups.

Why perceived exposure matters. It is important to understand the sorts of media that citizens believe others are exposed to. Davison's story illustrates why: The perception that his neighbors would be exposed to a media message that could influence their vote spurred him to action. When Davison handed out leaflets for his own candidate, he was responding to the perception that the media message affected his neighbors, even if that effect never actually happened.

People respond to the world–not as it truly is–but as they see it. If the public senses that those around them have been shaped and swayed by media messages, they may respond to that perceived influence, even if those media effects never happened. In other words, if people assume media have influenced others, they may respond to that presumed influence (Gunther & Story, 2003). One of media's more powerful effects, then, is not necessarily what it actually does but what it is perceived to do. The present studies make an important contribution to this line of research in the context of perceptions of political news media. By testing the hypothesis that the public believes others gravitate toward like-minded political news messages, I show that the public seems to believe others are exposing themselves to the very media messages that are most likely to bring about undesirable effects. Ultimately, I present an updated model of

perceived media effects (a simplified version of which can be seen in Figure 1) that accounts for the notion of perceived selective exposure.

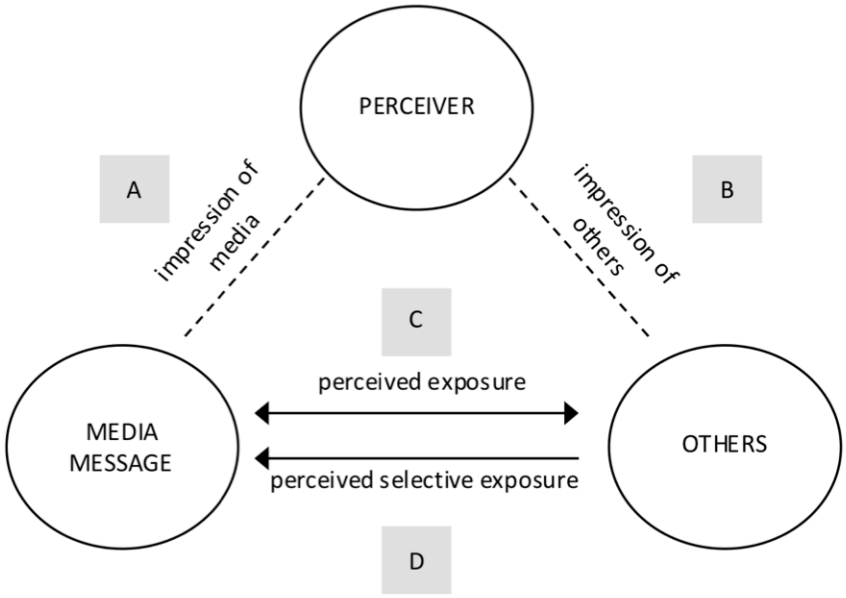


Figure 1. Model of perceived media exposure.

Organization of the present work. In order to understand why citizens believe certain people seek out certain types of media messages, I begin by reviewing research concerning public perceptions of mass media and the mass media audience. First, I review research exploring citizens' impressions of media messages (Figure 1, Component A). I focus on research that shows that citizens recognize that mass media messages reach a vast audience, that they tend to assume those mass messages are imbued with the ability to influence their audiences, and that they evaluate mass media messages differently than how they evaluate information that is not mass distributed. In particular, I focus on how perceptions of media messages depend on the unique predispositions of perceivers.

I next review research examining citizens' impressions of other people (Figure 1, Component B). This section focuses on how perceivers sort others into meaningful

groups, how perceptions of the self differ from perceptions of others, and how perceivers evaluate groups they belong to differently than they evaluate groups they are not a part of. Because the purpose of the present research is to understand how political partisans perceive others' news use, this section reviews research on perceptions of political in-groups (those who share one's political preference) and political out-groups (those with an opposing political preference).

I then explain how individuals use these perceptions of media messages and perceptions of others to match messages to their most likely audiences (Figure 1, Component C). After reviewing prior research exploring perceptions of others' media exposure, I argue that citizens are not just able to match messages with likely audiences, but that because of negative out-group stereotyping, they also believe others intentionally seek out particular types of messages (Figure 1, Component D). Specifically, I argue that audiences have a lay theory about partisan selective exposure, which is the idea that political partisans seek out primarily like-minded media.

Study 1 tests the perceived partisan selective exposure hypothesis. Several weeks before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a sample of political partisans were asked to evaluate the slant of 13 news sources and then estimate their own and others' exposure to those sources. The results demonstrate that news consumers believe their political opponents' election news diets were skewed toward like-minded content. Indeed, respondents believed their political opponents' diets were rich in attitude-consonant news, while respondents saw their own news diets as relatively balanced, suggesting partisans may view excessive like-minded news consumption as unsavory.

A second study, fielded several weeks after the 2016 election, provides a clearer understanding of how partisans regard selective media behaviors. Results show that citizens describe their own media habits as equally balanced between like-minded and attitude-challenging news, but believe their political rivals' news diets are loaded with attitude-confirming news and lacking in attitude-challenging news. Partisans admit to consuming a moderate amount of like-minded media, but they believe their political opponents consume much more. These results suggests that perceptions of partisan selective exposure emerge, at least in part, from out-group stereotyping.

As the upcoming chapter will illustrate, people tend to believe media are powerful and that others–especially out-group others–are vulnerable to media influence. The results of these two original studies suggest the situation is such that citizens believe their political opponents are voluntarily exposing themselves to the very media that is most likely to cause undesirable effects. The concluding chapter discusses the potential consequences of a public that believes others engage with primarily like-minded media, and I discuss how perceived partisan selective exposure fits into a broader model of public beliefs about media and media effects.

Perceptions of Media Messages

What sorts of news messages do citizens believe their peers are listening to, watching, and reading? As this section will address, the answer depends on how perceivers view particular media messages. Citizens have peculiar ways of assessing mass media messages. This section will review evidence that perceivers evaluate mass media in a manner that is distinct from how they evaluate non-mediated information, and

that different perceivers will often come to conflicting conclusions about the attributes of media messages. In general, perceivers tend to see media messages as wide-reaching, relatively hostile to their own preferences, and as capable of impacting others.

Perceptions of Media Reach

The "mass" of mass media does not refer to the volume of media messages or the breadth of message distributors; rather, it refers to a form of communication capable of, and intended to, reach a "mass" audience. Advertisers, filmmakers, producers, authors, and journalists are all message-creators who intend to craft content that will reach as many people as possible. This fact–that mass messages are meant for consumption by a massive audience– is not lost on the audience itself. Members of the media-consuming public form impressions of the size of a message's audience, a concept called *perceived reach* (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004).

Message features offer clues about the size of an audience. For example, perceivers should easily recognize that a video with a CNN logo reaches more people than a video with a local station's logo. In experimental research, scholars often manipulate such features to alter the perceived reach of a media message. Researchers have manipulated perceived reach by labeling content as a student essay or a newspaper article (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004), altering a newspaper's circulation level (i.e., low, medium, or high; Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009), and changing the number of views for a message shared via social media (Lim & Golan, 2011). Alternatively, some researchers measure, rather than manipulate, perceived exposure. Such measurement items ask respondents to estimate the number of general others (Gunther & Liebhart,

2006) or members of a particular group (Gunther & Storey, 2003) who would encounter a message.

What research involving perceived reach reveals is that citizens understand that certain messages, such as news stories, are intended to reach a wide audience. And while any two individuals would likely differ in their estimates of the *The New York Times'* circulation size, they would at least agree that its messages have a larger audience than say, a college student's final exam essay. Just as Davison once recognized that the political pamphlet in his mailbox was not distributed only to him, citizens recognize that mass media messages reach a wide audience.

Perceptions of Media Power and Influence

Armed with the impression that media reaches others, people often draw the conclusion that others have been affected by media. This is partly due to the assumptions that perceivers make about other people (e.g., that others are vulnerable), but it also speaks to something people inherently believe about media messages: that they have the power to influence.

Scholars once thought media were all-powerful. Communication models in the 1930s imagined media messages packed in unstoppable syringes– and the audience helpless once injected. Scholars now know that media effects are more nuanced, and most meta-analyses of media effects reveal small to medium effect sizes. Media do have effects, but mass media messages are not the "magic bullets" they were once imagined to be.

Though media scholars have updated their theories about media's effects, evidence suggests that the public has not followed suit. People believe that once mass

media messages reach others, those messages yield effects. Citizens believe media affect others' behaviors–such as their willingness to gamble (Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), smoke (Gunther et al., 2006), and purchase certain brands of alcohol (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999) or prescription drugs (Huh & Langteau, 2007). They believe media affect others' attitudes, including attitudes about body image (Chia & Wen, 2010) premarital sex (Chia & Lee, 2008), and mental illness (Hoffner, Fujioka, Cohen, & Atwell Seate, 2015). They believe others' political opinions are affected by everything from campaign ads (Wei & Lo, 2007) to polls reported in the news (Price & Stroud, 2005; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011). They think others are affected by messages delivered through video games (Zhong, 2009), television (Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1999), and music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). When these perceived effects are compared to real effects, scholars find that people generally overestimate the impact of media on others (Andsager & White, 2007).

Of particular interest to the present study, citizens tend to believe news media have powerful effects on others, a process detailed by the *persuasive press inference* (PPI; Gunther, 1998). The PPI describes a process in which audiences determine the slant of news messages, assume that others have been exposed to the same– at least or to similar–messages, and then calculate the state of public opinion based on the assumption that others have been exposed to and swayed by the skewed content. In other words, "people can easily form an idea of what others are thinking by inferring it from the information they think others are getting" (p. 489 Gunther, 1998). The PPI demonstrates that people not only assume others have been exposed to news messages, they also believe such exposure alters others' attitudes and opinions.

Few studies have explored the origins of this belief that media are powerful and influential. Research concerning perceptions of media reach shows that citizens recognize the ubiquitous nature of mass media, but a belief in *pervasive* media does not necessarily translate into a belief in *powerful* media. Several scholars have suggested that audiences have a sort of (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 2000), lay theory (Perloff, 1993), or media schema (Meirick, 2006) about the powerful media. Such explanations are based on research suggesting people are "common sense" psychologists or "naive scientists" (Heider, 1958), forming hypotheses about the world around them. Though people do not consider all media messages as equally capable of wielding influence (see Dillard, Shen, & Vail, 2007), there is substantial evidence that, in general, citizens believe that mass media messages are influential.

Perceiving Mass Media

Citizens see media as capable of reaching and influencing others, a perception that ultimately impacts the way perceivers evaluate mass mediated messages. There is overwhelming evidence that mass mediated messages are evaluated differently than messages that reach only a handful of others. Indeed, identical text, presented in a mass media format (such as a newspaper story) and in a non mass media format (such as a student essay), will receive unequal evaluations. Rather than evaluate mediated content as they do any other content, citizens appear to have a unique process for assessing mass media. Research on the *hostile media perception* has focused on the particular way in which audiences evaluate mass media.

Hostile media perception (HMP) research concentrates on understanding media–specifically, news media–from the perspective of the audience. It has focused primarily

on how audiences evaluate a particular facet of news: the slant, or bias, of the content toward one position or another. Rather than use content analyses to determine whether news content is actually biased in some fashion, HMP research is concerned with what audiences believe about news coverage, regardless of the extent to which such perceptions are accurate.

To examine HMP, scholars typically recruit individuals who have a clear position on an issue (often referred to as "partisans"), then ask those individuals to evaluate the slant or bias of a single news story (Gunther et al., 2009; Perloff, 1989) or news coverage in a general sense (Choi, Yang & Chang, 2009; Feldman, Hart, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf, 2015; Post, 2015). Across topics such as divisive social issues (Kim, 2015), religious conflicts (Ariyanto, Hornsey, & Gallois, 2009), scientific debates (Kim, 2011), and–particularly relevant to the present study–political campaigns (Beck, 1991; Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998; Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Huge & Glynn, 2010), a consistent pattern has emerged: Audience tend to judge news coverage as unfavorable relative to their preferences. Because a prerequisite for sensing bias against one's position is that one have a position, researchers typically focus on strong partisans, though HMP has been observed even when perceivers have low involvement toward a topic of news coverage (Hansen & Kim, 2011).

HMP research has traditionally focused on how audiences judge the valence, or slant, of a single news message or news messages in a general sense. Individuals often see the valence of news content as so harshly against their position that they ultimately see the content as favoring the opposing side, such as when Democrats and Republicans both assume media content favors the opposing party (Huge & Glynn, 2010). This is

sometimes termed an absolute HMP, as individuals judge media to be so slanted as to favor the opposing side.

Perceived differences in the slant of news content are not always so sensational, however. Opposing groups may agree on the slant of content, but disagree on the extent, or magnitude of that slant. When groups agree on the general tilt of news, but disagree on the severity of the slant, a relative HMP has occurred (Gunther & Chia, 2001). For example, when partisans evaluate content that truly does favor one side, those favored by the slant may acknowledge that the content is friendly to their position. However, the favored group sees the content as only slightly favoring their side, while those not favored by the slant see the content as extremely friendly to the favored group (Kim, 2015).

Describing HMP as absolute or relative is merely a way of conveying the severity, or degree, of perceived hostile bias. One contribution of the present study is that it illustrates how, across its relative and absolute forms, the heart of the HMP a tendency for individuals to see news media as disagreeably divergent from their own preference. This tendency creates a situation where those with different views see news content differently from one another. Because the present studies situate audience perceptions of news media attention within the HMP framework, it is pertinent to assess what HMP is and how it is measured.

Contrast bias. People generally interpret information as supportive of their views (Lord, Ross & Lepper, 1979); however, when evaluating news messages, the opposite occurs. News consumers tend to employ a contrast bias when judging media content, such that they see information as conflicting with, or relatively unfavorable toward, their

own positions (Vallone et al., 1985). This contrast bias seems to emerge from a defensive processing strategy that is triggered when people evaluate messages that are able to reach, and possibly influence, other people (Gunther et al., 2009).

Researchers have primarily used three measurement strategies to gauge the contrast bias. First, respondents are sometimes asked directly to indicate the extent to which media deviate from their personal views (Feldman et al., 2015). More often, researchers compute the difference between a perceiver's position and his or her evaluation of media's position. When a personal position can be expressed along a continuum (e.g. political ideology), the contrast bias can be calculated by subtracting the perceived position of media on a given issue from the stated position of a respondent (Rojas, 2010).

When personal position is categorical, such as when respondents either support or oppose a policy, the comparison between personal position and perceived media position is gauged by looking at whether a group evaluates a message as slanting away from its own preference and into unfavorable territory. For example, a contrast bias is evident when those against vaccinations judge media content as departing from neutrality and slanting into unfavorable territory (Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012), or when those who support a particular political candidate see news as slanting against that candidate (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011). Finally, the relationship between personal position and perceived media position has been explored through association (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) For example, Dalton and colleagues (1998) found a negative association between partisanship and perceived ideological slant of news media during an election: The more conservative or liberal

news consumers considered themselves, the more they saw news content as slanting toward the opposing ideology.

Across these techniques, researchers measure HMP by comparing a perceiver's position to a perceiver's evaluation of media. HMP is evident when the researcher interprets the perceived position of media as being undesirably divergent from the perceiver's preference.

Group differences in media evaluations. When those with opposing views each see media as relatively unfavorable to their position, a situation arises where audiences with different views come away with different impressions of the same or similar news content. Researchers often look for evidence of HMP by comparing how groups of opposing partisans evaluate the slant of a news article or news media more generally (e.g. Perloff, 1989; Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther, 2002). HMP is evident when a group rates media content as more unfavorable to its position, compared to how a group holding a neutral or opposing position evaluates the same or similar media content. In this measurement strategy, HMP is assessed by comparing partisans' evaluations of media to evaluations rendered by another group. This is a departure from the first HMP measurement tactic, which gauged the contrast bias by comparing how partisans' perceptions of media deviate from their own preferences.

Ultimately, HMP describes a tendency that emerges when partisans evaluate news content: News consumers tend to view media as hostile relative to their own preferences. As partisans with opposing views both evaluate media in this way, each group ultimately views news as more unfavorable to its position, relative to how others see that same media. HMP can be gauged by comparing audience evaluations of media to a) their own

preferences, or b) media evaluations rendered by those with a different viewpoint. Both methods capture what HMP fundamentally reveals about how news consumers evaluate media content: They view media through lenses tinted with their own predispositions.

Failure to Gauge Audience Perceptions of Media Message Attributes

Particularly within the realm of studies aiming to understand public perceptions of media's effects, researchers typically measure how respondents believe a message will affect others but they do not measure what respondents think about the message itself. The prior review of HMP research demonstrates why failing to measure audience perceptions of messages could be problematic: Audience impressions of mass media may not necessarily line up with researchers' expectations. Indeed, different segments of the audience may come away with varying impressions of media depending on their pre-existing attitudes about the message topic. Outside of HMP research, scholarship has largely failed to account for the particular ways in which audience members evaluate media content. This oversight introduces two potential problems when studying perceived media exposure and perceived media effects.

First, researchers' assumptions about how citizens view a media message may not match up with how perceivers view a media message. To illustrate, consider research on the third-person perception (Davison, 1983), which focuses on why citizens tend to believe others are more affected by media than they are themselves. In this line of research, scholars generally categorize media messages as prosocial, antisocial, or neutral. The purpose of the categories was to help explain why, sometimes, individuals believe they are more influenced than others by a media message (when the message is prosocial; e.g., Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995; Chock & Lee, 2005). But as Andsager and

White (2007) note, researchers typically just assume a message is pro- or antisocial, rarely seeking confirmation that perceivers agree with that assessment. In the few cases where respondents' impressions of media have been captured, those perceptions are not as straightforward as researchers might expect. Eveland and McLeod (1999) demonstrated as much as in their study, which asked students to rate the antisocial and prosocial messaging of rap lyrics. The students met the researchers' expectations in terms of which lyrics were pro social and which were antisocial, but the students' antisocial ratings of the antisocial rap lyrics were far more severe than their prosocial ratings of prosocial lyrics. In other words, there was asymmetry in respondents' perceptions of the two message categories–a nuance that affected the authors' hypotheses and that would have been missed if the authors had not accounted for the respondents' message evaluations.

Other lines of inquiry would also be enhanced by accounting for perceptions of media messages. For example, in an attempt to understand audience perceptions of how media influence attitudes about sexual permissiveness, Chia and Gunther (2006) predicted that college students who believed their peers were easily influenced by media would believe their peers to be more permissive about sex. In other words, the authors assumed that students would see media as advocating permissive sexual attitudes and that these students would consequently believe their peers' attitudes about sex had been influenced by that messaging. But what if the students did not see media messages as promoting sexual permissiveness? The study would have benefited from measuring the perceived prevalence of sexual permissiveness in media. Park (2005) used such a measure–specifically, a measure of the perceived prevalence of "thin ideals" in media–

and found that respondents did indeed vary in the extent to which they believed media perpetuated a "thin ideal."

It is also possible, of course, that certain groups perceive media a certain way while others do not share that view. Missing between-groups differences in message perceptions is the second problem that arises when researchers do not gauge audience impressions of media. For example, Ho and colleagues note in their study about the perceived influence of anti-drinking messages that drinkers and nondrinkers likely disagree about the desirability of anti-drinking messages, which would explain why the two groups had divergent ideas about how such messages would affect others (Ho, Poorisat, Neo, & Detenber, 2013).

Summary

This section reviewed research about how perceivers evaluate media messages. Citizens appear to employ different process for evaluating mass mediated messages (versus how they evaluate non mass-mediated messages). These evaluations of media are impacted by citizens' own attitudes toward the topic of a message: Perceivers display a general tendency to see media as relatively unfavorable to their own preferences. Understanding how citizens see media is important because people often believe media have powerful effects on others. It is easy to see how the nature of those perceived media effects might change depending on a perceiver's evaluation of the media-in-question.

In terms of perceptions of others' news exposure, it is important to account for the tendency to view media through lenses tinted with one's own predispositions, and the subsequent differences in media evaluations between those with competing views.

Predictions of which news messages others are drawn to should depend, at least in part, on how perceivers view particular news messages.

Perceptions of Others

The sorts of news messages citizens believe their peers are listening to, watching, and reading also depends on perceivers' impressions of the "others" in question. Rather than believe that all people are exposed to all messages, individuals are able to match messages to their most likely audiences, an ability that requires a perceiver to know something about the media message and something about the potential audience. While the previous section focused on the assumptions that citizens make about media messages, the following section examines the assumptions that citizens make about other people.

Even with limited or no interaction with a particular person or group, individuals are quite adept at forming impressions of and making assumptions about other people. Rather than go through life recording our surroundings and experiences as if the mind is a video camera, people store a representation of the people, places, events and ideas that they encounter. Fiske and Taylor (1991) describe this mental representation of concepts as a schema, or a "cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and relations among these attributes" (p. 98). Schemas are abstract, incorporating memories and perceptions of other people, ourselves, social roles, places and events into a general network of knowledge. These mental representations of knowledge and experiences are best thought of as an elaborate, tangled web of cognitions collected through personal and impersonal experiences.

What individuals believe about groups of others is often described as a stereotype. Though the term invokes a negative connotation in everyday life, Hamilton and Trolier (1986) define it as "a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about a human group" (p. 133). Information about a group can come through direct contact with people belonging to a particular group (i.e., instance-based) or through communication from some third-party concerning the group (i.e., abstract-based; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Park & Hastie, 1987). Two popular approaches to understanding our schematic representations of social categories are *prototypes* and *exemplars*. The prototype approach suggests that people have an idea of a typical member of some social category, and thus when deciding whether another person belongs in that category, people assess how similar they are to the prototype. Prototypes are not necessarily an average group member–in fact, prototypes can be extreme examples, and thus a social category would be organized around a prototype that is not reflective of the average member. Alternatively, the exemplar approach suggests that rather than remember one average prototype, people remember examples of a given category.

What Makes "Them" a Group?

It is important to draw a distinction between perceptions of groups (e.g., women) and perceptions of individuals (e.g., my wife). Indeed, in the domain of social perception, impressions of groups and individuals are typically separate lines of inquiry. Hamilton and Sherman (1996) argue that the process of forming impressions of groups is similar, but distinct from, the process of forming impressions of individuals. Perhaps the most important difference is that a group is not seen merely as a collection of individuals, but as an entity in and of itself. This perception of entitativity, or "the degree to which a

collection of individuals is perceived to be bonded together to form a coherent group" (Clark & Wegener, 2009, p. 42), is one of the many important judgments that perceivers make about groups of others.

Thinking about all the people in the world, there are seemingly less endless ways to sort others into meaningful collectives. One might draw distinctions based on demographic factors (e.g., women, Hispanics, teenagers), geography (e.g., Americans, Europeans), shared interests (e.g., tennis fans, video game players), occupations (e.g., doctors, lawyers), religious beliefs (e.g., Catholics, atheists), and a multitude of other individual differences (e.g., Prius drivers, heavy metal listeners, dog owners). Perceivers are able to able to generate descriptions of the people in these groups based solely on their group membership. For example, when asked to describe a social category (e.g., women), or even a task-oriented group such as a sports team, perceivers will readily identify personality traits, descriptive adjectives, and typical behaviors of the group (Hamilton, Sherman, & Rodgers, 2004). For the purposes of the present research, it is critical that, when it comes to groups of others, "perceivers differentiate among them and understand their properties" (Hamilton, Sherman, & Castelli, p. 139).

"They" Are Not "Me"

It is also important to note that impressions of others are just that–impressions of other people, not impressions of the self. Even an impression of a group an individual belongs to (e.g., people on my basketball team) consists of judgments made about others–and one thing all others have in common is that "they" are not "me." The distinction is crucial because people evaluate others differently than how they evaluate themselves.

When evaluating themselves, people offer luxuries that they do not extended to anyone else. People tend to believe that they are better-than-average (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995), and generally display a biased optimism about their own abilities and personalities (Chambers, 2008). Examples are easy to come by. Drivers believe they are among the safest and most skillful on the road (Svenson, 1981). People believe they are more moral (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989) and objective (Armor, 1999) than others and that they are less susceptible to cognitive biases (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004) and external influences (Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007), including media (Andsager & White, 2007). When given information about how often others perform undesirable behaviors, individuals will downplay how often they perform those same behaviors in order to preserve their comparative standing (Klein & Kunda, 1993). Many scholars have credited a need for self-enhancement–the need to view the self in a positive light–for the tendency to see ourselves unique in ways that are socially desirable (Brown, 1986; Suls & Wan, 1987; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

However, seemingly contradicting this motivational account, scholars have found that people are sometimes pessimistic about themselves in relation to others. For example, people think they have a less-than-average chance of winning the lottery (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003), believe they are less capable than others of coping with traumatic events (Blanton, Axsom, McClive, & Price, 2001), and rate themselves below-average on difficult tasks (Moore & Kim, 2003; Van Yperen, 1992). Chambers and Windschitl (2004) argue that differences in how people store, access, and apply information about themselves and others can better account for the tendency to see ourselves as unique from others. To begin with, people are egocentric in that they have

more self-relevant information on hand. This means that examples of our own behaviors and traits are accessible and relatively easy to recall (i.e., the availability heuristic; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), whereas it is more difficult to conjure up examples of others' behaviors and traits (Prentice, 1990). Furthermore, even when armed with information about the self and others, individuals generally overweight information about themselves and underweight information about others (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). While people draw on their own internal thoughts, intentions, and traits when making inferences about their own behaviors, they disregard others' internal states–and focus instead on others' behaviors–when making inferences about others (Pronin at al., 2007).

For the purposes of the present research, it is important to recognize that there are differences in how people evaluate themselves and others. A combination of motivational (e.g., self-enhancement) and cognitive (e.g., egocentrism) factors generally leads perceivers to see the self as unique in socially desirable ways.

How "Them" are They?

Beyond noting that "they" are not "me," impressions of a group also vary depending on how "them" a perceiver believes that "they" are. Considering whether others constitute an in-group (i.e., a group one belongs to) or an out-group (i.e., a group one is not a part of) is a staple of how perceivers organize groups of others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Just as there are differences in individuals' impressions of themselves versus their impressions of others, people make important distinctions between in-group and out-group others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people regularly display favoritism for groups they consider themselves a part of, a tendency known as intergroup bias (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

One reason perceivers favor in-groups is because schemas for out-groups tend to be less complex and less variable, compared to schemas for in-groups (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In particular, perceivers vary in the degree to which they see group members as being similar to or different from one another. In-groups are generally perceived as more variable than out-groups, at least in part because people have less familiarity with out-group members (Linville & Jones, 1980; Park & Judd, 1990). Negative stereotypes are more likely to be applied to individuals who are perceived as part of less variables groups, thus negative stereotypes are more likely to be applied to out-groups (Guinote, Judd & Brauer, 2002).

Park and Hastie (1987) found that respondents judged the variability of other groups quickly, and those impressions of variability were factored into subsequent judgments about the group. Even though different people may have the same stereotype about a particular group, they may differ in how variable they see the group, which can influence how likely they are to generalize something about one member of the group to other members of the group. Also contributing to negative out-group stereotypes, people have better memory for negative out-group behaviors than negative in-group behaviors (Howard & Rothbart, 1980).

Of particular relevance to the present study, citizens sort themselves and others according to political preferences. In the United States, the public largely breaks down into two opposing camps that are described by ideology (conservative vs. liberal), party preference (Republican vs. Democrat), or candidate preference (Donald Trump supporters vs. Hillary Clinton supporters). The competing political factions are growing increasingly distant from one another, both in terms of policy preferences (Abramowitz

& Saunders, 1998; Layman, Carsey, & Horowitz, 2006) and sentiment toward those in the opposing camp (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Members of these groups report seeing see vast differences between their party and the opposing party (Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, & Judd, 2015), and members tend to dislike the party they are not a part of (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012). A recent survey from the Pew Research Center (2017) found that partisans strongly disliked their political rivals; only 11% of Republicans had a favorable view of the Democratic party and 12% of Democrats had a favorable view of the Republican party.

Summary

This section reviewed research regarding perceivers' impressions of other people. Perceivers differentiate between themselves, groups they belong to (in-groups), and groups they do not belong to (out-groups). They are able to recognize characteristics of others and group others into collectives based on perceived shared characteristics. Citizens tend to favor groups that they are a part of, and are more likely to harbor negative stereotypes about groups they do not belong to.

Perceived Exposure: Matching Messages and Audiences

Once perceivers have an impression of a message and an impression of a potential audience for that message, they are better able to determine whether the message and the audience will cross paths. For example, asked whether senior citizens or teenagers are more likely to listen to pop radio, most people would probably say that teenagers are a more likely audience for pop music. People draw from relevant information they know about the media message (e.g., pop artists are usually young, the music plays in "hip"

bars, the tempo is fast and the songs are high energy) and information they know about the potential audience (e.g., teenagers are young, they have abounding energy) in order to predict whether a particular group of others will interact with a particular message.

Measures of *perceived exposure* aim to capture individuals' perceptions of which audiences interact with which media messages. As Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod (1999) explain, people "observe or infer a relationship between certain types of media content and certain types of people. For instance, most people could guess that romantic comedies are more popular among women, whereas action movies are more popular among men" (p. 281). Scholars have found that individuals are quite good at matching messages to audiences, a feat made possible by a natural ability to group others into categories based on their perceived attributes, and the tendency to rely on cognitive shortcuts, i.e., heuristics, when prompted to match those others to media. For example, based on what they know about bankers, people assume that this group is a more likely audience for CNBC *Financial News* than are college students (Reid & Hogg, 2005). When estimating the likelihood that a group of people would be exposed to any particular message, it is helpful to know something about both the audience (e.g., bankers work in the financial sector) and the message (e.g., CNBC *Financial News* focuses on financial issues).

Why examine perceived exposure? Mass communication scholars are interested in perceived exposure because the public tends to believe media have great effects on others (see review on p. 12). Indeed, the first scholars to raise the idea of perceived exposure did so as an alternative explanation for the third-person perception (the perception that media affect "others" more than "me"). The gap between perceived media

effects on self and others was often explained by the *social distance corollary*–the idea that socially distant others are thought to be more affected by media because they are considered increasingly different from the invulnerable self. However, Eveland et al. (1999) argued that a perceiver's estimate of how likely it was that a given group was exposed to a message was a better predictor of perceived media influence. In other words, perceivers should know that even a socially distant group cannot be influenced by media they have not been exposed to (Lambe & McLeod, 2005).

Perceived exposure is thus measured in many studies that examine citizens' perceptions of how media impact others. Researchers have asked respondents to estimate how often their peers are exposed to certain genres of media content (Chia & Lee, 2008), how much attention others pay to certain types of media content (Ranxi & Chia, 2009), how often others see particular messages (Gunther et al., 2006), and what percentage of a particular group has been exposed to a message tailored to that group (Gunther & Story, 2003). Readers may recognize that *perceived exposure* (i.e., the perception that a group has been exposed to a message) is conceptually similar to the notion of *perceived reach* (i.e., the perception of how many people have been exposed to a message), which appears in a separate vein of communication research focused on perceptions of media bias. Still, the primary purpose of measuring perceived exposure has been to better understand when people are most likely to believe others have been affected by media. Unsurprisingly, researchers have found that believing a group of others has been exposed to a message is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for believing that those others have been impacted by a media message. In other words, perceived exposure does not necessarily

result in perceived effects (Meirick, 2005), but perceived effects cannot occur without perceived exposure.

Perhaps because perceived exposure is such an intuitive prerequisite for perceived media effects, there has been little effort to understand why people believe others are exposed to certain messages in the first place. The present research takes on that task. I argue that people recognize that others are exposed to messages either incidentally (e.g., seeing an advertisement while watching a television show) or intentionally (e.g., choosing to watch the television show) and that it is critical to understand the sorts of media others actively seek out, particularly in regards to news media.

Perceived Partisan Selective Exposure

Because of the ability to categorize others according to political preference, and the tendency to diagnose the partisan leanings of news media, the potential exists for citizens to link political groups to corresponding partisan media messages. The perceived partisan selective exposure hypothesis is the idea that citizens believe others are drawn to like-minded political news. For example, if an individual believes that Fox News Channel (FNC) favors a conservative ideology and MSNBC favors a liberal ideology, they should assume that Republicans are more likely to tune into FNC. The partisan selective exposure hypothesis predicts a relationship between citizens' perceptions of others' news exposure and their perceptions of the political leanings of news messages, reflective of a belief that others choose news content consistent with their ideological preferences.

Additionally, I contend that matching partisan audiences to attitude-consonant news reflects more than just an ability to match others with media messages that reflect their

political preference. I argue that the belief that others are drawn to like-minded media is also rooted in dislike of one's political rivals–that rather than thinking others are open-minded and interested in diverse viewpoints, citizens believe others actively look to news that reinforces their political views. In other words, selective media behaviors should be viewed as socially undesirable, something the detested out-group is more likely to do.

In the following studies, I test the premise that citizens believe others, especially their political opponents, consume primarily like-minded news. These studies also attempt to account for why such a belief exists, though there are likely multiple origins for the perception that others gravitate toward like-minded. The following section will examine the potential catalysts for perceptions of partisan selective exposure.

A Lay Theory of Selective Exposure

Media scholars have long wondered about the extent to which news consumers gravitate toward politically like-minded sources (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Curiosity about media selectivity nagged in earnest as the internet burgeoned, filling a previously paltry buffet of news choices with fresh sources of every political flavor. Scholars wondered, are news consumers now able to fill their plates with news that satisfies a particular political palate? Studies exploring this possibility are concerned with politically motivated selective exposure, which is the extent to which news consumers select attitude-confirming news media (Feldman, Myers, Hmielowski, & Leiserowitz, 2014). Scholars have gauged the extent to which news consumers choose like-minded media (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), or avoid attitude-challenging media (Garrett, 2009). Researchers typically determine the political slant of an assortment of news sources and then ask news consumers to report how frequently they use those sources (e.g. Mutz &

Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2010). Alternatively, some researchers use computer software to track the amount of attention individuals allocate to various news sources (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Scholars are concerned when a person's news diet is found to consist of extensive attention to attitude-consonant news. Research has shown that limited exposure to attitude-challenging information could encourage news consumers to be less tolerant of opposing opinions (Garrett et al., 2014; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) and contribute to more extreme attitudes (Stroud, 2010).

Just as media scholars have asked where the public gets its news, individuals may have their own theories about where their fellow citizens turn to for information. Individuals often have theories about the world around them that mirror the ideas that scientists subject to empirical testing (Furnham, 1998; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). These naive theories (also known as lay beliefs, common-sense understandings, or implicit theories, see Wegener & Petty, 1998), are borne from an innate need for social perceivers to make sense of the world around them. People naturally generate hypothesis to account for the effects they observe, and though they do not go through the steps of formal hypothesis-testing, these assumptions guide their behaviors (Heider, 1958).

It is fairly intuitive for the public to have its own concept of partisan selective exposure. Much like media researchers, the public has noticed expanding array of choices for news. In particular, the rise of Internet has ushered in a news industry marked by choice. Technological advances (e.g., smartphones and tables), increasingly easy access to the Internet, and new communication platforms (e.g., social media, niche websites, podcasts, etc.) have contributed to a sense that the modern news landscape is awash with information sources. Thee breadth of options does not appear to be lost on the average

news consumer. Researchers have found that a news consumers recognize dozens of outlets and that, when asked to self-report their exposure to various sources, news consumers tend to report getting news from numerous sources (Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer & Mitchell, 2016). The variety of available news makes it possible for liberals to accuse a conservative of limiting their media diet to a steady stream of Fox News Channel (FNC), or a conservative to accuse a liberal of getting information only "the liberal media." Indeed, such accusations are increasingly common, with political thought leaders regularly discussing the woes of "echo chambers" and "information silos." The concept of selective exposure has thus been injected into the U.S. political narrative, making it more likely that the public will adopt a lay theory of the idea that others gravitate toward like-minded media.

Predicting Others' Behavior

The perceived selective exposure hypothesis centers on citizens' predictions about others' behavior–specifically predictions of others' news media selection. Yet, people are seldom know the entirety of what someone else listens to, watches, and reads. Without actually observing others' news habits, how are perceivers able to render a guess about which media others will choose, or their motivation of doing so? Though we are privy only to our own thoughts and feelings, theory of mind, or "the capacity to represent the intentional states of others" (Schreiber, 2007, p. 53), suggests that humans are (possibly) uniquely capable of assigning reason to why others act the way that they do. In other words, even without witnessing the media that others consume, people are capable of rendering an estimate of others' news diets because people are generally capable of rendering estimates about others' behaviors. These estimates are not always accurate–

indeed, social perceptions often fascinate scholars precisely because they are inaccurate; (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977)–but such estimates make sense in light of the tools that perceivers use to generate hypotheses about others' behavior.

These tools may be thought of as cognitive shortcuts, and perceivers may make use of one or multiple shortcuts when asked to estimate others' news selection habits. First, as mentioned in the previous section, people may simply regurgitate information they have heard from others in regards to selective exposure. Though pundits, political elites, and general thought leaders do not use the term "selective exposure," they do discuss the idea that people are isolating themselves from alternative points of view by using politically consonant news sources. Hearing these concerns, people may simply accept selective exposure as reality; thus when asked to estimate others' news habits, they fall back on what they once heard about others' media habits: that people look for news that fits their views.

While possible, this explanation is unsatisfying in that it would require that citizens be swept up in political currents. The concept of echo chambers may be familiar to those who spend time talking about media and politics or listening to political commentary, but it is not exactly a mainstream idea. For a majority of perceivers, making predictions about others' media habits likely involves several other classic shortcuts that aid in estimating others' behaviors.

Projection. When making predictions about others' behaviors, people often start with their own. There is a general tendency to assume others' opinions, preferences, and behaviors are similar to our own. The tendency to believe others think and act as we do has also been studied in research involving the looking-glass effect (people "look out into

the world and somehow see their own opinions reflected back" Fields & Schuman, 1976, p. 437), the false consensus effect (i.e., the idea that those with a minority opinion often have bloated estimates of support for their position; Allport, 1954; Ross et al., 1977), and more general literature on social projection (i.e., a positive relationship between personal opinion and the perceived opinion climate; Gunther & Christen, 2002). People project their own preferences onto others when they predict political (Brown, 1982) or product preferences (Gershoff, Mukherjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2008), when they estimate public attitudes about topics such as nuclear energy (van der Pligt, van der Linden, & Ester, 1982) sexual behavior (Whitley, 1998), or ethnic minorities (Watt & Larkin, 2010). While citizens do not necessarily believe that a *majority* of others share in their preferences and behaviors, research has clearly documented a positive relationship between perceptions of one's own and others' actions or attitudes.

Scholars have offered several explanations as to what underlies the tendency to project our own opinions and behaviors onto others. Because people are most familiar with themselves, personal preferences are an accessible anchor, or initial reference point, for generating estimates about other people (Catrambone & Markus, 1987). Ross et al. (1977) suggested that people tend to orbit social circles consisting of like-minded individuals, and therefore their most accessible cues about public opinion come from a sample that is quite biased in their favor. Another explanation involves motivation, specifically, that projection is driven by a need to maintain self esteem by believing we have support for our views (Marks & Miller, 1987; Morrison & Matthes, 2011).

Projection appears to conflict with a previously discussed tendency: the impulse to consider ourselves unique (p. 25). How is it that people can both assume their behaviors

are normative but also believe they are more likely than others to engage in desirable behaviors (or less likely than others to engage in undesirable behaviors)? To illustrate, consider a person who holds prejudiced attitudes. That person may simultaneously overestimate the number of people who share their views (projection) but also believe others' prejudicial attitudes are much stronger than their own (Watt & Larkin, 2010). The positive association between perceptions of one's own and others' behaviors is not necessarily a perfect one; people can both use themselves as a reference point in making predictions about others, but also perceive differences between themselves and others. This is often observed in research on the third-person perception, where those who say they would be influenced by undesirable media assume others would be as well, but those perceivers also believe others would be *more influenced* than they would personally (e.g., Chia & Wen, 2010; Cohen & Weimann, 2008).

In terms of the present research, projection may help shape citizens perceptions of others' news diets in that people may assume their own style of news consumption is normative. Those who engage in selective media behaviors may anticipate that others have similar habits.

Extrapolation. Another clue about others' news diets may come from what people directly observe. There are many opportunities for individuals to get glimpses into other people's media habits; perhaps noticing the news channel that a family members watches or seeing the news stories that friends share via social media. The small-numbers-bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971) refers to the tendency to see a small sample as representative of a larger population. Perceivers may take note of the sorts of news that witness others reading, listening to, or watching and extrapolate from that small sample.

The samples that people extrapolate from are, of course, not representative. The people providing a glimpse of their news use via Facebook may be systematically different from the group they are a part of (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015). Just because a strongly aligned Democrat tends to share MSNBC news articles on Facebook, for example, does not mean that all Democrats get their news primarily from that source. Similarly, it is easy to imagine, upon witnessing a conservative family member watching FNC. a perceiver might conclude that FNC is the family member's primary source of news. In reality, the family member may spend just as much time watching MSNBC, but it is easy to see how one might extrapolate from the limited information they are privy to.

Interestingly, people have a better memory for negative out-group behaviors than for negative in-group behaviors (Howard & Rothbart, 1980). If turning to like-minded news is considered an undesirable style of news consumption, witnessing a political rival engaging in that behavior should likely be a memorable event.

Heuristics. The perception that others consume ideologically consistent media may also be the product of a simple message-audience matching heuristic, e.g., women like romantic comedies and men like action movies. Such a heuristic would involve stereotyping, though not necessarily in a negative way. As readers may recall, stereotypes are the cognitive representation of stored information about a group (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). In this way, a message-audience match such as "Democrats prefer news with a liberal slant" is a merely a product of linking stored information about the audience (partisanship) to stored information about a message (perceived partisan slant). Citizens may even consider ideological message-audience matches somewhat desirable. For example, Clay, Barber, and Shook (2013) suggested partisans may report consuming

news that matches their political preferences in an effort to appear ideologically consistent.

But there is also evidence that when asked directly about selective media behaviors such as seeking like-minded media or avoiding incongruent media, news consumers are reluctant to acknowledge those tendencies. In a recent surveys, only 23% of Americans said they prefer news that shares their political opinions (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012), while 69% of Americans said they would prefer that their friends and family share more mixed-view news on social media (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). Similarly, Tsfati and Chotiner (2015) found that when news consumers were asked to report their interest in like-minded news, the average response indicated a reluctance to own up to such a preference.

News consumers, in reality, may prefer like-minded news. But people also like to think of themselves as open-minded (Hare, 2004), and a focus on one-sided political information signals a lack of interest in alternative perspectives. I argue that while citizens do make use of a simple heuristic to match audiences to ideologically corresponding media, negative stereotypes about others–especially out-group others–also contribute to perceptions of others' media habits.

Negative Stereotyping: Selective Exposure as an Undesirable Media Behavior

Just as scholars have regarded politically motivated media selection as an undesirable style of news consumption—noting that excessive exposure to attitude-confirming media can contribute to increasing political polarization (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010) and affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014)—news consumers may view selectivity as an undesirable habit.

One reason to believe the news audience could view partisan-driven media selectivity as troublesome behavior is that such behavior runs contrary to the notion of open-mindedness. There is some debate among scholars as to what it truly means to be open-minded (see Spiegel, 2012); however, scholars agree that to lay claim to open-mindedness requires a willingness to expose one's self to alternative views. For instance, Hare (1987) describes open-mindedness as "whether or not we are prepared to entertain doubts about our views" (p. 99) and Baehr (2011) suggests open-mindedness involves a willingness to be placed in a position where preferred ideas might be challenged. Researchers have generally categorized open-mindedness as a positive trait (e.g. Amabile, 1983; Linley et al., 2007) and an intellectual virtue (Baehr, 2011). There is evidence that the public shares in the belief it is a good thing to be open-minded. Hare (2004) argues that people like to view themselves as open-minded, an argument built on philosopher Bertrand Russell's premise that individuals are confident in their own intellectual virtue. Hare (2004) notes Russell's observation that people often see others as "stubborn and pigheaded" (p. 1). Some empirical evidence also supports the idea that the public generally views close-mindedness as a negative trait and open-mindedness as a positive one, such as Mogan and Knox's (1987) finding that being close-minded was viewed as a key attribute of bad instructors, and Wood, Harms and Vazire's (2010) study showing that open-mindedness was positively associated with other desirable traits such as creativity, deep thinking, and intelligence.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the public regards open-mindedness as a positive trait, and open-mindedness is difficult to reconcile with a media diet dominated by like-minded news. While a certain amount of politically consonant news consumption

may be seen as reasonable, or even desirable, citizens may also see value in balancing like-minded news exposure with exposure to competing viewpoints.

If selectivity is regarded as an undesirable behavior, a long line of research on social contrast indicates individuals will believe others are more likely than they are personally to curate a diet of like-minded news. People tend to perceive the self in ways that are ego-protective and self-enhancing (Taylor & Brown, 1988), but often harbor negative stereotypes about groups they are not a part of (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Thus, unsurprisingly, when asked how often they engage in positive behaviors, they assume they do "good" things more often than others (Suls, Wan, & Sanders, 1988) but that others are more likely than they are personally to engage in "bad" behaviors (Goethals, 1986). A similar pattern emerges when perceivers estimate how often in-group members and out-group members perform undesirable behaviors: Out-groups are seen as more likely to engage in unfavorable behaviors, compared to the in-group (Howard & Rothbart, 1980).

There is some evidence that people believe that others, more than themselves, will engage in undesirable styles of media exposure. Eveland et al. (1999) found that people believed more than a dozen other social groups were more likely than they were personally to be exposed to violent and misogynistic music. Similarly, people think that others spend more time viewing sexual content on TV (Chia, 2006).

If attention to like-minded news is considered an undesirable media habit, it would surely be something "they" do–not something "I" do. Indeed, A majority of both Democrats and Republicans describe those in the other party as more close-minded than other Americans (Doherty, Kiley, Jameson, 2016). It is easy to imagine a Republican

believing that Democrats watch only MSNBC –or a Democrat believing Republicans watch only Fox News–yet believing that they personally are open-minded enough to consume news offering a spectrum of views.

The perceived selective exposure hypothesis is thus that citizens assume others' political partisanship guides their news choices, in part because it is natural to match a relevant audience preference (in this case, partisanship) to messages that reflect that preference, but also because partisans dislike their political rivals–and are therefore more likely to believe that their close-minded opponents are disinterested in news that challenges their views.

Introduction to Studies

It is important to understand the sorts of news that people believe others listen to watch, and read. People tend to believe that news media have powerful effects on others, perceived effects that would likely be amplified when people believe others have intentionally sought out a particular message. The following studies are the first to examine citizens' perceptions of others' news habits. In two studies, I test the hypothesis that citizens believe others gravitate toward like-minded political news and I attempt to account for why such a perception exists.

Study 1 tests the main premise of the perceived selective exposure hypothesis: Do citizens match media messages with audiences based on ideology? Matching others to in this way would require knowledge of the potential audience–in this study, one's political opponents–and knowledge of the message–in this study, the political leanings of various news sources. Study 1 required respondents who self-sorted into one of two camps (either supporters of 2016 Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump or supporters of

2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton) to rate the political leanings of more than a dozen news sources. Respondents then estimated how much election news they, and their political rivals, got from each source. Perceived selective exposure was tested by examining the relationship between perceived exposure and perceived slant: Did citizens believe their political opponents gravitated toward news sources *that they perceived* as leaning in the opposing candidate' favor? The results of Study 1 suggest that generally, the more that citizens saw a source as leaning tilting in their opponents' favor, the more news they believed their opponents got from that source. Both Clinton and Trump supporters described their own news diets as only slightly skewed toward their favored candidate, but in the eyes of their political rivals–their diets were laden with like-minded content.

Study 2 is designed to illuminate whether perceived selective exposure is a product of a simple audience-message matching heuristic (i.e., citizens match partisans to media that reflects that partisanship), or whether negative stereotyping plays a role in perceptions of selective media habits. To gain this insight, respondents were asked to estimate how often that they, members of their political in-group, and members of their political out-group engaged in selective media habits (e.g., seeking out like-minded news) and diverse media habits (e.g., seeking out attitude-challenging news). While citizens said they spend equal amounts of (modest) time with attitude-challenging and attitude-confirming news, they believed out-group members spend a great deal of time with like-minded media and far less time with news that might challenge their views. The pattern of perceived self/in-group/out-group differences reveals that, while a moderate amount of

selectively may be acceptable, frequent selection of like-minded news is undesirable– something "the other side" does.

Where the "Other Side" Got News about the 2016 Election

This study is the first to explore audience perceptions of politically motivated selective exposure. A national survey of U.S. adults (*N*=657) conducted several weeks before the 2016 presidential election reveals that supporters of Donald Trump and supporters of Hillary Clinton believed their political opponents crafted news diets rich in candidate-friendly information. These perceptions of selective exposure stem from respondents' assessments of (a) the extent to which news sources are biased toward a particular candidate and (b) the amount of news that they believe their political adversaries received from each of those sources. Results show that the more voters perceived a source as favoring the opposing candidate, the more news they believed their political opponents got from that source. Voters ultimate reported that their own election news diets only modestly favored their own candidate, but in the minds of their political opponents– those diets were laden with like-minded news.

The present study is an important first step in understanding citizens' perceptions of others' news habits. These perceptions matter. Media messages are typically seen as capable of influencing others (Davison, 1983; Gunther, 1998), and if audiences believe others are exposed mostly to messages that feed their existing attitudes, those others may seem increasingly extreme and ideologically distant. Indeed, a majority of respondents in the present study said that the news their political rivals consumed during the election

made them more extreme, reinforced their prior beliefs, and failed to open them up to new ideas.

Matching Partisan Audiences to Media Sources

Estimates of the bias, or slant, of news media vary greatly depending on who is making the estimate. News consumers with a particular stance on an issue have a habit of judging news media as slanting in an undesirable direction, producing a situation where groups on both sides of an issue sense that media content is less friendly to their side (Vallone et al., 1985). In other words, opposing groups often agree news is biased - but each side believes the bias is against their side. This is a curious phenomenon, as predispositions typically color information in a favorable shade, such that individuals interpret content as supportive of their views (Lord et al., 1979). The hostile media perception (HMP), on the other hand, demonstrates that when evaluating media content, individuals tend to employ a contrast bias: They interpret media as diverging in a disagreeable direction from their own preferences. The HMP often results in dramatic contrasts in how opposing groups judge news content, such as when Democrats and Republicans both believe news media favor the opposing political party (Huge & Glynn, 2010).

More often, the contrast bias that is activated when judging news content does not result in each side sensing bias, in an absolute sense, against their side. Rather, in what has been termed the *relative* HMP, opposing groups may agree on the slant of media but disagree on the severity of the slant (Gunther et al., 2001). Relative HMP is a case where each group agrees that news content favors one side over the other, but the group not favored sees a more severe tilt away from their viewpoint, compared to the side favored

by the slant. For example, when evaluating a news article deliberately designed to be biased in one direction, the favored group will acknowledge that the article is somewhat favorable to their position, while the group not favored by the slant will see the article as severely slating in their opponents' favor (Gunther et al., 2001; Kim, 2015). Similarly, when evaluating news from sources with a partisan reputation, those favored by the partisan slant report the lowest levels of bias, compared to other groups (e.g., compared to liberals, conservatives see FNC as less biased; Coe et al., 2008). In terms of the present study, relative HMP would be evidenced by supporters of a candidate judging each news source as less favorable to their candidate, compared to how non-supporters judge the slant of that source.

H1: A candidate's supporters will judge news sources as less friendly to their candidate, compared to how non-supporters judge those same sources.

The perceived partisan selective exposure hypothesis predicts that perceivers will match partisan groups to the perceived partisan leanings of news sources. Through the use of a basic ideology-based message/audience matching heuristic, I predict that perceivers will link their political opponents to media that they believe reflects their opponents' political preferences.

H2a: Clinton voters will believe Trump voters gravitate toward news sources that they perceive as slanting in Trump's favor.

H2b: Trump voters will believe Clinton voters gravitate toward news sources that they perceive as slanting in Clinton's favor.

If news consumers tend to judge news content as relatively less friendly to their candidate (H1: the relative HMP) and they believe their political opponents gravitate toward sources they judge to be the most severely slanted toward the opposing candidate (H2a, H2b: perceived selective exposure) then it follows that news consumers will view their own diets differently than how their political opponents view those diets. Specifically, while I predict that news consumers will view their political opponents' news diets as heavily weighted toward like-minded information, I do not think news consumers will see their own diets as severely skewed toward their preferred candidate.

To illustrate, consider a Clinton voter who believes conservative-leaning FNC is generously tilted in Trump's favor, and that this voter also believes Trump voters get more news from sources that they see as favoring Trump. The result is that the Clinton voter sees the Trump voter as consuming a *high volume* of news from a *strongly slanted* pro-Trump source. Perhaps the Clinton voter also believes Trump supporters get some news from (what they see as) Clinton-leaning MSNBC. The relative HMP would suggest Clinton voters would not judge MSNBC to be strongly pro-Clinton, creating a situation where the Clinton supporter sees Trump voters as getting a *low volume* of news from a *weakly slanted* pro-Clinton source. From the perspective of the Clinton voter, even though the Trump voter would receive news from both MSNBC and FNC, the Trump supporter's total news diet is weighted toward Trump.

Consider that same scenario from the perspective of the Trump voter. The presence of HMP would restrain the Trump supporter from sensing a full-on tilt toward Trump from FNC. Even though the Trump voter may report consuming a *high volume* of FNC, it would be a high volume of *weakly slanted* Trump content. On the other hand, the Trump voter would sense a strong Clinton-slant to MSNBC, so even though the voter reports watching a *low volume* of MSNBC, it is a low volume of *strongly slanted* Clinton content. From the perspective of the Trump voter, his or her own news diet is somewhat balanced between a high volume of lightly Trump-tinted content and lower a volume of Clinton-saturated content.

I predict that the interaction between the relative HMP and perceived selective exposure will ultimately mean that voters will overestimate the extent to which their opponents' news diets consist of candidate-friendly content, at least when compared with how their opponents describe their own news diets.

H3: Voters will describe their political opponents' news diets as more heavily weighted toward candidate-friendly news, compared to how their political opponents describe their own news diets.

A final research question address that possible consequences that voters may believe arise due to others' news habits. People generally believe media are powerful (Davison, 1983) and that the media messages others are exposed to often bring about negative effects (Andsager & White, 2007). If news consumers believe others, especially

their political opponents, are tuning in to like-minded news, what sorts of consequences might they expect from such exposure?

RQ1: What sorts of outcomes do voters expect from their political rivals' election news habits?

Method

To test these hypotheses, I collected responses from a national sample of U.S. adults who indicated they were planning to vote for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. This online was administered by Survey Sampling International (SSI) from Oct. 3-8, 2016. Respondents were members of SSI's large and diverse online panel who agree to periodically respond to survey requests in exchange for compensation. Quotas were implemented so that an equal number of responses were collected from supporters of Donald Trump and supporters of Hillary Clinton. Those who preferred another candidate, or did not have a candidate preference, were screened out (n=127). A total of 769 respondents completed the survey and 112 were removed from the dataset for failing a measure of data quality control.[1] The final sample consisted of 657 U.S. adults, 327 of whom were Clinton supporters and 330 of whom were Trump supporters. Although this is a non-probability sample, it is heterogeneous and, as Table 1 shows, the demographics of the final sample are largely consistent with the makeup of Trump and Clinton voters in terms of age, gender, race, education level and party identification.

[1] An item appeared in the first three minutes of the survey that said, "To help us format the next few questions, please select answer option "yes." Those who did not answer "yes" were immediately excused from the survey.

Table 1

Sample Demographics Compared to 2016 Electorate

	Support Clinton	Support Trump	% of sample	% of electorate
Gender				
Women	60	40	51	54
Men	39	61	49	47
Age				
18-29	61	39	16	16
30-49	53	47	36	31
50-64	47	53	29	30
65+	37	63	18	21
Race				
White	37	63	66	70
Hispanic/Latino	70	30	12	9
Black/African American	95	5	15	12
Education				
College grad	44	56	40	33
Some college	55	45	25	33
HS or less	53	47	32	33
Political affiliation				
Democrat	92	8	43	33
Republican	95	5	34	29
Independent	36	64	23	34

Note. Electorate demographics are from Pew Research Center (2016) except for the percentage of women in the electorate, which is from 2016 exit polling data. Data (*n*=657) collected Oct. 3-8, 2016.

Procedure and measures. These data are a part of a larger project concerning news use and the 2016 election. After providing their demographic information, respondents were asked to indicate the amount of election news they got from 13 different news sources. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to estimate how

much election news their political opponents got from each source and to evaluate whether each outlet was neutral, or whether it favored Clinton or Trump. Respondents were also asked to indicate what sort of consequences they believe their opponents experienced as a result of their news diets.

My aim was to ask about news sources that are well known and have a reputation for being liberal or conservative, as well as sources that are well known but do not have a clear reputation for being ideologically slanted. I chose the major TV networks (NBC, ABC, and CBS), two major newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*), two prominent online-only news sources (Yahoo News and Huffington Post), the three major cable news outlets (CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News), and three radio sources (Rush Limbaugh, The Sean Hannity Show, and NPR).

Perceived source slant. Respondents were presented with each news source and asked whether the source favored Clinton (-2 = *strongly favored Clinton,* -1= *somewhat favored Clinton*), was neutral (0 = *neutral*), or favored Trump (1= *somewhat favored Trump*, 2= *strongly favored Trump*).

Perceived source exposure. Respondents were presented with each news source and asked to indicate "how much election news they get" from each source on a 5-point scale (0= *none*, 4 = *a lot)*. Using the same scale, Trump voters estimated how much election news Clinton voters got–and Clinton voters estimated how much election news Trump voters got–from the 13 news sources. Each respondent thus reported their perception of how much news they personally consumed from each source, and their perception of how much news their opponents consumed from that source (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics).

Table 2

Perceived Exposure to Election News Sources

	Self-Reported Exposure		Exposure Perceived by Opponents	
	Clinton voters	Trump voters	Clinton voters	Trump voters
Source	*M* *(SD)*	*M* *(SD)*	*M* *(SD)*	*M* *(SD)*
FNC	1.33 (1.42)	2.24 (1.42)	1.49 (1.28)	2.95 (1.13)
SH	.27 (.72)	.99 (1.30)	1.06 (1.14)	2.12 (1.37)
RL	.22 (.60)	.76 (1.19)	1.05 (1.13)	2.36 (1.37)
WSJ	.99 (1.26)	.81 (1.18)	1.95 (1.19)	1.85 (1.19)
ABC	1.97 (1.31)	1.48 (1.35)	2.52 (1.05)	1.96 (1.13)
NBC	1.94 (1.37)	1.41 (1.35)	2.66 (1.04)	1.99 (1.13)
CBS	1.95 (1.31)	1.46 (1.31)	2.53 (1.04)	1.88 (1.15)
YAH	1.29 (1.32)	.88 (1.19)	2.13 (1.14)	1.76 (1.08)
CNN	2.21 (1.41)	1.34 (1.38)	2.85 (1.11)	2.07 (1.23)
NPR	.86 (1.22)	.43 (.82)	1.90 (1.28)	1.44 (1.22)
NYT	1.26 (1.34)	.61 (1.02)	2.51 (1.22)	1.77 (1.23)
HP	1.15 (1.23)	.61 (.99)	2.22 (1.26)	1.54 (1.16)
MSN	1.60 (1.40)	.82 (1.15)	2.73 (1.18)	1.76 (1.22)

Note. N=657. FNC= Fox News Channel, SH = Sean Hannity, RL = Rush Limbaugh, WSJ = Wall Street Journal, YAH= Yahoo News, NYT = New York Times, HP = Huffington Post, MSN= MSNBC. Responses reflect how much election news respondents believed they and others got from each source using a scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*a lot*). Data collected Oct. 3-8, 2016.

Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure. A respondent's evaluation of perceived source slant was multiplied by the reported amount of attention they paid to that particular source. This produced a measure that reflects the magnitude of candidate-slanted news that voters believed they consumed. For example, in the first row of Table 3, a Clinton voter who rated FNC as very favorable to Trump (2) and said they consumed "a little bit " of FNC (1) would receive a score of 2 for that particular source. Respondents received a score for each of the 13 news sources. Because a perceived slant of "neutral" was coded as 0, scores for a source the respondent deemed neutral always received a score of 0. Similarly, because "no" exposure was coded as 0, respondents received a score of 0 for sources they did not get news form, regardless of how they judged the slant of that particular source. The maximum possible pro-Clinton was -8 and the maximum possible pro-Trump score was 8.

The same calculation was used to produce a measure that reflects how respondents viewed the their political opponents' exposure to slanted news. For each news source, the respondent's perceived slant of that source was multiplied by the amount of news they believed the opposing side got from that source (see columns 5-7 of Table 3). By taking the product of perceived exposure to a news source and perceived slant of that source, this measure reflects more than a simple count of pro-Trump or pro-Clinton news sources that voters believe they–and their political opponents–consumed. Rather, exposure is weighted according to a voter's own perception of a source's slant.

Table 3

Example Calculation of Perceived News Diet for a Hypothetical Clinton Voter

	Self			Trump Voters		
Source	Perceived Slant	Perceived Exposure	Slant × Exposure	Perceived Slant	Perceived Exposure	Slant × Exposure
FNC	2	1	2	2	4	8
SH	2	1	2	2	3	6
RL	2	1	2	2	3	6
WSJ	1	2	2	1	3	3
ABC	0	3	0	0	2	0
NBC	-1	3	-3	-1	2	-2
CBS	0	3	0	0	2	0
YAH	0	1	0	0	3	0
CNN	-1	2	-2	-1	2	-2
NPR	0	1	0	0	1	0
NYT	0	2	0	0	3	0
HP	-1	1	-1	-1	1	-1
MSN	-1	4	-4	-1	2	-2
Perceived News Diet =			-2			16

Note. Perceived slant ranges from -2 (*strongly pro-Clinton*) to 2 (*strongly pro-Trump*). Own and other exposure ranges from 0 (*none*) to 4 *(a lot*).

Perceived news diet. The Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure scores are necessary to quantify the extent to which voters believed pro-Clinton and pro-Trump sources made up their own and others' news diets. To calculate *perceived news diet*, Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure scores for all 13 news sources were summed. Table 3 provides an example calculation of a respondent's own perceived news diet (column 4) and their opponents' news diets (column 7). A news diet that was entirely pro-Clinton would require seeing all news sources slanted entirely in her favor (each

source's slant = -2) and perceiving maximum exposure to each source (each source's exposure = 4). Such an extreme pro-Clinton diet would earn a score of -104 (Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure = -8 × 13 news sources). The maximum pro-Trump news diet score was 104, a score a respondent could only achieve if he or she estimated maximum levels of exposure across all news sources, and that those sources were severely tilted toward Trump. Because only three of the 13 news sources were generally viewed as being favorable toward Trump, respondents were less likely to achieve positive scores.

Perceived effects of opponents' news diet. A final set of items asked respondents to indicate using a 5-point scale (1 = *definitely not*, 5 = *definitely yes*) the extent to which they thought that the news their political opponents watched and read during the election opened them up to new ideas ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.06$), reinforced their beliefs ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.07$), and made them more extreme ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.07$).

Results

Relative hostile media perception. I first examined H1. Looking at how Clinton and Trump voters judged the slant of each of the 13 news sources. Respondents generally thought each source leaned one way or another–the only source a majority (55%) described as neutral was Yahoo New. Voters largely agreed on the direction of each source's slant, i.e., whether a source generally favored Trump or Clinton; however, there were differences in the perceived severity of the slant for each source, indicative of a relative hostile media perception (relative HMP).

Table 4

Comparison of Trump and Clinton Voters' Perceptions of Source Slant

	Perceived slant		
	Clinton voters	Trump voters	
Source	*M*	*M*	*t*
	(SD)	*(SD)*	
FNC	.66	.55	1.14
	(1.27)	(1.10)	
SH	.61	.75	-1.61
	(1.12)	(1.18)	
RL	.85	.77	0.91
	(1.07)	(1.05)	
WSJ	-.11	-.54	5.73***
	(.91)	(1.01)	
ABC	-.41	-.90	7.30***
	(.78)	(.90)	
NBC	-.46	-.91	6.27***
	(.77)	(1.01)	
CBS	-.39	-.85	6.76***
	(.75)	(.96)	
YAH	-.28	-.65	5.70***
	(.71)	(.94)	
CNN	-.49	-1.03	7.03***
	(.92)	(1.04)	
NPR	-.22	-.67	5.68***
	(.90)	(1.09)	
NYT	-.46	-1.02	7.36***
	(.90)	(1.04)	
HUF	-.46	-.81	4.51***
	(.88)	(1.08)	
MSN	-.54	-1.09	7.35***
	(.88)	(1.00)	

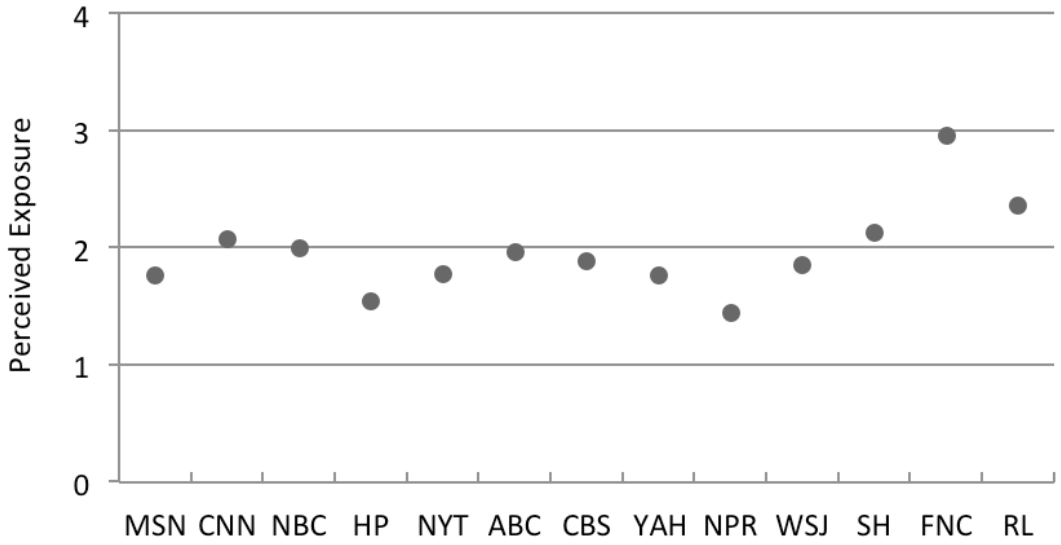
Note. FNC= Fox News Channel, SH = Sean Hannity, RL = Rush Limbaugh, WSJ = Wall Street Journal, YAH= Yahoo News, NYT = New York Times, HP = Huffington Post, MSN= MSNBC. Perceived slant ranges from -2 (strongly pro-Clinton) to 2 (strongly pro-Trump). ***p< .001. Data (*n*=657) collected Oct. 3-8, 2016.

A series of independent sample *t* tests were performed to compare Clinton voters' perceptions of a source's slant to Trump voters' perceptions of that source's slant. The groups agreed that Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and FNC were favorable for Trump, and there were no significant differences between the groups' estimates of the severity of the Trump slant for those sources. The two groups also agreed that the remaining 10 sources did not favor Trump, but that is where their perceptions began to diverge. Trump supporters saw each of these 10 sources as significantly more favorable to Clinton, compared to how her supporters judged the slant of the sources. For example, 73% of Trump supporters said MSNBC was favorable to Clinton, while only 45% of Clinton supporters agreed (48% of Clinton supporters described MSNBC as neutral). Similarly 71% of Trump supporters believed the NYT was slanted in Clinton's favor, while only 43% of Clinton supporters agreed (47% of Clinton voters said the NYT was neutral).

H1 is supported for a majority of the news sources: There was a general tendency for Trump supporters to see news sources as less favorable to Trump, compared to how Clinton supporters judged those sources. This is evidence of the relative HMP, a phenomenon where opposing groups agree on the general slant of news media but disagree about the severity of that slant. There was no evidence of HMP for the news sources that were seen as pro-Trump.

Perceived exposure. To test whether voters believed their political opponents gravitated toward candidate-friendly news sources, I first ordered the news sources according to their perceived slant toward the candidates. Figure 2 shows the sources arranged from least-to-most Trump-friendly as perceived by Clinton voters (upper panel) and from least-to-most Clinton-friendly as perceived by Trump voters (lower panel).

(a) News Exposure of Trump Voters (According to Clinton Voters)



(b) News Exposure of Clinton Voters (According to Trump Voters)

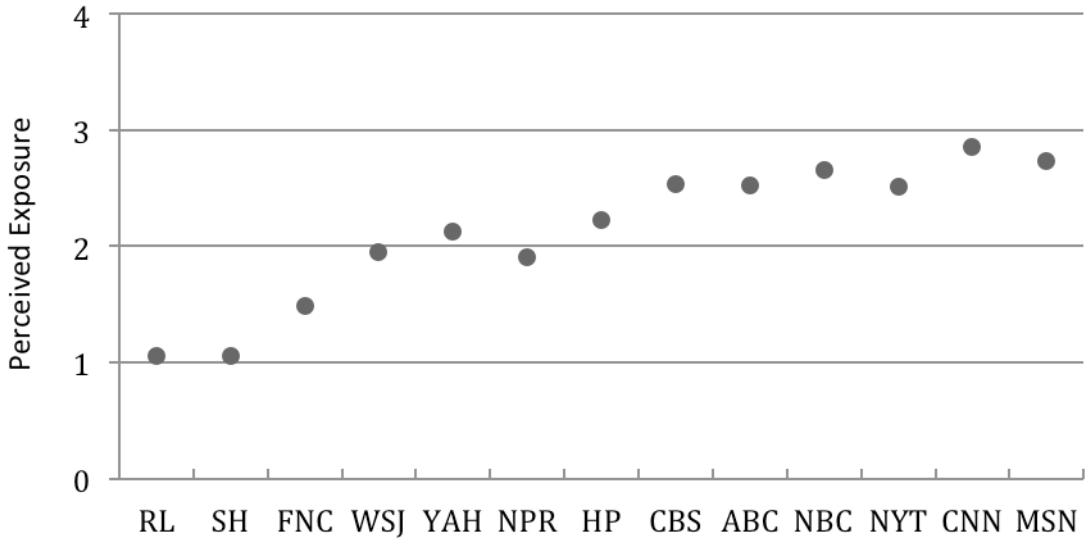


Figure 2. Estimates of how much news one's political opponents received from election news sources

Note. (a) Sources are arranged from least Trump friendly to most Trump friendly as seen by Clinton voters (b) and from least Clinton friendly to most Clinton friendly as perceived by Trump voters. FNC= Fox News Channel, SH = Sean Hannity, RL = Rush Limbaugh, WSJ = Wall Street Journal, YAH= Yahoo News, NYT = New York Times, HP = Huffington Post, MSN= MSNBC. Responses reflect how much election news respondents believed their political opponents got from each source using a scale ranging from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*a lot*).

H2a stated that Clinton voters would believe their political opponents tend to consume more news from, what they perceive to be, Trump-leaning sources. To test this hypothesis, I plotted Clinton voters' estimates of their opponents' exposure to each source. As seen in the top panel of Figure 2, perceived exposure increases from the left side of the graph (sources that Clinton voters see as Clinton-leaning) to the right side of the graph (sources that Clinton voters see as Trump-leaning). The linear trend is significant, $F(1, 306) = 38.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .11$, supporting H2a: The more Clinton voters saw a source as leaning toward Trump, the more news they believed Trump voters got from that source. Clinton voters saw Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and FNC—the only sources that Clinton supporters judged as slanting in Trump's favor–as Trump voters' top election news sources.

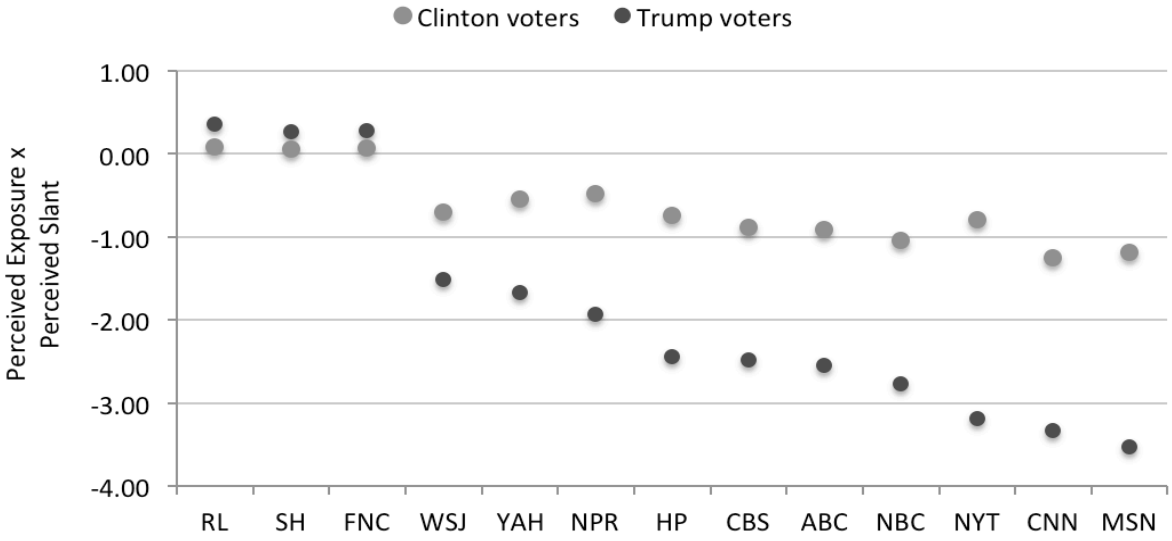
Trump voters demonstrated the same tendency to assume their political opponents gravitated toward like-minded sources. In the lower panel of Figure 2, news sources are arranged from least Clinton-friendly (left) to most Clinton-friendly (right) as perceived by Trump voters. By plotting Trump voters' estimates of Clinton voters' exposure to each source, the pattern is one in which the more Trump voters believed a source leaned toward Clinton, the more news they believed Clinton voters received from that source, $F(1, 310) = 472.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .60$. H2b was supported.

An alternative method of testing these hypotheses is to simply compare the amount of perceived opponent exposure to sources viewed as Trump-leaning to those seen as Clinton-leaning. Such a test is possible because, while Clinton and Trump voters disagreed about the severity in which news sources favored a candidate, they did agree on

which sources favored Trump (FNC, RL, and SH) and which favored Clinton (all remaining sources). Clinton voters believed Trump voters were exposed to more Trump-leaning news (M = 2.47, SD =1.11) than Clinton-leaning news (M = 1.80, SD =0.91), $t(322)=8.73$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.49$. Trump voters said that Clinton voters were exposed to more Clinton-leaning news (M = 2.40, SD =0.89) than Trump-leaning news (M = 1.20, SD =1.01), $t(325)=17.60$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$.

Perceived election news diet. To gain a comprehensive understanding of how voters saw their own, and others', election news diets, it is critical to understand both *how much* news voters believed they and their opponents consumed and *what* they believe that news looked like. Voters' perceptions of their own and the opposing side's news diets include (a) their estimates of their own/their opponents' exposure to various news sources (b) their judgments about the slant of those sources. After taking into account how voters perceive the slant of various news sources and their perceptions of their own/their opponents' exposure to those sources, H3 predicts that voters will see their opponents' news diets as friendlier to the opposing candidate, compared to how those opponents view their own diets.

(a) Clinton voters' election news diets as perceived by Clinton and Trump voters



(b) Trump voters' election news diets as perceived by Clinton and Trump voters

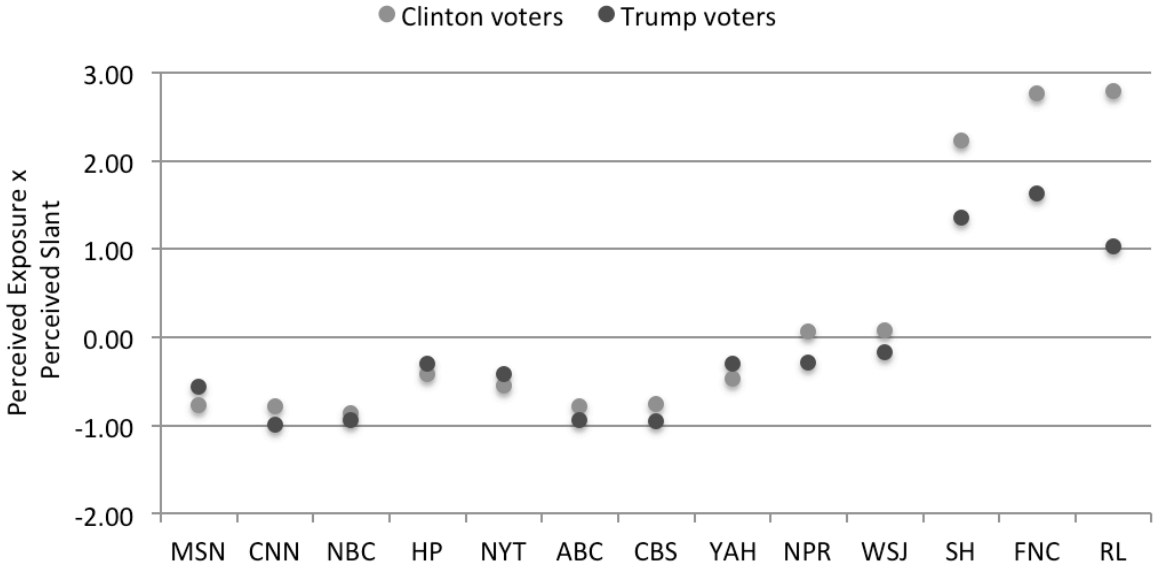


Figure 3. Perceived news diets: Perceived exposure x perceived slant scores.
Note. Scores (x-axis) are the product of perceived slant (-2 = *slanted toward Clinton* to 2 = *slanted toward Trump*) of a source multipled by how much election news respondents said they got/their opponents got from each source (0 = *none* to 4 = *a lot*). Scores range from -8 to 8 with scores less than zero indicating a perceived news that favors Clinton and scores above zero indicating a perceived news diet that favors Trump. (a) Sources are arranged from least Trump friendly to most Trump friendly as seen by Clinton voters (b) and from least-to-most Clinton-friendly as perceived by Trump voters.

I first explored how Trump voters see their own media diets, compared to how Clinton voters view those diets. Looking at the plot of Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure scores for Trump voters (lower panel of Figure 3), what is immediately clear is that the gap between Trump voters' perceptions of their own media diets and Clinton voters' estimates of those diets are quite small across a majority of the news sources. The lack of a gap can be explained by accounting for how the opposing sides assessed the slant of the various news sources.

To illustrate, Clinton voters believed MSNBC only somewhat favored Clinton and that Trump voters received only a little bit of news from the source, resulting in a Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure score very similar to that of Trump voters who said they consumed less news from these sources but the sources were very much slanted in favor of Clinton. In other words, Trump voters thought sources like MSNBC very much favored Clinton, so from their perspective, even a little bit of news from that source injected a substantial amount of pro-Clinton news into their diets. Meanwhile, even though Clinton voters thought Trump voters were exposed to MSNBC, Clinton voters tended to judge that source as less favorable to Clinton. Thus, Clinton voters' belief that Trump voters were exposed to MSNBC did not not translate into a belief that Trump voters were exposed to a great deal of pro-Clinton content.

Another way of thinking about it is that, across the first 10 sources listed in the lower panel of Figure 2, Clinton voters saw Trump supporters as consuming large slices of only mildly flavored Clinton news, whereas Trump voters saw themselves as consuming smaller, but more strongly Clinton flavored, slices of news. The result is that there is not much of a gap between the degree of pro-Clinton content that Trump voters

believed they consumed and the degree of pro-Clinton content that Clinton voters believed his supporters consumed.

However, a different story emerges when examining the final three sources (FNC, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity). Clinton and Trump voters largely agreed that that these sources favored Trump, but Clinton voters rendered higher estimates of how much election news Trump supporters got from these sources, compared to Trump voters' self-reported exposure to those sources (see Table 2).

A similar pattern is evident when examining Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure scores for Clinton voters (top panel of Figure 3). Trump voters tended to believe Clinton voters got a great deal of news from the 10 news sources they viewed as Clinton-leaning. Another way of thinking about it is that they believed Clinton voters were getting large slices of strongly flavored Clinton content, while her supporters thought they were getting much smaller slices of mildly flavored Clinton content from these same sources. Across the first 10 sources in the top panel of Figure 3, the pattern is such that Trump supporters believed Clinton voters had much more pro-Clinton content in their media diets, compared to how Clinton voters viewed their own news diets.

To formally test the third hypothesis, I summed the Perceived Slant × Perceived Exposure scores to create a score that reflects the extent to which voters believe that their own/their opponents' news diets lean toward one candidate or the other (this calculation is illustrated in columns 4 and 7 in Table 3). Lower media diet scores indicate a voter perceives a news diet favoring Clinton, while higher media diet scores indicate a voter sees a news diet favoring Trump.

Clinton supporters thought Trump voters' media diets were more pro-Trump (M = 2.49, SD = 16.16) than how Trump voters described their own diets (M = -1.73, SD = 12.50). Similarly, Trump voters thought Clinton supporters' media diets were more pro-Clinton (M = -24.32, SD = 25.42) than Clinton voters' descriptions of their own diets (M = -7.79, SD = 12.13). Independent sample t tests confirmed there was a significant difference between voters' self-reported media diets and their media diets as perceived by their political opponents, supporting H3. Trump voters said Clinton voters' media diets were more pro-Clinton than did Clinton voters $t(651) = 10.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.88$, and Clinton voters said Trump voters' media diets were more pro-Trump than Trump voters self-reported, $t(651) = 4.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.29$.

Because there were more "pro-Clinton" news sources–at least in the eyes of the respondents–in the mix, it was easier for news diet scores to end up negative, rather than positive. That Clinton voters' perceptions of Trump supporters' news diets ended up in positive territory indicates the magnitude of their belief that their political opponents gravitated toward like-minded news: Even with Clinton supporters believing Trump voters consumed a fair amount of news from 10 pro-Clinton news sources, these voters believed Trump voters paid so much attention to strongly slanted Trump sources (i.e., Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and FNC) that their overall impression of their political opponents' news diet trended into pro-Trump territory.

Perceived effects of opponents' election news diet. A final set of items provides insight into RQ1: Do voters see their political opponents' news diets as problematic? When asked to assess the effects of their opponents' election news diets, both Clinton and Trump voters were pessimistic. A majority of voters said the news their political

opponents consumed made their opponents more extreme, reinforced their beliefs, and failed to open them up to new ideas. In fact, the more voters believed that their political rivals' news diets skewed toward like-minded content, the more they believed that their rivals' news diets brought about these undesirable consequences. The more Clinton voters thought Trump voters' media habits were skewed toward Trump, the more likely they were to say their opponents' news diets reinforced their beliefs (r = -.31, p < .001) made them more extreme (r = .27, p < .001), and failed to open them up to new ideas (r= .31, p < .001). Mirroring those perceptions, the more Trump voters thought Clinton voters' media habits were skewed toward Clinton, the more likely they were to say their opponents' news diets reinforced their beliefs (r = -.17, p < .001) made them more extreme (r = -.15, p < .001), and failed to open them up to new ideas (r = .41, p < .001).

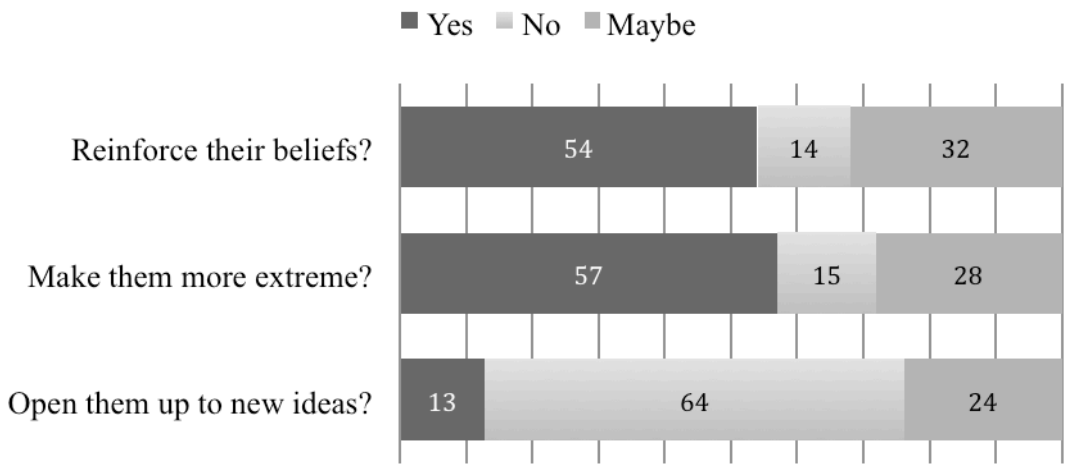


Figure 4. Perceived effects of opponents' election news diets.
Note. Values are the percentage of respondents who answered yes, no, or maybe when asked whether the electon news that their political opponents consumed reinforced their beliefs (n=647), made them more extreme (n=644), and opened them up to new ideas (n=644). Response options were *definitely yes* or *probably yes* (coded as *yes*), *maybe*, and *definitely not* or *probably not* (coded as *no*).

Discussion

This study introduces the concept of perceived selective exposure, which is the idea that news consumers believe their political opponents gravitate toward like-minded news sources. Results from a national survey of U.S. adults weeks before the 2016 presidential election support the perceived selective exposure hypothesis. By accounting for (a) voters' assessments of the partisan slant of various news sources and (b) voters' estimates of how much news their political opponents consumed from those sources, the emerging story is one where voters believed their political opponents were drawn to election news sources that satisfied their political palettes. Supporters of Donald Trump and supporters of Hillary Clinton believed their opponents gravitated toward like-minded election news sources, and that the news diets of those in the opposing camp were ultimately skewed toward the rival candidate. Compared to how voters described their own exposure to like-minded election news, the results of the present study indicate that partisans overestimated the extent to which others engaged in selective exposure.

It is critical to understand where citizens believe others turn to for political news: People believe that media are powerful (Davison, 1983); they believe others, especially out-group others (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1998), are vulnerable to media influence. The results of this study indicate that partisans believe their political opponents gravitate toward the very messages most likely to precipitate negative effects. Indeed, voters overwhelmingly believed the news that the other side consumed failed to open them up to new ideas, made them more extreme, and reinforced their prior beliefs.

Relative hostile media perception. Consistent with the relative hostile media perception (relative HMP), a candidate's supporters tended to judge a news source as less

friendly to their preferred candidate, compared to how those in the opposing camp judged the slant of that particular source. In contrast to an absolute HMP–where competing groups each sense a total bias against their side–Trump and Clinton voters agreed that, to varying degrees, 10 of the sources favored Clinton and three favored Trump. But it is the varying degrees that define the relative HMP, with each side sensing its candidate fared a bit worse among the election news sources–at least compared to how the other side saw it.

The relative HMP pattern did not hold for the three news sources that have a conservative reputation: In the case of FNC, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity, both Trump and Clinton voters mostly agreed on the extent to which the sources favored Trump. That Clinton voters did not see more pro-Trump bias from these sources may be a consequence of the fact that, at the time of data collection, Trump was trailing in national polls and Clinton was widely expected to win the election (only a quarter of Americans thought Trump would win; YouGov, 2016). Perceptions of media bias tend to decrease as a candidate gains ground in opinion polls (Huge & Glynn, 2010), possibly because the leading candidate's supporters have little reason to be defensive about their candidate's news coverage. Additionally, liberals generally sense less media bias than do conservatives, at least in part because conservative politicians routinely provide cues to their constituents about the "biased media"(Lee, 2005).

It would be valuable to know about news sources beyond the 13 featured in the present study. I chose sources that were familiar to most Americans, and aimed to create a mix of sources in terms of medium and reputed political ideology (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley & Matsa, 2014). Still, there are a multitude of other news sources where citizens

get news, and the present study should not be interpreted as an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of where voters got their news about the 2016 election. Rather, my focus was exploring a pattern of perceived exposure–specifically, that citizens believe others gravitate toward like-minded news sources. I expect that pattern would persist beyond the sources presented in this study, but that is a question for future research.

Perceptions of opponents' election news exposure. The perceived selective exposure hypothesis was supported by evidence that the more that voters believed a source favored the opposing candidate, the more news they assumed their political opponents got from that source. For Trump voters, this meant believing that Clinton voters got moderate amounts of election news from sources they considered Trump-friendly, like Fox News Channel, and a great deal of election news from sources that they considered Clinton-friendly, like CNN. Mirroring those perceptions, Clinton voters thought Trump supporters gravitated toward Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, while paying considerably less attention to *The New York Times* and NPR. It is notable that the relationship between perceived exposure and perceived slant is more substantial among Trump voters than among Clinton voters. Looking at the graph (Figure 1) of Trump voters' estimates of their opponents' source exposure (lower panel), the linear pattern between perceived slant and perceived out-group exposure is much clearer, and the effect size much larger, than it is for Clinton voters' estimates of their opponents' source exposure (top panel).

The situation is such that voters believe that their political opponents are being exposed to media content that both challenges and confirms their views; however, these voters not only believe their political opponents consumed a greater *amoun*t of content

that fits its views, they also believe that attitude-confirming news is severely slanted toward the out-group's preferred candidate. For example, Clinton supporters thought that Trump voters got news from both MSNBC and FNC. However, Clinton voters not only believe FNC is a more popular source of news for Trump voters than MSNBC, they also judge MSNBC to be only somewhat Clinton-leaning while they believe FNC has a strong tilt toward Trump. In other words, Clinton voters believe Trump supporters got a small slice of mildly flavored Clinton news from MSNBC, but a larger slice of strongly flavored Trump news from FNC. Without taking into account how candidate preference colored perceptions of a source's slant, i.e., the relative HMP, this nuance would have been missed.

Perceived effects of selective exposure. The results of the present study demonstrate that, like media scholars before them, citizens have hypothesized that others gravitate toward like-minded news. These perceptions are notable not because they are inaccurate–in fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that people do engage in politically motivated selective exposure (Stroud, 2008)–but because, in the minds of media consumers, exposure often equals effect. In other words, people tend to believe that "what mass media are saying today must be what the public will be thinking tomorrow" (Gunther, 1998, p. 487). The present results suggest that people believe their political opponents are drawn to the very news sources that are most likely to have undesirable effects.

The present study provides an initial look at what sorts of effects might result from perceptions of partisan selective exposure. Far from believing that the election news that their opponents consumed had a positive influence, voters reported the other side's news

diet made them more extreme, reinforced their prior opinions, and failed to open them up to new ideas. Indeed, the more voters perceived their opponents' news diets as like-minded, the more likely they were to say these negative effects occurred. This is promising evidence that citizens sense consequences to their opponents' media habits. Ideally, future research would manipulate perceptions of others' news habits and observe the change in respondents' estimates of the effects of those habits. Future research should also further explore the sorts of consequences that citizens anticipate from a selective media diet. For example, researchers have hypothesized that selective media behaviors contribute to political polarization (Stroud, 2010) and affective polarization (Garret et al., 2014). Do citizens have their own theories about how their own and others' media habits have affected the political climate?

It is also worth nothing that the present sample was meant to be reasonably representative of the demographics within the Trump and Clinton voting blocs–a strategy that sufficed for testing the hypothesized perceptual phenomena. Data from a random sample representative sample would be necessary to generalize media behaviors and attitudes to the voting public.

Fitting message to audience? Or stereotyping the out-group? These results suggest that citizens do make use of an ideology-based audience/message heuristic–that is, news consumers match an impression about media (that messages from a particular news source favor one candidate over another) to an impression of a particular group of others (that those others prefer one candidate or another). Voters displayed a tendency to match partisan others to media messages that they believe reflected that partisanship. Just as people may infer what others think based on the media they believe others consume

(Gunther, 1998), these results suggest people may infer which media others use based on what they think those others believe.

The question remains, however, are these perceptions the result of a simple ideology-based message/audience heuristic (i.e., "People prefer news that matches their political preferences")? Or are perceptions of selective exposure also rooted in a negative out-group stereotype (i.e. "My political rivals are close-minded and thus only consume news that reinforces their views")?

The present findings hint at the use of negative stereotyping in assessments of others' news habits. Partisans saw their own election news diets as far less like-minded than how their rivals viewed their diets. If citizens simply link audiences and media based on partisanship, they should link themselves and others at about the same rate. For example, Clinton voters reported consuming some pro-Clinton content, but thought Trump voters consumed far more pro-Trump content. Why would the ideology-based message/audience link be stronger for an out-group than for the self? One possibility is that individuals have more access to their own media habits, thus, estimates of their own media behavior are less prone to calculation errors. However, rendering inflated estimates of the out-group's selective media behaviors may just as easily stem from negative stereotyping. People may be driven to see their own media diets as relatively balanced, while believing their political rivals are too close-minded to curate a diverse news diet.

To further explore why citizens believe others gravitate toward like-minded news, a second study was conducted–one that directly aimed to test whether selective exposure is considered an undesirable style of news consumption.

My News Habits Versus "Their" News Habits

Study 1 provided evidence that citizens believe others engage in partisan selective exposure. The present study, a survey of U.S. adults conducted in November 2016 (*N*= 815) examines how citizens evaluate this tendency to seek out like-minded media. Specifically, this study investigates whether selective exposure is considered a value-neutral behavior, or whether negative stereotyping contributes to the perception that others consume attitude-consonant media.

Citizens may simply match partisan audiences to messages that reflect that partisanship, similar to how citizens may match other audiences to messages that they perceive as being a "fit" to that particular audience (e.g., children watch cartoons). Perceptions of partisan selective exposure may be rooted in a belief that Democrats prefer liberal news and Republicans prefer conservative news. If this were the case, one could expect partisans to report that they, as well as others, seek out like-minded media at the same rate.

But the more likely scenario is that selective media behaviors are considered undesirable. Excessive attention to attitude-confirming news seemingly signals disinterest in alternative perspectives, and people generally like to think of themselves as open-minded (Hare, 2004). Regardless of the extent to which news consumers actually expose themselves to like-minded news, citizens may like to think of themselves as the sorts of people who are interested in hearing multiple perspectives. Indeed, the results of Study 1 demonstrate that while news consumers admit to consuming election news that they saw as tilted in their candidate's favor, they also reported getting plenty of news from sources that they believed favored the opposing candidate.

To investigate how citizens regard selective media behaviors, a sample of Democrats and Republicans were asked to report how frequently they engage in selective media behaviors (e.g., seeking out like-minded news, avoiding attitude-challenging news), and how frequently they engage in nonselective media behaviors (e.g., seeking out news that challenges their political views, seeking out news that offers a range of political opinions). Respondents were then asked to make the same estimates for members of their own political party (i.e., other Democrats, other Republicans) and members of the opposing political party.

A key difference between this and the previous study is that, in this study, respondents are directly asked about selective media behaviors. In Study 1, media selectivity was calculated from items gauging perceptions of media slant and perceptions of others' media consumption. The relevant items on that survey were even separated so that respondents would not be aware of what was being tested. Such tactics are often used when researchers do not want respondents to know what is being investigated. For example, when measuring racial prejudice, researchers do not ask respondents to indicate how much they dislike a racial minority. Instead, they ask items that probe racial attitudes in ways that would not prompt respondents to "try and look good" by providing socially desirable answers (i.e., social desirability bias; Nederhof, 1985). The present study does not try to disguise what is being measured. Indeed, it is important that respondents are aware that the items gauge their own and their perceptions of others' exposure to like-minded news. If attention to like-minded media is seen as a value-neutral behavior, one would not expect a systematic pattern in how citizens estimate their own and others' tendencies to engage in the behavior.

But I do anticipate differences in how people describe their own and others' news habits. The following hypotheses are based on the tendency for people to evaluate themselves more favorably than others, and to evaluate in-groups more favorably than out-groups. If selective media behaviors are perceived as an undesirable style of news consumption, as I expect, social desirability should prompt partisans to report that they are less likely than others to engage in selective media behaviors. Conversely, I predict that perceivers see it as a "good" thing to interact with different viewpoints. They should therefore report being more likely than others to engage in nonselective media behaviors.

In particular, if news consumers see partisan selective exposure as an undesirable style of news consumption, they should see out-group partisans as the most likely to engage in it. Those in the out-group are seen as the most likely candidates to perform undesirable behaviors (Howard & Rothbart, 1980). Citizens should also draw distinctions between their in-group and out-group's media habits, as in-groups are generally granted more favorable evaluations than out-groups (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Group rivalry in U.S. politics is particularly fierce–neither side likes the other, and members of both parties describe members of the opposing party as close-minded (Doherty et al., 2016).

H1a: Citizens will report that they engage in selective media behaviors less frequently than others.

H1b: Citizens will report that their fellow party members engage in selective media behaviors less frequently than those in the opposing party.

H2a: Citizens will report that they engage in nonselective media behaviors more frequently than others.

H2b: Citizens will report that their fellow party members engage in nonselective media behaviors more frequently than those in the opposing party.

If the predicted trends occur, it could easily result in a situation where news consumers see their own news diets quite differently from how their out-group does. Similar to the Study 1 differences in how partisans view their own news habits versus how their political rivals view those news habits, I anticipate:

H3: Citizens will perceive their out-group's media habits as more selective compared to how their out-group self-describes its habits.

Finally, it is possible that certain social and demographics groups are more likely to believe others engage in selective media behaviors. In particular, those who acknowledge their own selective media habits should be more likely to project those habits onto others, though I still expect that citizens will report that others engage in selective behaviors more often than they do personally. As discussed previously (p. 35), it is possible for individuals to believe their behaviors and preferences are normative (social projection) and yet still draw distinctions between their own and others' behavior in a manner that is self-enhancing. Additionally, it may be the case that certain groups, e.g. Democrats, young people, are more likely to perceive that others engage in selective media habits. To provide an initial look at the individual-level factors that may predict perceived partisan selective exposure, I submit the following research question:

RQ1: Which social and demographic factors predict perceptions of others' selective media behaviors?

Method

To test these hypotheses, I surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults in November 2016 as part of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) administered by YouGov Polimetrix. The CCES is a cooperative online survey project that uses a matched random sample design (Ansolabehere & Rivers, 2013). Just over half of respondents (54%) were women, 73% were White, slightly less than half (47%) had a college degree, and the median age was 50.

Because the hypotheses involve comparing respondents' perceptions of their own, their political in-group, and their political out-group's media behaviors, I asked participants to indicate which description fits them best: strong Democrat, not a very strong Democrat, lean Democrat, Independent, lean Republican, not a very strong Republican, or strong Republican. Those who reported being strong, not very strong, or leaning Democrat were classified as Democrats (n = 490), while those who reported being strong, not very strong, or leaning Republican were classified as Republicans (n = 325). Each of these groups has a clear in-group (other members of their party) and a clear out-group (members of the rival party); however, because there is no clear in- or out-group for Independents, respondents who identified as such (n = 185) were dropped from the analysis. More than half of Democrats (52%) and a slightly lower percentage of Republicans (42%) identified themselves as having a "strong" party affiliation. I classified other respondents (who identified as "not so strong" or "leaning" toward either Democrats or Republicans) as having a weak party affiliation. Respondents were broadly

representative of Democratic and Republican voters. Among Democrats, 58% were women, 63% were White, 51% had a college degree, and the median age was 46. Compared to Democrats, a lower percentage of Republicans were women (48%), a higher percentage were White (88%), fewer had college degrees (42%), and the median age was slightly older (52).

Measures. Seven items were used to gauge participants' perceptions of their own and others' selective media habits. I designed three items to test "perceived exposure to like-minded news" and four items to test "perceived exposure to attitude-challenging news." These items were submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis (principal components, varimax rotation) which, as anticipated, yielded a two-factor solution. The solution accounted for 62% of the variance in individual items after rotation. The three items measuring perceived attention to attitude-confirming news loaded on a single factor (with factor loadings rankings from .632 to .844), and the four items measuring perceived attention to attitude-challenging news loaded on a separate factor (with factor loadings ranging from .566 to .884).

Perceived attention to attitude-confirming media. Three items measured the extent to which citizens believe that they, and others, curate a news environment that echoes their own views. Using a 5-point scale, respondents were asked to indicate how often (1=*never,* 5 = *always*) they "seek out news that supports your political views," "avoid news that challenges your political views," and "read or watch news that leans liberal/conservative." This third item was customized such that respondents were asked to indicate how often they read or watched news that coincided with their party's dominant

ideology (e.g., Democratic respondents indicated how often they read or watched news that leaned liberal).

The three items were repeated for respondents' political in-group and out-group. Respondents indicated how often (1=*never,* 5 = *always*) members of their own party and members of the opposing party seek out news that supports their political views, avoid news that challenges their political views, and read or watch news that leans liberal (in the case of Democrats) or conservative (in the case of Republicans). The three items demonstrated satisfactory, though modest, reliability ($\alpha = .62$)[2] and were averaged to create an index reflecting the extent to which respondents believed they ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.76$), their in-group ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.71$), and their out-group ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.88$) surround themselves with attitude-consonant news.

Perceived attention to attitude-challenging media. I also measured the extent to which respondents sought out news that challenged their own views and the extent to which they believed other partisans sought out attitude-challenging news. Using a 5-point scale, respondents were asked to indicate how often (1=*never,* 5 = *always*) they "seek out news that challenges your political views, "seek out news that offers a range of political opinions," "seek out news that includes both conservative and liberal opinions, and "read or watch news that leans liberal/conservative." The final item was customized such that respondents were asked to indicate how often they read or watched news that conflicted with their party's dominant ideology (e.g., Democratic respondents indicated how often they read or watched news that leaned conservative).

[2] While the relatively low reliability is not ideal, Nunnally (1967) suggests it is tolerable in early stages of research where acceptable reliability ranges from .5 to .6. Similarly, Van de Ven and Ferry (1980) offer .55 as the minimum criteria for broad constructs. Inter-item correlations (r =.21, .41, .42) fall within the optimal range recommended by Briggs and Cheek (1986).

The four items were repeated for respondents' political in-group and out-group. Respondents indicated how often (1=*never,* 5 = *always*) members of their own party and members of the opposing party seek out news that challenges their political views, seek out news that offers a range of political opinions, seek out news that includes both conservative and liberal opinions, and read or watch news that leans liberal (in the case of Republicans) or conservative (in the case of Democrats). The four items were satisfactorily reliably ($\alpha = .81$) and were averaged to create an index reflecting the extent to which respondents believed they ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.81$), their in-group ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.76$), and their out-group ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.86$) surround themselves with attitude-challenging news.

Throughout these analyses, I used pairwise deletion for handling missing data.

Results

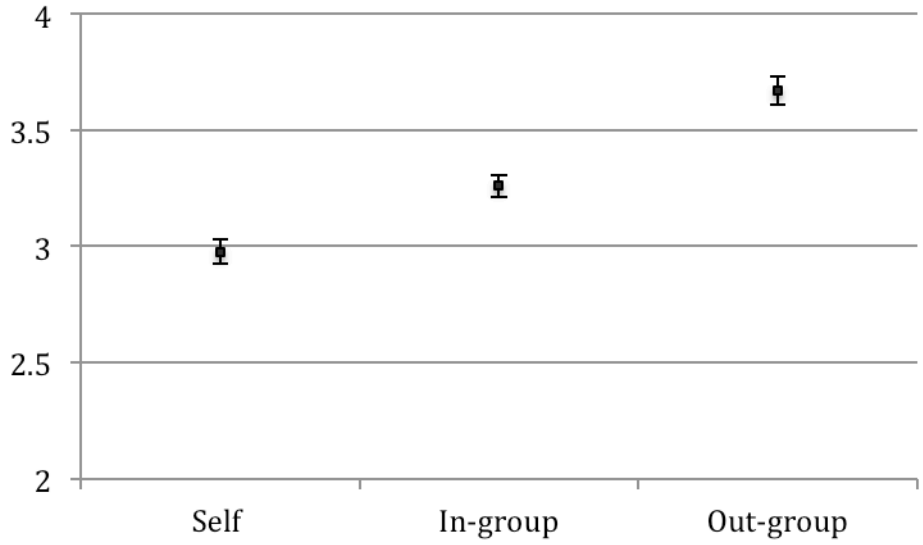
I predicted that respondents would see themselves as the group that spends the least amount of time seeking out attitude-confirming media, followed by their in-group, and finally their out-group. I predicted the reverse-order when called upon to estimate their own and others' exposure to attitude-challenging news, i.e., that respondents would see themselves as the group that spends the greatest amount of time seeking out attitude-challenging media, followed by their in-group, and finally their out-group.

To test H1, a univariate repeated measures general linear model (GLM) procedure was performed with perceived attention to attitude-consonant news as the dependent

variable and target group (self, in-group, out-group) as the within-subjects factor.[3] Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, χ^2 (2)= 39.41, $p < .001$, therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Greehouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\varepsilon = .96$). The main effect for the target group was significant, $F(1.91, 1554.45) = 253.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .24$. As can be seen in Figure 5, respondents reported paying a moderate amount of attention to attitude-consistent news, but believed that others, especially those in the opposing party, made more of a habit of turning to friendly news. Planned contrasts (Helmert) revealed that respondents said others (both in- and out-group others) sought out attitude-consuming news more frequently than they did personally, $F(1, 814) = 322.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .28$, supporting H1a. H1b was also supported: Respondents believed the out-group engaged with attitude-consuming news more frequently than members of their in-group, $F(1, 814) = 180.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .18$.

[3] An ANCOVA was first performed to test whether the hypothesized pattern of self/other differences was affected by age, race, gender, education, party affiliation, or party identification strength. These demographic variables did not affect the hypothesized self-other differences and were dropped from the analysis. However, certain social groups were more likely to say they and others engaged in selective media behaviors. These between-group differences are demonstrated in the regression analysis on p. 84.

(a) Perceived Attention to Attitude-Confirming News



(b) Perceived Attention to Attitude-Challenging News

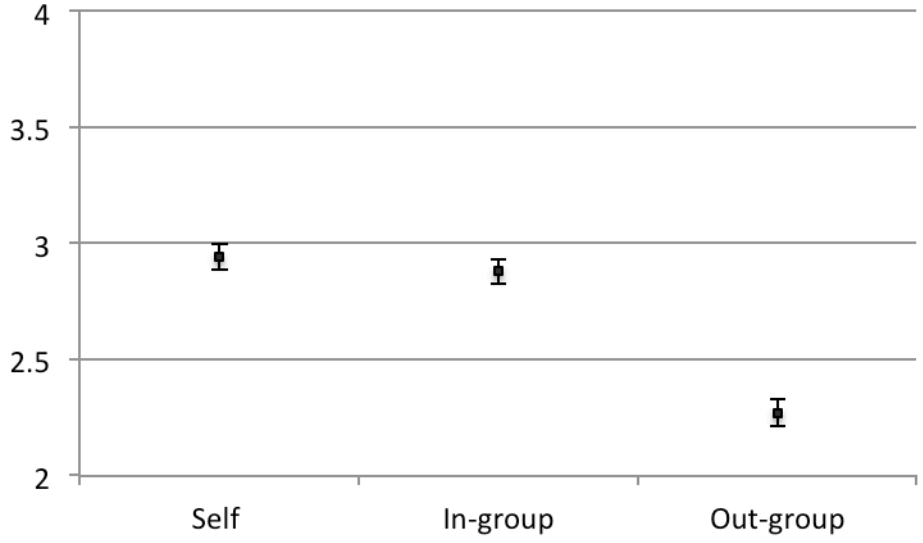


Figure 5. Perceived self, in-group, and out-group attention to attitude-confirming (a) and attitude-challenging (b) news.

Note. Items asked respondents to estimate how often they and others watched and read news that supported or challenged their views. Perceived attention was measured on a 5-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The above graphs are zoomed in (the y-axis ranges only from 2-4) in order to show the 95% CIs, which are extremely narrow.

A second repeated measures ANOVA examined how perceived openness to challenging media varied across the three target groups (self, in-group, out-group). Again, Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, χ^2 (2) = 57.83, $p < .001$, therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Greehouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ($\varepsilon = .94$). There was a main effect for target group, $F(1.87, 1523.40) = 245.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .23$. As can be seen in the lower panel of Figure 5, respondents believed they spent a moderate amount of time with attitude-challenging news, but that others spent less time with such news. Planned contrasts (Helmert) revealed that respondents said others (both in- and out-group others) sought out attitude-challenging news less frequently than they did personally, $F(1, 814) = 140.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .15$, supporting H2a.

H2b was also supported: Respondents believed the out-group engaged with attitude-challenging news less frequently than members of their in-group, $F(1, 814) = 381.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .32$. It is notable that, even though the difference between perceptions of one's own attention to attitude-challenging media and perceptions of the in-group's attention to such media is significant, it is slim. The effect size for the difference between perceptions of own and in-group attention to challenging media is considerably smaller than the effect size for the difference between perceptions of the in-group and out-group's challenging-media habits. News consumers believe their in-group members are exposed to slightly less challenging media as they are themselves, but they see a much larger gap between the challenging-media behaviors of their in-group and out-group.

News consumers see themselves as more likely than others to engage in a positive behavior (being open to attitude-challenging media) and less likely than others to engage in a more undesirable style of media consumption (seeking out attitude-confirming news). While respondents acknowledge turning to like-minded media, they also assume others do so more often. Similarly, while they believe that members of their own and the opposing party are exposed to attitude-challenging news, they believe those others spend less time with mind-expanding media than they do personally. The pattern of perceived differences between the self, the in-group, and the out-group was not affected by social markers, illustrating that–regardless of partisanship, gender, age or other social markers–news consumers tend to see themselves as less likely than others to engage in selective media behaviors.

Perceptions of own selective media behavior: self vs. out-group. These results suggest that a moderate amount of media selectivity is acceptable to news consumers. If seeking out friendly media was viewed as an entirely negative behavior, respondents would likely have been more reluctant to admit to time spent with attitude-consonant news. Instead, news consumers reported spending about an equal amount of time attending to attitude-consuming (M =2.89, SD =0.81) and attitude-challenging news (M =2.95, SD =0.88). How news consumers saw their own media behavior, however, is not how their political rivals viewed their media behavior. Respondents assumed their political opponents maintained more selective media diets than what was actually reported by Democrats and Republicans in the sample.

To test H3, which stated that respondents would perceive their media behaviors as less selective, compared to how the out-group viewed those behaviors, I performed a

series of one-sample t tests. Democrats reported spending a modest amount of time with attitude-confirming media (M = 2.92, SD = 0.78), but in the eyes of Republican respondents, Democrats spent far more time with friendly news (M = 3.83, SD = 0.85), $t(324) = 19.47$, $p < .001$. Similarly, Republicans said they spent a moderate amount of time with like-minded media (M =3.07 SD =0.73), but Democrats assumed Republicans were far more attentive to attitude-consonant news (M = 3.57, SD = 0.89), $t(489) = 12.50$, $p < .001$. H3 would also be supported by evidence that respondents underestimated the time their out-group spent with attitude-challenging media. That is indeed the case. Democrats said they spent a fair amount of time with diverse news (M = 2.95. SD = 0.81), but Republicans thought Democrats spent much less time with such media (M = 2.10 SD = 0.80), $t(324) = -18.94$, $p < .001$. The same pattern is evident for Democrats: While Republicans reported spending a modest amount of time with attitude-challenging news (M = 2.93, SD = 0.82), Democrats assumed Republicans spent less time with non-likeminded media (M = 2.38, SD = 0.87), $t(489) = -13.99$, $p < .001$. The overall trend is one in which news consumers say their own media behaviors are somewhat selective, while their political rivals believe their behaviors to be substantially more selective.

Predictors of perceived selective exposure. A final test addresses RQ1: Who is more likely to believe others engage in selective media habits? To begin, I created a new measure of perceived attention to attitude-confirming media for others by summing perceived attention to attitude-confirming media for both the in- and out-groups (M = 6.93, SD = 1.34).

To scrutinize the factors that contribute to the perception that others' consume attitude-consonant news, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. The model

examines the impact of respondents' age, gender, race (White or not White), party affiliation (Democrat or Republican), education level, and personal exposure to attitude-confirming news on the perception that others engage in selective media behaviors. Because personal exposure to attitude-conforming news is the only predictor that has a theorized relationship to the outcome variable, it is entered into the model first. Table 5 displays the results of the two blocks.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression: Predicting Perceptions of Others' Exposure to Attitude-Confirming News

Parameter	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Step 1			
Constant	4.75	0.17	
Own selectivity	0.73	0.06	.42 ***
Step 2			
Constant	4.26	0.27	
Own selectivity	0.69	0.06	.39 ***
Age	0.00	0.01	.01
Gender	-0.14	0.09	-.05
Race (0 = non-White)	-0.22	0.10	-.07 *
Education	0.15	0.04	.12 ***
Party affiliation (0=Democrat)	0.28	0.09	.10 **

Note: R^2= .17 for Step 1, R^2=.21 for Step 2. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

The first block shows that respondents' own attention to like-minded news contributed to predicting their perception of others' like-minded news consumption. On its own, personal exposure to attitude-confirming news explains 17% of the variance in perceptions of others' media selectivity. The addition of social and demographic markers in Block 2 explains another 4% of the variance, a significant increase, $F(5, 808) = 7.24$, p

< .001. In this second block, personal exposure to attitude-confirming news remains a significant predictor of others' media selectivity: The more respondents personally engaged in selective media habits, the more they believed others did as well.

Race, education level, and party affiliation also emerged as significant predictors of perceptions of others' media selectivity. Respondents who were non-White demonstrated lower levels of perceived other selective exposure. Conversely, being highly educated and belonging to the Republican Party were associated with higher levels of perceived other selective exposure.

Discussion

The present study was designed to investigate (1) whether news consumers viewed politically-motivated selective media behaviors as desirable, undesirable, or value-neutral and (2) how partisans perceived their political rivals' news diets. In regard to how news consumers regard selective media behaviors, I hypothesized that citizens would see attention to like-minded media as a undesirable style of news consumption and would see attention to attitude-challenging media as a desirable style of news consumption. To test these hypotheses, I relied on theories of social comparison, positing that the differences in how news consumers evaluate their own media habits and how they evaluate others' media habits would reveal their attitudes toward selective media behaviors.

The results support the idea that citizens see the consumption of attitude-consonant news as an undesirable style of media consumption: News consumers reported watching and reading a modest amount of like-minded news, but they assumed that members of their political in-group consumed more than they did personally, and that members of their political out-group consumed even more like-minded news than their in-group did.

The opposite pattern was observed for perceptions of attention to attitude-challenging news. News consumers reported watching and reading a modest amount of attitude-challenging news, but they assumed that members of their political in-group consumed less than they did personally, and that members of their political out-group consumed even less attitude-challenging news than their in-group did.

In today's world of myriad media options, it could very well have been the case that news consumers believe their fellow citizens take advantage of the diverse array of political content. That does not appear to be the case. Faced with the opportunity to curate a news diet of both attitude-challenging and attitude-confirming news, people assume their political opponents load up on like-minded content.

Perceived self-other differences in selective media behaviors. The difference between how news consumers described their own and others' media habits is illuminating. Just looking at the means of the two media habit scales, audience members report consuming a moderate amount of both like-minded news and attitude-challenging news. Armed with only that information, it would be tempting to conclude that news consumers see both behaviors as fairly benign media habits, i.e., neither style of news consumption is necessarily desirable or undesirable–respondents were, after all, willing to admit to engaging in both styles of news consumption. But in comparing respondents' perceptions of their own and others' media habits, the differences in perceived media behaviors indicate that the news audience does recognize one behavior as preferable: Respondents consistently rated themselves as the most likely candidates to seek out diverse and attitude-challenging media while assuming that others did not do so nearly as often. Indeed, nearly 70% of respondents said that members of their political out-group

"often" or "always" seek out news that supports their views, while only 14% said out-group members "often" or "always" seek out news that challenges their views.

Respondents did acknowledge that they spent a modest amount of time with like-minded news. To an extent, attending to friendly media appears to be an acceptable behavior. Prior (2013) found that partisans actually over-reported their attention to attitude-consonant partisan news, a result that may steam from a need to appear ideologically consistent (Clay et al., 2013). Indeed, the results of Study 1 demonstrate that partisans acknowledge paying attention to sources that they see as favoring their own side. But there appears to be a limit to how much selectivity is deemed appropriate, indicated by the finding that, as much as people say they turn to like-minded news, they assume others do so more often.

These findings are consistent with a long history of social comparison research which shows that individuals reliably grant themselves positive evaluations at the expense of others, especially when those others are socially distant from the perceiver (i.e., members of the out-group). While there are situations where individuals will assign others a more positive evaluation–for example, on difficult tasks like computer programming, people rate their own abilities as below average (Kruger, 1999)– it is unlikely that the present study would reflect such a pattern. From a self-enhancement motivation perspective (Brown, 1986), people would be driven to see their own media habits as superior to others'–especially their out-group others. It is not surprising that people like to think of themselves as open-minded, which is generally viewed as a positive trait. From a non-motivated cognitive perspective (Chambers, 2008), relevant information is easily accessible when making estimates about one's own media

behaviors; but because citizens have no knowledge readily available about others' news habits, they are more likely to rely on easily accessible heuristics (e.g., "Democrats are liberal and therefore prefer news that is also liberal") or stereotypes about the out-group (e.g., "Republicans are close-minded, so of course they want to watch Fox News").

The gap between perceptions of in-group and out-group media behaviors points to the perception being at least partly rooted in a negative stereotype political rivals. If it was simply the case that people relied on an ideology-based audience/message heuristic, respondents would have reported that both the in-group and out-group engage in selective behaviors at about the same rate. That was not the case. Respondents believed a specific group of others–the others they are most likely to have negative feelings toward–had the most selective media habits. Ideally, I would have tested whether those with negative impressions of the out-group are more likely than those with neutral impressions about the out-group to believe others engage in selective behaviors. Due to the constraints imposed by the collaborative nature of this survey, I was unable to include the measures necessary to test whether feelings toward the out-group affect perceptions of the out-group's media habits. Future research should include measures of out-group affect, though in today's hyper-polarized political environment, neutral feelings toward the opposing party may be hard to come by.

Respondents also believed that in-group members engaged in selective behaviors more often, and nonselective behaviors less often, than they did personally. Interestingly, the gap in perceptions of self and the in-group were not always equidistant (see Figure 5). Respondents saw little difference between themselves and the in-group when estimating the amount of time spent with attitude-challenging media, the narrowness of the gap

reflected in the small effect size ($d = 0.07$). The perceived distance between the self and in-group for use of attitude-confirming media, however, was much larger ($d = 0.35$). It seems be the case that news consumers are willing to assume their in-group participate in a positive behavior (i.e., use of challenging media), but not as willing to believe their political comrades avoid a more undesirable behavior (i.e., use of attitude-constant media).

Limitations and future directions. This study is not without limitations. In order to assess individuals' perceptions of their own and others' media habits, I created seven items that asked respondents to estimate time spent with attitude-challenging and attitude-confirming news. As expected, a factor analysis yielded two clear factors, but the internal consistency for the items measuring perceived attention to attitude-confirming news was somewhat low ($\alpha = .62$). Future research should include additional items to improve the scale.

The present research includes an initial exploration into which individual-level differences might predict perceptions of selective exposure, and future research should follow up some of these findings. For example, those who personally engage in selective media habits are more likely to believe others do as well–a result that is unsurprising considering the history of findings regarding social projection. Somewhat more surprising were the results regarding education and party affiliation: Those with higher levels of education, and those who identified as Republicans, were more likely to think others engage in media selectivity–even after accounting for their own selectivity habits.

In interpreting the findings of this study, it is critical to emphasize that that it was not designed to test the extent to which people actually engage in selective media

behaviors; rather, the purpose was to gauge how news consumers perceive their own and others' media habits. The perceptual focus of this research affects the interpretation of the results. For example, Republicans did not necessary *overestimate* the selective behavior of Democrats; rather, Republicans perceived Democrats as being more selective in their media choices, compared to how Democrats perceived their own selective behaviors. Without tracking respondents' media use, it is impossible to know whether respondents were wrong about their own or others' media behaviors. Do the partisans in this sample truly spend a modest amount of time with attitude-challenging news? I cannot say for sure, but what I can say is that news consumers report spending a modest amount of time with attitude-confirming news, but in the eyes of their political rivals, partisans' attention to like-minded news extends beyond modest consumption.

For the purposes of perceived media effect research, whether news consumers are right or wrong about their rivals' media habits misses the point. Regardless of the extent to which citizens actually engage in selective media behaviors, their political opponents certainly seem to believe that they do. When news consumers believe others are influenced by media, and they believe others are mostly seeking news that fits their existing views, a situation arises where citizens believe others are exposing themselves to the very information that is most likely to reinforce or strengthen their existing views.

Believing others are focusing their attention on news that nourishes their own ideology may have the effect of making the political out-group seem more extreme, and could potentially be a driving factor behind perceptions of partisan polarization. Researchers have taken on the task of exploring whether news consumers engage in selective media behaviors and the possible consequences of this style of news selection,

but this is the first study to consider that–regardless of whether selective exposure actually happens–the news audience appears to believe that their political opponents rely on like-minded media.

Summary of Findings

Modern news consumers find themselves at an expanding buffet of news choices–a variety of options in flavors that would satisfy any political palate. But the thing about buffets is–one is rarely alone in the line. While news consumers fill their plates, their elbows knock against other news consumers looking to satisfy their own information needs. What sorts of news do citizens believe others are spooning onto their plates?

The results of two empirical studies reveal that members of the public appear to have a lay theory of partisan selective exposure. Rather than believe others are sampling news featuring a variety of flavors, people believe others are consuming news that satisfies their particular political palates. News consumers believe others, especially their political rivals, gravitate toward like-minded news.

Why do people think that political partisanship drives others' news choices? The results of Study 1 suggests it may be an over-reliance on the assumption that news preferences match political preferences. That mental shortcut may emerge from the law-of-small-numbers bias: People tend to extrapolate based on limited experience (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971) and make inferences based on limited data (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). If, for example, a Democrat has few Republican connections on social media and those Republican friends frequently share news with a conservative slant, the Democrat may extrapolate from that experience and assume that Republicans consume primarily

conservative news. The results of Study 1 support the existence of an ideology-based message/audience heuristic. Clinton supporters believed Trump voters got news from – what they perceived to be–Trump-leaning saw sources such as FNC and Rush Limbaugh. Similarly, Trump voters believed Clinton supporters turned to news that, in their view, favored Clinton. Citizens demonstrated a tendency to match partisan others to news sources that they saw as reflecting that partisanship.

It is possible that matching others to like-minded media happens because that is how citizens choose their own media, i.e., people may project their own media habits onto others. As was evident by the results of Study 1, people tend to report having a slight preference for like-minded news. Because people often assume their own habits are normative (Ross et al., 1977), they may simply assume others share in this penchant for like-minded information. As there is a lot of guesswork involved in estimating someone else's media habits, it is easy enough for perceivers to overestimate the amount of attitude-consonant news their peers consume. In Study 2, perceptions of one's own selective media behaviors were predictive of others' media behaviors: Partisans who personally engaged with like-minded media were more likely to think others did as well.

The results of Study 2, however, suggest that perceived selective exposure is not merely the result of shoddy guesswork, an ideology-based audience/message heuristic, or an assumption that others' news habits are the same as our own. When asked directly about selective media behaviors, the gap between how citizens describe their own and others' media habits suggests that excessive selection of like-minded media is perceived as undesirable–something "the other side" does. Even those who reported high levels of selective media behaviors still believed their political rivals were guiltier of the practice.

This indicates that, though people project their own media habits onto others, they still draw distinctions between themselves and others in a manner that is self-serving. If partisan selective exposure was seen as a value-neutral behavior–a benign matching of messages to audiences based on political preferences–there would be no reason for citizens to report differences between their own and others' rates of selective exposure.

But citizens do see differences between their own and others' media behaviors. Partisans report having a news diet balanced with like-minded and cross-cutting information, suggesting that citizens see value in both types of information, at least in theory. In practice, citizens may see it as increasingly difficult to access legitimate alternative views. Whereas many Republicans may have simply considered CNN to be liberal-slanted in the past, Republicans–chief among them, President Trump–now regularly accuse the cable news giant of being "fake news." Exposure to CNN, in the minds of many on the political Right, may no longer be considered exposure to alternative viewpoints, but rather, exposure to outright lies. Meanwhile, on the political Left, opinion leaders increasingly use terms such as "propaganda" and "state news" to describe sources like FNC and Brietbart News. To liberals, exposure to such sources may not constitute exposure to alternative views but rather, exposure to misinformation. In light of these political trends, citizens may claim to value exposure to diverse viewpoints but also see it as a challenge to find sources that they believe offer those viewpoints.

Perceived Exposure

This study joins a small body of research examining perceptions of others' media exposure. The few scholars who have explored perceived exposure have done so because it is predictive of perceived media effects–i.e., citizens tend to believe media impact

others, but that impact is unlikely to happen if they do not believe others were exposed to the media in question. Perhaps because perceived exposure is such an intuitive prerequisite for perceived media effects, it has not often been on the receiving end of empirical inquiry. Previous research has focused on whether perceivers believe others have been exposed to a particular message, but this is the first in-depth investigation into the sorts of messages perceivers believe others seek out and the cognitive tools they use to predict others' media behaviors.

The present studies have revealed several critical findings regarding the notion of perceived media exposure. First, consistent with prior research (Reid & Hogg, 2005; Meirick, 2005) citizens match others to media based on perceived characteristics of both media and the potential audience. In the case of the present studies, this meant matching the perceived partisanship of news sources to the perceived partisanship of a group of others *and* matching like-minded media to the partisan out-group. Both matches require perceivers to link their impressions of media to their impressions of a potential audience of that message. However, one is a case of a perceiver believing Republicans watch FNC because he or she senses the two share political preferences and in the other case, a perceiver matches Republicans to FNC because that perceiver is a Democrat who believes his or her close-minded political rivals are connoisseurs of like-minded news. Both perceptions are the result of perceivers matching aspects of a group of others to aspects of the media in question. The present studies demonstrate that perceivers may match audiences to media based on multiple perceived characteristics–in this case, perceived political preferences and negative stereotypes about the out-group.

It is thus critical to understand perceivers' impressions of media and their impressions of the potential audience for that media. The results of Study 1 illustrate why accounting for perceivers' impressions of media messages is important: Opposing partisans often disagreed about the political valence of news sources, and those perceived differences helped explain why voters saw their own election news diets so differently from how those diets were perceived by their political rivals. Researchers typically make assumptions about the characteristics of media messages, as would have been the case if I had predetermined which news sources in Study 1 were pro-Trump or pro-Clinton. But making such assumptions could result in missing why perceivers believe others are or are not exposed to certain content. For example, I personally would have categorized NPR as politically neutral, but Trump voters overwhelmingly saw it as biased toward Clinton. Had I not accounted for how perceivers' impressions of NPR, I might have concluded that Trump voters thought Clinton voters were consuming a lot of neutral news, which was not the case. In research on perceptions of media exposure and the perceived effects of that exposure, researchers rarely account for perceivers' impressions of media messages. The present results demonstrate why such an omission could lead to misunderstanding citizens' beliefs about others' media exposure.

Similarly, in understanding perceptions of others' media exposure, it is important to account for how perceivers see the others-in-question, especially in terms of the perceiver's relationship to that group of others. While calculating likelihood of media exposure for a distinct group may involve only a simple message/audience matching heuristic (e.g., children like cartoons), when the group is an out-group, the potential exists

for audiences to use negative stereotype to match others to messages (e.g., close-minded political rivals seek out attitude-confirming news).

Another finding of the present studies that should inform future research on perceptions of others' exposure is that perceptions of others' exposure cannot be fully explained by self exposure. Projection did help explain the results–for example, in Study 2, those who engaged with like-minded media were the most willing to assume others did as well–but the results certainly do not indicate that perceivers believe others' media habits are identical to their own. Indeed, in Study 1, perceivers reported that others are got election news from sources they did not personally use. Even without personal exposure to a particular media message, if a perceiver has an impression of the message and knowledge about the potential audience for that message, they are equipped to estimate the likelihood that certain others will encounter the message. For example, in Study 1, even Democrats who said they received no news from FNC still had an impression of the political leanings of the channel and believed Republicans watched it. Personal exposure to media may help perceivers form an impression of media and perceivers may, to an extent, project their own exposure onto others–but researchers should be cautious about measuring self-exposure and assuming that perceivers believe others' media habits mirror their own.

Finally, the present investigation into perceived exposure raises an important distinction between perceived intentional and perceived incidental media exposure. The results of Study 1 could potentially be interpreted as citizens perceiving that others consume politically consonant news because those are simply the messages they are most likely to encounter. For example, perhaps Clinton voters thought Trump supporters

consumed a lot of FNC because stories from that source were more likely to appear in their newsfeed, or because FNC directly markets to conservatives. Though unlikely, it may be the case that voters believe others are more likely to incidentally encounter like-minded, versus attitude-changing, news.

But what is more likely, and what is supported by the result of Study 2, is that citizens grant others agency in choosing the sorts of news they want to consume. Perceivers do not believe others sit idly by and consume the messages that waft their way. Rather, perceivers believe others seek out certain types of news. In providing evidence that citizens believe others gravitate toward like-minded news (perceived partisan selective exposure) the present studies also provide evidence of a more general belief: People believe others choose certain media (perceived selective exposure).

Perceived consequences of partisan selective exposure. The importance of perceived selective exposure can be summed up by the following example: Suppose that a perceiver knows that Citizen A accidentally saw a media message at the dentist's office and that Citizen B actively searched out that same media message online. Which citizen would the perceiver believe is most affected by the media message: Citizen A, who incidentally encountered the message, or Citizen B, who sought it out? By seeking out the message, Citizen B has signaled a "fit" with the content (Reid & Hogg, 2005), and this openness to the message could indicate an increased vulnerability–or even receptivity to–the message's effects.

In the quest to understand–from the audience's perspective–what happens when others interact with media messages, scholars have mostly focused on the fact that people generally believe others are quite vulnerable to media's influence. This study takes a

different approach, joining a smaller body of research that considers that people may believe media affect others not only because media are powerful and others are vulnerable, but also because people believe others are drawn to the very messages they are most receptive to. Returning to Davison's (1983) fear that his neighbors would be swayed by a political pamphlet delivered to their mailboxes, it is easy to see how his concern might be amplified if, instead of just coming across the pamphlet in a stack of mail, Davison saw his neighbors lining up at a disliked candidate's information booth. The findings of the present study are analogous to that scenario: Partisans believe their political opponents seek out like-minded news, the very news that is most likely to cause undesirable effects.

To the extent that perceived selective exposure may have consequences, it matters little whether citizens are accurate when it comes to others' selective media behaviors. Whether they are right or wrong, if partisans believe their political opponents are exposed primarily to like-minded information, the pervasive belief that media are influential would lend itself to sensing that such exposure was consequential. Believing others have crafted media diets that serve primarily to nourish their own political preferences may have the effect of making the other side seem more extreme, and could potentially be a driving factor behind perceptions of partisan polarization. Regardless of the extent to which partisan selective exposure is actually happening, citizens seem to believe their political opponents are relying on like-minded media.

An experimental design would be best suited to addressing whether citizens believe there are consequences to partisan selective exposure. The design would ideally manipulate perceptions of like-minded news consumption. For example, respondents

could all be introduced to a hypothetical television viewer who is part of a research project. In one condition, respondents would be told that, as part of a research project, the viewer came into the lab every day for two weeks and watched two hours of news from a like-minded source. In another condition, respondents would be told that the viewer came into the lab every day for two weeks and watched two hours of news from an attitude-challenging source. In a third condition, respondents would be told that the viewer came into the lab and watched two hours of non-news content (e.g., episodes of a comedy TV show). Respondents would be asked to estimate what happened to the viewer as the result of the research project. Did the viewer develop more extreme attitudes, become more tolerant of opposing opinions? If people believe there are consequences to like-minded news exposure, I would expect respondents in the like-minded news condition to say the viewer become more extreme and less tolerant as a result of that exposure. Exploring the perceived effects of others' news diets is one of the immediate next steps in my research agenda.

This thorough examination of perceived exposure has explored an element of perceived media effects that is often overlooked. Outside of a handful of studies (Eveland et al., 1999; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001; McLeod et al.,1997; Meirick, 2005), few scholars have tried to address how people make predictions about others' media exposure, and no studies have looked at perceived exposure to news media. The present work helps identify the cognitive shortcuts that help people make predictions about where other people turn to for news, and reveals that citizens use both perceptions of partisanship and negative stereotyping about out-groups to match others to news messages.

A New Model of Perceived News Media Effects: Integrating Perceived Partisan Selective Exposure

Ultimately, this deep look into how perceivers estimate others' exposure to news media was in service of a broader theoretical exploration. The notion of perceived exposure–and along with it, perceived selective exposure–are elements of a larger model of perceived news media effects (Figure 6).

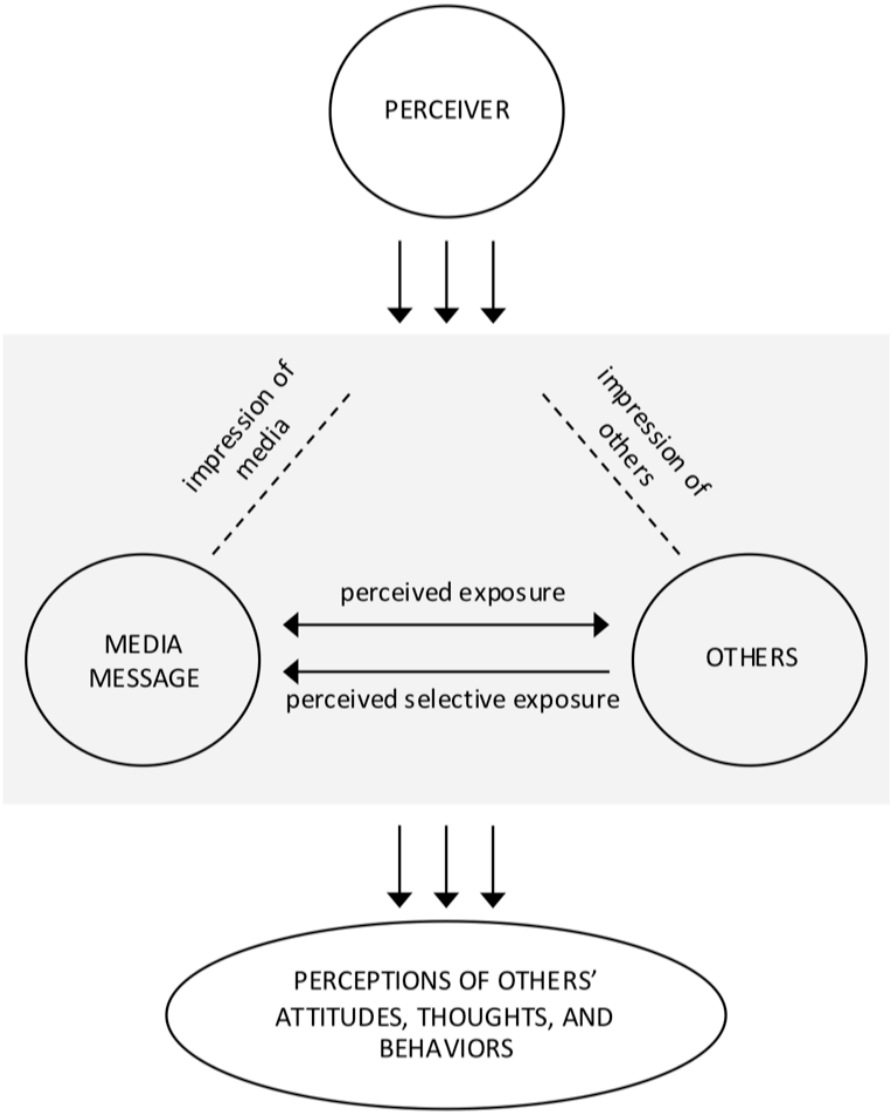


Figure 6. Model of perceived media effects.

This model illustrates the process a perceiver undergoes in order to estimate the impact of news on other people. In short, perceivers make assumptions about media and about groups of others–they use cognitive shortcuts to guess whether those others have interacted with the media-in-question–and then based on these inferences about media, others, and the interaction between the two, perceivers assess the impact that certain news media have on groups of others.

Perceived exposure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for perceived media effects. In other words, perceived exposure, even perceived selective exposure, does not necessarily equal perceived effects. For example, Democrats may believe Republicans directly seek out some news from MSNBC, but they do not necessarily think MSNBC influences Republicans. The calculations that perceivers perform when estimating others' exposure to news content (e.g., their impressions of the media message, their impressions of the others-in-question) also come into play when perceivers estimate how others are affected by media. Perceivers use their impressions of media and a potential media audience to decide if exposure is likely to occur. If perceivers believe exposure has occurred, they once again use their impressions of media and others to predict whether others will be affected by that exposure. Perceived media effects on others should vary according to a) what perceivers make of the media message b) a perceiver's relationship to and attitude toward the potential audience c) the perceived likelihood of the message and audience meeting and d) whether the perceiver believes that meeting was incidental or intentional.

The next step in my research agenda is to fully articulate the model of perceived news media effects. The model accounts for how social perceptions are influenced by the

assumptions people make about media's effects on others. To illustrate, take the perception that the nation is sharply divided by ideology. This belief may originate directly from personal experience (e.g., friends and family are polarized) or from the acceptance of the version of reality presented by media (e.g., the news says people are polarized, so that must be true). But such a perception can also be formed indirectly–people sense that news media encourage extremity and division, that vulnerable others are exposed to that news, and thus others become increasingly polarized. In this way, the social perception of "political polarization" stems from assumptions about the media others are exposed to and the perceived effects of that exposure.

Just as understanding perceptions of others' media exposure is important because those perceptions help explain perceptions of media effects, perceptions of media effects are ultimately important because people may adjust their own attitudes and behaviors in response to perceived media influence. Returning once again to Davison's (1983), it is evident how perceived media effects on others can lead to actual effects. Davison assumed a media message–in his case, a political pamphlet–would influence his neighbors, a perception that prompted him to take action; he handed out pamphlets for his own preferred candidate. Did the political leaflets have any effect on his neighbors? Perhaps not; but people react to the world as they see it, even if those perceptions are inaccurate. The importance of social perceptions in guiding one's own behavior is well documented in several streams of scholarship (Asch 1955; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Indeed, there is mounting evidence that people act on perceptions of media influence, regardless of whether that influence actually occurred (Gunther & Story, 2003; Rojas, 2010; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). In this

way, many of news media's greatest effects on society may not be caused by the media itself, but rather, by citizens' assumptions about how news media has affected society.

Mapping the ways in which people believe others are impacted by news requires understanding the sorts of news that people believe others are exposed to. The present research provides insight into this important query, finding that, in a news environment littered with choices, people believe others gravitate to news that fits their views.

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