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Causes and Consequences of Selective Exposure Among Political Blog Readers: The Role of Hostile Media Perception in Motivated Media Use and Expressive Participation

Porismita Borah
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ABSTRACT. Concerns about selective exposure to partisan information have become a mainstay for scholars of political communication in the changing media environment. This study draws on a survey of a unique population—readers of political blogs—to explore the relationship between perceptions of mainstream media bias (as hostile media perception) and selective exposure to media sources that provide like-minded information as well as social support. We find that hostile media perception is an important motivator for partisan selective exposure among this audience, and also that such perceptions can lead indirectly to expressive political participation by encouraging visits to politically homogeneous online spaces.

KEYWORDS. Expressive participation, hostile media perception, motivated media use, selective exposure

Online media have enabled the proliferation of outlets providing access to political information and commentary of all kinds. The official voices of news organizations are joined online by a multitude of individuals and organizations sharing information, providing expertise, advocating for candidates, and engaging in political punditry, creating an increasingly complex ecology of political communication. The growing readership for specialized—often partisan—information channels, especially among politically involved citizens, has heightened concern about a more polarized and fragmented electorate arising from selective exposure to media. The fear is that citizens will wall themselves off from contradictory viewpoints inside partisan

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“echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Pariser, 2011; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2002).

Some studies provide evidence for scholars’ concern about this “echo chamber” phenomenon. A content analysis of political blogs revealed polarization of the political blogosphere such that cross-ideological linkages between political blogs on the left and right of the political spectrum account for a very small portion of the overall links in their blogs (Adamic & Glance, 2005). Political blog readers were found to have higher levels of political interest and stronger party ideology than non-readers (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010) and discussion networks around controversial political topics were found to be politically homogeneous (Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). However, others propose that partisan media such as political blogs serve to supplement traditional news media use or unfavorable information sources instead of displacing them (e.g., Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000). Garrett, Carnahan and Lynch (2013) found that the use of partisan media is positively correlated with the use of mainstream news media sources, suggesting that the desire to seek out attitude-consistent information sources is at least to some extent balanced by the use of attitude-discrepant media.

Such mixed findings and expectations about citizens’ information selection patterns suggest that partisan information selection habits, especially selective avoidance, may not be a universal phenomenon, even among citizens who are highly engaged in politics. Rather, selective exposure may depend on a number of contingent factors and motivations (Cotton, 1985; Frey, 1986; Knobloch-Westrick, 2014). In fact, early selective exposure studies produced conflicting findings concerning whether individuals’ beliefs or attitudes motivate them to avoid attitudinal discrepant views (see Freedman & Sears, 1965 for a review; also see Sears & Freedman, 1967). Within more recent research, evidence is building to suggest that selective avoidance of disagreeable information is less common than selectively seeking out content that supports one’s views (Garrett, 2009a; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013).

To further our knowledge of this phenomenon, it is important to understand the mechanisms underlying partisan selectivity (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2007). To investigate what explains blog readers’ patterns of information source use and what role blogs may play in engaging readers with the political process, this study focuses on a psychological factor—hostile media perception (HMP)—which we argue triggers blog users’ defensive motivation in their media selection. More specifically, we explore links among partisanship-driven hostile media perceptions, self-selection of media sources likely to reinforce one’s point of view, and expressive political engagement among political blog readers. We first look at how hostile perceptions of mainstream news media sources shape information source selections among political blog readers, with the goal of demonstrating that hostile media perceptions enhance partisan defensive motivations. In turn, such motivations lead to an individual media diet that includes a larger helping of information supporting pre-existing views and less exposure to dissimilar views via the mainstream news media. We then explore how these paths that begin with alienation from mainstream news media and lead to supportive, like-minded political blog use can end in increased levels of expressive political participation.

To test our hypotheses, we administered a Web-based survey to a purposive sample of political blog readers (N = 3,160) from 40 top political blogs. Our sample allows us to explore the antecedents and possible effects of partisan blog exposure among an audience that is, as yet, insufficiently represented in nationwide random sample surveys.

**POLITICAL BLOG READERS AND SELECTIVE EXPOSURE**

The increased diversity of information sources in the new media environment has rekindled researchers’ early interest in individuals’ information selection behaviors. Selective exposure and avoidance are primarily developed from cognitive dissonance theory (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). Cognitive dissonance and
selective exposure (see Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) are theories that propose that individuals tend to select specific information that supports their prior beliefs or attitudes. According to Festinger (1957), when a person holding an opinion on a matter of importance is exposed to a contrary opinion, cognitive dissonance is produced and he/she has a need to reduce the dissonance. Several strategies are available to reduce experienced dissonance (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). Early studies showed that one of the frequently used strategies for people in a dissonant situation is to select specific information that supports their opinion, avoiding exposure to the dissonance-increasing communication and seeking out consonant communication (Adams, 1961; Ehrlich, Guttmann, Schonbach & Mills, 1957; Stempel 1981). Festinger considered both seeking out supportive information and avoiding dissonant information as selective exposure (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). However, other scholars have considered selective exposure and avoidance conceptually different (Frey, 1986; Lowin, 1967).

Early empirical tests of selective exposure phenomenon did not produce consistent results supporting people’s preference for supportive information (see Freedman & Sears, 1965 and Frey, 1986 for detailed reviews). Regarding such inconsistent findings, scholars assert that whether selective exposure actually occurs may depend upon individual predispositions and psychological factors. For example, Sears and Freedman (1967) suggested that education and interest might promote more balanced information seeking, because numerous studies show that such variables are positively related to consumption of news from diverse information sources, including mainstream news media (Bimber, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998). In addition, education and political interest may motivate individuals to seek out and maintain accurate understandings and judgments on political issues, which may lead to a more balanced selection of information. Studies on motivated reasoning have revealed that individuals motivated to be accurate showed more complete and unbiased searches for information and an increased effort to reduce biased analyses (e.g., Tetlock, 1983, 1985; Tetlock & Kim, 1987).

In contrast, some individual predispositions such as partisanship and issue involvement seem to increase selective exposure. For example, studies show that partisans tend to exhibit a great deal more selectivity than nonpartisans (Garrett, 2009b, Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Stroud, 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Partisans strive to protect their political beliefs because their partisan attitudes are not only easily accessible but also closely related to their self-concept (Stroud, 2008). As studies on motivated reasoning show, partisans are more likely to be motivated to defend or maintain their prior beliefs, which may prompt a biased information search and assessment by showing: (1) confirmation bias—a biased search and assessment for supportive information (Taber & Lodge, 2006; see also Sweeney & Gruber, 1984), and (2) a disconfirmation bias—a biased search and assessment of contradictory evidence (Lodge & Taber, 2000; see also Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979).

Regarding political blog readers’ pattern of information selection, such dispositional and motivational approaches to selective exposure provide two important implications. First, studies have shown that readers of political blogs are not only better-educated and more politically interested but also are more partisan than non–blog readers (Farrell, Lawrence, & Sides, 2008; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Related characteristics of political blog readers, such as strong issue involvement (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009), or concerns with credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2013; Winter & Krämer, 2012) may increase selective exposure. Johnson, Bichard, and Zhang (2009) show that blog users indeed engage in selective information seeking. Using data from 11 countries, Goldman and Mutz (2011) demonstrated that individuals select media that are close to their political predispositions.

Second, the motivational approach to selective exposure suggests that the selective exposure phenomenon may depend upon the extent to which a specific situation triggers salience of individuals’ partisanship and thus induces partisan defensive motivation to protect political beliefs or attitudes. In this regard, one of the reasons for weak evidence of selective exposure
may be the lack of sufficient arousal of motivation to induce biased information selection. In fact, a meta-analysis confirmed that dissonance arousal is an important precondition for selective exposure, such that those who experience dissonance before information selection task show a greater tendency to select supportive information than those who do not (D’Alessio & Allen, 2002). Stroud (2011) offers four theoretical explanations for the selection of like-minded information: cognitive dissonance, motivations beyond dissonance, cognitive misers, and perceptions of information quality (for details, see Stroud, 2011; also see Stroud, 2010). Using cross-sectional and panel surveys as well as experimental research, the author shows the prevalence of partisan selectivity across newspapers, cable television news, talk radio, political Web sites, and political documentaries.

**HMP, MOTIVATED INFORMATION SEEKING, AND SELECTIVE EXPOSURE**

Hostile media perception invokes the idea of “perceptual bias” whereby partisans—highly involved individuals who hold strong opinions about an issue—tend to see media coverage of that issue as biased against their own position. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985), first demonstrated this “biased perception of the media bias” (p. 578) in an experiment where they found that both Arab and Israeli partisans labeled the same neutral broadcast news coverage of the Mideast conflict as biased against their own group. The hostile media perception has been replicated in several studies since (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, 1992; Perloff, 1989) and the mechanisms involved in the phenomenon have been explored (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Schmitt, Gunther & Liebhart, 2004, 2006; Matthes, 2013). In a more recent study, Arceneaux, Johnson, and Murphy (2012) examined the influence of partisan news shows on media perceptions. They conducted six laboratory-based experiments and found that counter-attitudinal cable talk shows increase the likelihood of inducing hostile media perceptions. Additionally, they found moderating effects of selective exposure. The influence of counter-attitudinal news shows was mitigated when viewers selected specific news on their own.

The literature suggests that the selective exposure phenomenon may depend upon the extent to which a specific situation induces ego-defensive motivation to protect individuals’ prior belief or attitudes. Because the “partisan bias” in the media is viewed as a threat to the interests and values they themselves hold onto (Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008), hostile media perception can be an important factor influencing perceivers’ ego-defensive information-seeking behaviors, especially among those who have a strong commitment to their own beliefs and attitudes. That is, when partisans experience mainstream news as hostile to their views, they may strive to disconfirm the validity or credibility of the mainstream news and even try to avoid such unfavorable content. At the same time, they are more likely to confirm favorable information and seek out supportive information when they perceive that the mainstream news is hostile to their own views. One possible response is that as more functional alternatives to the mainstream media become available, those who perceive the mainstream news media as hostile will decrease their use of mainstream news media sources and increase use of supportive, partisan sources. The vanguard of this movement should be knowledgeable, interested partisans—a segment of the citizenry well represented by political blog readers.

There is some empirical evidence for these expectations. For example, research on HMP shows that partisans give lower evaluations to media content they perceived as hostile to their views (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2004). This disconfirmation bias is demonstrated by findings that HMP is negatively related to news credibility judgments including factuality, neutrality, and truth telling. More direct evidence for the link between HMP and media selection comes from Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Gil de Zuniga, and Shah (2006). Using a Web-based survey of political dissenters during the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Hwang et al. found that the more that individuals felt their views on the Iraq
war differed from mainstream media portrayals, the more motivated they were to use the Internet as an information source and discussion channel.

**MOTIVATED BLOG USE FOR SUPPORTIVE INFORMATION AND EXPRESSIVE PARTICIPATION**

As a widespread phenomenon, HMP attracts researchers’ attention partly because of its behavioral implications. As Gunther and his associates pointed out (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001) HMP could have wide-ranging consequences “such as corresponding misperceptions of public opinion and potential effects on opinion expression, voting patterns, and other social behaviors that might result” (p. 298). Some research has suggested that HMP could have wide-ranging behavioral consequences such as motivating “corrective” actions aimed at perceived injustice in news media coverage and biased public opinion resulting from hostile media coverage (Rojas, 2010; see also Hwang et al., 2008). That is, HMP may motivate individuals to engage in expressive participation such as expressing one’s criticisms of the media, voicing one’s own views, and/or discussing one’s opinions with others that are seen necessary to correct bias in news media coverage and public opinion by making their own views heard in the public sphere (Hwang et al., 2008).

Among individuals who perceive mainstream news media as hostile toward their views, like-minded political blogs can be important resources for social support, and these supportive spaces may encourage engagement in expressive activities in diverse public venues. Within this “divided blogosphere” where we find “liberals and conservatives linking primarily within their separate communities” (Adamic & Glance, 2005, p. 43), exposure to homogeneous information sources can encourage political participation. Like-minded networks offer encouragement, reinforce partisan ideas, and serve as safe enclaves for the expression of opinions that might not otherwise be heard (Mutz, 2006).

The positive effects of homogeneous information channels may be particularly relevant to the case of blogs because of the relative anonymity of computer-mediated communication channels. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) proposed that visual anonymity makes interpersonal cues less relevant and thus shifts emphasis toward perceptions of the self in terms of group membership. Lea, Spears, and deGroot (2001) found that anonymity increased perceptions of group homogeneity, identification with the group, and, perhaps most important, encouraged adherence to behavioral norms associated with the group.

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

In this study, we examined how blog readers’ perceptions that traditional news media are biased against their views shape their information use patterns and, in turn, how information selection patterns are related to expressive participation. We include print news media and television news media as traditional media use in the study. We first predict that perceived hostility of traditional news media will motivate blog users to avoid unfavorable traditional information sources (the selective avoidance hypothesis). In exploring the relationships between hostile media perception and avoidance of traditional news media, we pose two hypotheses:

- **H1**: Hostile media perception (HMP) will be negatively associated with print news media use among political blog readers.
- **H2**: HMP will be negatively associated with television news use among political blog readers.

Given that respondents of the current study are heavy users of the Internet, avoidance of traditional news media may simply result from their frequent use of the Internet rather than their perceived hostility of the information. That is, the first two hypotheses may reflect an information channel effect. We therefore propose two additional hypotheses to examine whether hostile media perception influences choices of media content, regardless of medium.
H3: HMP will be negatively associated with use of mainstream news Web sites among political blog readers.

H4: HMP will be negatively associated with unlike-minded blog use among political blog readers.

Next, we propose that blog users who perceive the traditional news media as hostile will be motivated to use blogs for supportive information. We define supportive information as information that supports individuals’ opinions. Political blogs may serve as a viable alternative for those who feel their views are poorly represented in the mainstream news media and offer easy access to information that supports readers’ preexisting beliefs.

H5: HMP will be positively associated with blog use for supportive information.

Further, we predict that blog use for supportive information triggered by hostile media perception will be positively related to engaging in expressive participation activities such as expressing one’s criticisms of the media, voicing one’s own views, and/or discussing one’s opinions with others. Supportive blogs should serve as resources for social support and mobilization among those who experience hostile media perception. To explore the paths that begin with alienation from mainstream news media and lead to motivated blog use for supportive information and expressive participation, we pose two hypotheses:

H6: Blog use for supportive information will be positively associated with expressive participation among political blog readers.

H7: Blog use for supportive information will mediate the relationship between HMP and expressive participation among political blog readers.

**METHOD**

Although a great number of Americans are using the Internet for news and political information, political blog users remain a numeric minority. Given the influential role of the blogosphere in American politics, however, studies of this group add a meaningful contribution to current research on political information use. Our concern here is with those who use political blogs, whether their perceptions of the information environment shaped their information channel selection, and how such selective information use spurred action.

To construct our sample we took the top 300 most popular blogs listed on Technorati (http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/) in 2006 and narrowed them down to “political” blogs (those that contain mostly political content). We further refined the sample by eliminating blogs that were in a foreign language and those that had not been in operation by the same blogger or groups of bloggers for at least two years in order to gain samples of audiences that were familiar with the blog content and style. On the basis of this sample selection process, our final solicitation was e-mailed to 154 top political blogs in October 2006. This solicitation produced 66 responses from blog authors. Of these, 40 bloggers posted our survey, resulting in a valid sample of 3,160 blog readers. Of the total reader respondents, 26.2% were women and 73.8% were men. The mean age of the respondents was 46 years (SD = 12.28). Ethnic distribution of the sample was 89.9% white. The median educational level was some graduate education and the median annual household income was $80,000–$100,000. The gender, education, and income skews in this data are consistent with previous research on blog readers (Rainie, 2005). This procedure also produced a very ideologically diverse sample, with 39.7% describing themselves as Democrats and 28.1% as Republicans, while 23.5% of the respondents chose third parties (i.e., Libertarians, Greens, and other) as their party affiliation.

**Measures**

Print news media use was an additive index of four items asking respondents how often they use print news media (i.e., a local newspaper, a national newspaper, an international newspaper, and a news magazine). The four items
were measured on an 11-point scale, where zero meant “none in the past year,” and ten meant “very often.” Print news media use was constructed by averaging the values of the four items (α = .73, M = 4.84, SD = 2.70, Min = 0, Max = 10).

TV news use was constructed by three items asking respondents how often they watch national evening news, local evening news, and news magazine programs (α = .79, M = 3.62, SD = 2.85, Min = 0, Max = 10). The three items were measured on an 11-point scale, where zero meant “none in the past year,” and ten meant “very often.”

Use of mainstream news Web sites was measured by a single item asking respondents how often they use mainstream news Web sites such as CNN.com and Nytimes.com (M = 7.92 SD = 2.86, Min = 0, Max = 10). The item was measured on an 11-point scale, where zero meant “none in the past year,” and ten meant “very often.”

Unlike-minded blog use was measured by a single item asking respondents how often they visited a blog they disagreed with (M = 5.67, SD = 2.89, Min = 0, Max = 10). The item was measured on an 11-point scale, where zero meant “none in the past year,” and ten meant “very often.”

Blog use for supportive information. In order to measure partisan-based defensive motivations for political blog use, we created two statements tapping blog use for supportive information. Blog use for supportive information was measured by asking respondents’ level of agreement with the following statements: “I use blogs to give me more facts to back up my opinions” and “I use blogs to help me make up my mind about things” (α = .62, M = 6.13, SD = 1.84, Min = 0, Max = 10).

Primary news source was measured by asking respondents to choose a primary news source among six news sources (print newspaper, online newspaper, online news portal, blogs, TV, and radio). A total of 38.2% (n = 1200) of the respondents chose blogs, 10.3% (n = 323) chose print newspaper, 24.4% (n = 765) chose online newspaper, 17.8% (n = 558) chose news portal, 3.7% (n = 116) chose TV, and 5.6% (n = 117) chose radio as their primary news source.

For the actual analyses for examining respondents’ source selection patterns, we only used blogs, print newspaper, online newspaper, and TV.

Hostile media perception was measured by a single item, asking respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Most news media are biased against my views.” Respondents indicated the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement using an 11-point scale ranging from “0” (strongly disagree) to “10” (strongly agree) (M = 6.36, SD = 2.58, Min = 0, Max = 10). Even with our purposive sample, there was considerable range and variation in the hostile media perception measure (see King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994 for problems of selection bias restricting variance).

Expressive participation. An index for expressive participation was created using nine items that measured on an 11-point scale how often respondents participated in following online and offline expressive activities: (1) sent an e-mail to an editor of a newspaper/magazine; (2) used e-mail to contact a politician; (3) forwarded a political e-mail to friends; (4) signed an online petition; (5) forwarded a news story to friends via e-mail; (6) recruited friends via e-mail to support a cause or campaign; (7) wrote a letter to an editor of a newspaper/magazine; (8) displayed a campaign button, sticker, or sign; and (9) contacted a politician. An index was created by averaging scores for these items (α = .88, M = 2.97, SD = 2.27, Min = 0, Max = 10).

Control variables. Two sets of variables are controlled for the main analyses. First, five demographic variables were constructed and controlled: age, gender (female), race (white), education, and income. Second, we controlled for three political orientation variables: political interest, party affiliation (Democrats, Republicans, and third party), and strength of party affiliation. An index for political interest was created by taking the mean of responses to questions asking how closely they follow political issues and how much they were interested in political strategy (inter-item correlation = .57, M = 8.06, SD = 1.70, Min = 0, Max = 10). Three dummy variables of Democratic party, Republican party, and third-party affiliation
were constructed based on an item asking respondent’s party ideology (Democrats, \( n = 1,253 \); Republicans, \( n = 887 \); third party, \( n = 744 \); no affiliation, \( n = 276 \)). Strength of party affiliation was measured by a single item, asking how strong the respondents’ party affiliation is on a one (weak) to three (strong) scale (\( M = 2.56, SD = .63 \)).

**RESULTS**

*Preliminary Analysis: Validation of HMP*

Before testing the stated hypotheses, we first attempt to further validate our HMP measures by looking at whether the HMP measure in this study has construct validity by showing that it is predictable by individual-level factors of ideological extremity and partisanship (see Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther, 1992; Vallone et al., 1985). To test construct validity of our HMP measure, we used a series of hierarchical regressions to determine which factors among the control variables predicted hostile media perception. In the analyses, demographic variables (gender, race, age, education, and income) were entered into the first block, followed by political orientation (political interest, strength of party affiliation, party affiliation). This analytical strategy was undertaken to obtain two pieces of evidence: (1) the amount of variance in hostile media perception accounted for by each block of variables after the controls, and (2) the effect of each predictor, net of all the others included in the final equation. The results are shown in Table 1.

The results show that hostile media perception is linked to political orientation after controlling for demographic variables. The incremental \( R^2 \) for this block (9.50%) is significant at \( p < .001 \). Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Eveland & Shah, 2003), strength of party affiliation (\( \beta = .10, p < .001 \)) and Republican party affiliation (\( \beta = .19, p < .001 \)) positively predicted hostile media perception. In addition, political interest (\( \beta = .09, p < .001 \)) and third-party affiliation (\( \beta = .09, p < .01 \)) were positively related to hostile media perception, while Democrat party affiliation was negatively related to hostile media perception (\( \beta = -.12, p < .001 \)). These results help establish a necessary degree of construct validity of the hostile media perception measure. That is, the measure captured respondents’ self-anchored and partisan-colored evaluation of news media content. The results also provide an empirical ground for our hypotheses on effects of hostile media perception on information use patterns and expressive participation.

**Hostile Media Perception and Information Avoidance**

Hypotheses 1 through 4 predicted that perceptions of hostility toward traditional news media would be linked to avoidance of mainstream news media sources. For testing predictions of negative relationships between HMP and uses of unfavorable information sources, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted after controlling for the two sets of control variables: (1) demographic variables including age, gender (female), race (White), income, and education; and (2) individual political orientation variables (i.e., political interest, strength of party affiliation, and party affiliations). The results of the regression analyses are reported in Table 2.

The results consistently revealed that hostile media perception was negatively associated with uses of mainstream news media sources after

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Predicting Hostile Media Perception (( N = 3,150 ))</th>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic controls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political orientations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democrats (dummy)</td>
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<td>Republicans (dummy)</td>
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<td>Strength of party identification</td>
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<td>Total ( R^2 ) (%)</td>
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<td>Adjusted ( R^2 ) (%)</td>
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Notes: Demographic controls include race (White), gender (female), age, education, and income. Cell entries are final standardized regression coefficients. **\( p < .01 \), ***\( p < .001 \).
controlling for demographic variables and political orientation variables. Specifically, respondents who perceived the news media as biased against their views were less likely to use print news ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.001$) and television news ($\beta = -0.12, p < 0.001$), supporting H1 and H2. More clear evidence for the relationship between hostile media perception and avoidance of hostile information was obtained from regression analyses for H3 and H4, showing that hostile media perception was negatively associated with use of mainstream news Web sites ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.001$) and unlike-minded blogs ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.001$). Therefore, H3 and H4 were supported.

**Hostile Media Perception, Blog Use for Supportive Information, and Expressive Participation**

Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7 were established to test relationships among hostile media perception, blog use for supportive information, and expressive participation. To test relationships among these variables, regression path analyses were conducted after controlling for (1) demographic variables (i.e., age, gender (female), race (White), education, and income); (2) traditional news media use (i.e., print, TV, and mainstream Web news use) and; (3) political orientation variables (political interest, strength of party affiliation, and party affiliations). The results of regression path analyses are reported in Table 3.

The results show that HMP had a significant and positive effect on blog use for supportive information ($\beta = 0.15, p = 0.001$) after controlling for demographic variables ($\Delta R^2 = 4.35\%, p < 0.001$), mainsteam news use variables ($\Delta R^2 = 0.4\%, p < 0.001$), and political orientation variables ($\Delta R^2 = 4.81\%, p < 0.001$). The results support H5 and indicate that the more that participants in our study perceived the news media as hostile toward their views, the more they were motivated to use blogs for supportive information of their views. Additionally, the results provide evidence supporting H6 by showing that blog use for supportive information was positively associated to expressive participation ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.001$) after controlling

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### Table 2. Hostile Media Perception and Information Avoidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Print news ($N = 3148$)</th>
<th>TV news ($N = 3148$)</th>
<th>Mainstream news Web site ($N = 3124$)</th>
<th>Unlike-minded blogs ($N = 3137$)</th>
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<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
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<td>Gender (female)</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>.17***</td>
<td>-.08***</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>-.13***</td>
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<td>Income</td>
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<td>-.05*</td>
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<td>$\Delta R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>2.22***</td>
<td>4.82***</td>
<td>2.01***</td>
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<td><strong>Political orientations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.12***</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Str. of party id.</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>4.95***</td>
<td>1.36***</td>
<td>2.87***</td>
<td>3.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMP</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.12***</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>1.14***</td>
<td>1.28***</td>
<td>1.01***</td>
<td>1.68***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>8.30***</td>
<td>7.46***</td>
<td>5.89***</td>
<td>6.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>7.98***</td>
<td>7.14***</td>
<td>5.56***</td>
<td>6.58***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Cell entries are standardized final regression coefficients.

* $p < .05$, * $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
TABLE 3. Hostile Media Perception, Blog Use for Supportive Information, and Expressive Participations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blog use for supportive information (N = 3124)</td>
<td>Expressive participation (N = 3123)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>-.04**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
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<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.16***</td>
<td>.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td>4.35***</td>
<td>6.55***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream news use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV news use</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print news use</td>
<td>-.08***</td>
<td>.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream news site</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web site</td>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>4.62***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political orientations</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
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<td>.24***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>.15***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>.09**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Str. of party id.</td>
<td>.06***</td>
<td>.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td>4.81***</td>
<td>14.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostile media perception</td>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td>2.41***</td>
<td>.72***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog use for supp. info.</td>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔR² (%)</td>
<td>11.95***</td>
<td>27.31***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R² (%)</td>
<td>11.55***</td>
<td>26.96***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Cell entries are standardized final regression coefficients.
*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

DISCUSSION

The contemporary political information seeker is awash in choices. Traditional forms of news media—including print newspapers and broadcast news—have been supplemented both by extensions into new channels, such as online newspapers or cable news, and by the rise of relatively new information “genres,” including blogs and news aggregators. We are still just beginning to consider systematically the various implications of this media environment characterized by an abundance of both mainstream and specialized news sources. Journalistic norms of balance in the mainstream news media lead to the inclusion of multiple, conflicting messages in news stories, making it difficult to avoid exposure to unlike-minded views (Mutz & Martin, 2001). However, the Internet lowers the barriers to selectively choosing only media that provide supportive information, allowing information seekers to pursue their own interests and control exposure to a much greater extent than allowed by traditional media (Tewksbury, 2003). The Internet provides low-cost and efficient mechanisms for users to find specific information and avoid seeing disagreeable information.

That said, a debate remains as to whether and to what extent news consumers engage in processes of selective information seeking and selective avoidance. A key question within this larger debate concerns the motivations that may drive selection behaviors among some subset of information seekers. This study explored the role of perceived hostility in traditional news sources in explaining blog users’ media use patterns and their political participation. The findings support our predictions about hostile media perception and avoidance of traditional news sources, demonstrating that hostile media perception is negatively related to mainstream media use, at least among this select sample of Internet users. This is not merely a reflection of channel selection, such that blog readers are turning away from offline media sources but maintaining usage of mainstream media online. The findings from H3 and H4 showed that blog readers who perceive the media as hostile were...
also less likely to use mainstream news Web sites and blogs that offer content that disagrees with their views.

Following previous research, we argue that political blogs can function as spaces that encourage political mobilization, especially for those who perceive mainstream news media as hostile. Our findings demonstrate a significant path from hostile media perception through blog use for supportive information to expressive political participation. Although questions of causality must remain open given our cross-sectional data, these findings suggest that for those alienated from traditional news sources, supportive blogs provide a space in which they can safely share their views and elaborate on their opinions without fear of social sanction, which may in turn facilitate expression of political opinions. The strong effect of supportive blog use is particularly compelling given that the model controlled for all other media use variables, including both online and offline sources.

These findings must be viewed with some caution, however. By relying on a purposive sample that drew on political blog users who might be highly engaged political actors, we make no claims to generalize to “average” citizen actions and attitudes. Indeed, recent research focused on the relationship between selective exposure to partisan media and use of the mainstream media suggests that this subset of actors may be quite unlike most news consumers (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). Instead, by testing these relationships within this sample, we are able to explore the role that media perceptions and political blogs play in converting interest to participation among highly motivated online political actors. Our findings show that hostile media perception is an important contextual variable that helps to explain why some partisans engage in selective exposure to like-minded information while others do not. Another limitation of the study is the use of single-item measures for the use of mainstream news Web sites, unlike-minded blog use, and hostile media perception. As a result we interpret these findings with appropriate caution.

By linking media bias perceptions to the selection of alternative news sources, the study provides a new way to examine the behavioral outcomes of hostile media perception. Previous research on social movements has shown that homogeneous social networks can motivate and enable participatory activities (McAdam, 1986; Mutz, 2006; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Without such homogeneous social networks, including supportive online communication networks, those who felt dissociated from the media might be alienated from the political process, resulting in silence or withdrawal from political action. As the spiral of silence theory suggests (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), individuals who are alienated from the mass media may doubt and deny the legitimacy of their beliefs and become unwilling to express them. However, this silencing effect could be offset if they can find other information sources or interpersonal voices that share their views, validating their perspective and spurring expression and action. The Internet seems to satisfy that need for some, transforming private resentment into social resistance.

On the other hand, blog users who perceived the media as hostile were seemingly motivated to avoid disagreeable views in diverse communication channels. As seen in Table 4, the negative relationships between supportive blog use and heterogeneous information uses cast additional concerns about potential detrimental effects of homogeneous communication networks. These findings illustrate conflicting roles of homogeneous communication networks. On one hand,

### Table 4. Partial Correlation Between Supportive Blog Use and Heterogeneous Information Uses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blog use for supportive information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print news use</td>
<td>−.06***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV news use</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Web sites</td>
<td>−.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlike-minded blog</td>
<td>−.11***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:* Model 1: Demographics (age, gender, education, income, and race) were controlled.
Model 2: Demographics and political orientations (political interest, party affiliation, and strength of party affiliation) were controlled.
Model 3: Demographics, political orientations, and hostile media perception were controlled.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001*
the supportive views expressed within like-minded communication networks may enhance the expressive participation of the minority. On the other hand, these more isolating communication networks may produce detrimental effects by increasing political antagonism and heightening political intolerance and extremity (Mutz, 2006, Sunstein, 2001). This conflicting role of homogeneous communication networks remains to be addressed, with future research seeking to broaden our understanding of the role of homogeneous and heterogeneous social interaction in both deliberative and participatory democracy.

This study begins to investigate an important line of inquiry by exploring how perceptions of the mainstream news media drive the use of alternative information sources, and, importantly, how use of these sources may variously impact political attitudes and behavior. Future research should examine the impact of supportive versus disagreeable blog use on important attitudinal outcomes such as intolerance toward opposing groups and elaboration on political opinions. It also seems likely that there is a reciprocal relationship between the use of like-minded sources and perceptions of bias, such that like-minded sources reinforce perceptions of the mainstream media as hostile (Eveland & Shah, 2003). Our blog reader sample provides a particularly useful case through which to begin untangling the relationships among media perceptions, media use patterns, and political engagement. Changes in the U.S. media environment increasingly enable selective exposure to like-minded information sources (Sunstein, 2001), and blog readers are leading the charge in terms of seeking out niche, partisan sources for political information and commentary.

NOTES

1. According to a report from Pew Internet and American Life project (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007), 20% of Americans used the Internet for political purposes in campaign 2006, which corresponds to 6.2% of adult Americans.

2. We also constructed online and offline expressive participation indexes separately in order to examine whether the two participation variables show any different patterns. Our data showed that the two variables not only were highly correlated with each other (zero order r = .75) but also showed similar patterns in their relationships with key variables of the current study. Thus, we decided to use a single-factor measure of expressive participation for simplifying research hypotheses and analyses.

REFERENCES


