POLITICAL MEDIA FRAGMENTATION: ECHO CHAMBERS IN CABLE NEWS

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ABSTRACT

As the number of available outlets for political news grows, so does the tendency of citizens to self-select which news to consume and which to ignore. This news filtering has resulted in media fragmentation—a situation where different individuals are consuming unique news packages. This paper looks at selectivity by news consumers on cable news, namely, MSNBC and Fox News. This study argues that political media selectivity is largely driven by political belief systems. Using a quantitative, statistical methodology, I performed an audience analysis using the Pew Research Center’s 2010 Media Consumption Survey. I show how fragmented cable news audiences are based on party identification and political ideology, with Democrats/liberals gravitating towards MSNBC and Republicans/conservatives relying heavily on Fox News, and both groups largely ignoring the opposing point of view. Further, using OLS regression models, I support the assertion that political belief systems are strong and important predictors of media outlet choice. This study then discusses the polarizing effects of this “echo chamber” news environment, where citizens lack a common frame of reference on political issues and move towards more fiercely partisan, and often radical, political opinions.

The emergence of new media and the rise of novel media outlets have vastly changed the media environment we interact with everyday. Today, there are countless choices from which to get your news, many of which are overtly partisan (Chalif, 2011). This extremely high choice environment will undoubtedly have some major implications with respect to political news. Before the advent of talk radio, cable news channels, and most recently, the Internet, citizens received a relatively consistent news package. Most people learned about politics through their local newspaper and the evening news broadcast on network television. As a result, there was a commonality to the news people consumed regardless of their geographic location, issue positions, or ideological stance.

Today, people can choose from thousands of news outlets, each producing a different news product. Citizens also have the opportunity to cater their news intake to cover only issues that interest them. Some people may only expose themselves to political information that reinforces their preconceived notions, compromise will become increasingly difficult, as people may not even be aware of the alternate perspective on a political issue. If political news ceases to educate citizens by providing multiple perspectives, and instead, becomes an “echo chamber” for like-minded individuals to share their similar perspectives, it is likely that the result will be an increasingly polarized citizenry.
This study will look to cable news, and MSNBC and Fox News specifically, as an illustrative example of media fragmentation according to political belief systems. I hypothesize that the analysis will show people selecting news outlets that reflect their preconceived political preferences, while largely ignoring those outlets with which they disagree.

**Literature Review**

The existing literature on media fragmentation and its polarizing effects, answers many of the important preliminary questions relevant to this study. Previous research sheds a great deal of light on the implications of the new media environment, and how it relates to increased polarization among American citizens. I will use the theoretical framework provided by the literature discussed below, to explain my hypothesis, stating that people will gravitate towards media that echoes their political preferences, and thus show how a high choice media environment will lead to greater media selectivity and ultimately, greater political polarization.

**High Choice News Environment**

Just a few decades ago, news consumers had very limited choices about where to get their news. Most news consumers had access to one or two newspapers, and the vast majority of Americans tuned in to the nightly network newscast on one of the three network TV channels (NBC, ABC and CBS). These newscasts covered very similar stories, and opinionated commentary was quite limited. This relatively limited news environment resulted in most Americans consuming the same news products and thus coming away from the news with relatively consistent impressions of the day’s events. The old media environment of limited choice encouraged moderation and conformity (Jones, 2002). This was not only a journalistic choice but also a legal prerogative for the three broadcast stations, imposed by the FCC policy known as the Fairness Doctrine (Jung, 1996). This policy prevented any network from moving too far to either side of the ideological spectrum, and preserved a sense of journalistic objectivity.

Today, we live in a much different news environment made clear by the exponential growth of news outlets, many of which are overtly partisan. This changing news environment owes a great deal to the technological innovations developed over the past several decades, such as cable TV, satellite radio, mobile technologies, and ultimately, the Internet. To illustrate this massive proliferation of news sources, it is useful to compare some statistics about the number of news outlets available in the past to those available to the public today. In 1970, television provided a mere seven channels to the average household. In comparison, by 2005, 85% of households had access to cable or satellite television, providing the average viewer with about 100 channels to chose from (Prior, 2005). Today, we see TV channels numbering in the thousands and new recording devices, which make watching any content at any time an easy option. Further, people can now access countless newspapers online. They can read any of the national papers, or even local papers from around the world instantly and at any time.


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Lastly, as the Internet developed as a tool for political communication, the number of online news sources grew dramatically. These sources range from online news sites of established media organizations (eg. CNN.com), to political blogs written by well-known commentators (eg. The Drudge Report) or even unknown bloggers, to social networking sites (eg. Facebook), which have increasingly become a relevant place for political discussion. A 2010 Pew Research Center study showed that 34% of the public goes online for news, and 44% of Americans said they got news through one or more Internet or mobile digital sources on the day prior to receiving the survey. Further, the report indicates that 9% of Americans regularly read blogs about politics or current events, and another 19% sometimes turn to blogs for their news (Pew Research Center, 2010). These percentages are even higher during election campaigns or times of increased political interest.

What effects does this high choice media environment have on media consumption as well as political understanding and discussion? One result that seems undeniable is that news consumers will increasingly have to make choices about what news to consume and what to ignore. As news consumers begin basing their news choices on personal preferences and dispersing amongst an ever-growing choice of outlets the media environment is growing increasingly fragmented. To illustrate this decentralization of the American news audience, consider that in 1970, the three broadcast networks (NBC, ABC, and CBS) captured 80% of all audiences, while by 2004 that number was more than halved to 34% (Morris, 2005). What happened to the 46% of news consumers who moved away from network news? Markus Prior (2007) explains that, “more choice leads to better sorting of the television audience by taste.” These people likely found other outlets that more closely matched their tastes and preferences for content.

Media Selectivity & Fragmentation

Media selectivity can be well understood by considering what Cass Sunstein (2007) calls, “The Daily Me”. His book describes the phenomenon that has resulted from extremely high media choice, coupled with the new ease of accessing information. Instead of relying on a mediating institution, such as a newspaper or a television channel, people now serve as their own news aggregators (Lee, 2009). Individualized filtering has the ability to compromise one of the most basic American constitutional ideals—deliberative democracy. This system of government places a high priority on discussion between free, equal and informed citizens. As the media become so fragmented that they cease to serve as a “public forum” where citizens gain a common frame of reference about the happenings in the country, it will become more difficult for the electorate to discuss, debate, or compromise on important political decisions.

Political vs. Non-Political Selectivity

Many scholars have looked at this fragmented environment and the inevitable media selectivity that comes with it, as a major problem for our political establishment. They lament that
with increased media choice, people may simply move away from political content towards entertainment content. A citizen who is very interested in the news now has the opportunity to access huge amounts of information. A political “junkie” can follow any story, from the most hyper-local to the most international. While this scenario seems like an idyllic model for what Michael Schudson (1998) calls the “informed citizen,” one must also consider the possibility of the other extreme. A person with no interest in politics or the news has so many other media options that he or she can avoid almost all political messages. While partisans on both sides of the aisle garner most of the media attention, there is still a large center of citizens who are indifferent or ambivalent towards politics (Bernhardt et al, 2008). The idea that this group can completely detach from the political world is unsettling at best, and detrimental to the functioning of our democracy at worst. Prior explains, “Since political knowledge is an important predictor of turnout and since exposure to political information motivates turnout, the shift from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment implies changes in electoral participation as well” (Prior, 2005:578).

Selectivity Based on Political Preferences

While selectivity between political and entertainment content is clearly an important avenue of research, this study focuses on selectivity within political content. Here, I will argue that one of the most important determinants of media outlet choice is the political preference of the news consumers. There is strong evidence for the claim that people tend to seek out information consistent with their own beliefs (Klapper, 1960). This body of evidence can be traced back to some of the first studies on selective exposure from the 1940s. Paul Lazarsfeld linked his work with a psychological study by Leon Festinger on the theory of cognitive dissonance. Festinger suggested that people want to avoid information that conflicts with their preexisting beliefs, and thus they seek out information that confirms their current beliefs by engaging in activities such as selective exposure (Mutz, 2004).

Previous research has found that individuals’ political predispositions can predict their exposure to specific media (Lee, 2009; Stroud, 2011). A study of self-reported media exposure during the 2000 and 2004 campaigns showed significant fragmentation of media use among Republicans and Democrats. Republicans gravitated towards talk radio, a medium known to have a conservative slant; while Democrats avoided talk radio and watched television newsmagazines and late night entertainment, two predominantly liberal media outlets (Pfau et al., 2007). Interestingly, studies have also shown that news consumers’ affinity for agreeing political news does not only apply when considering controversial political topics but also when searching for news on “soft” subjects such as crime and travel, and that the stronger a person’s partisan affiliations the more likely they were to select media outlets that confirmed their beliefs. This study further found that the mere presence of a news organization label increased the stories’ appeal across all subject matters. For example, identical stories about politics attracted vastly differ-
ent audiences when labeled as Fox, CNN, or NPR (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). Looking to cable news, there is already clear evidence of audience selectivity based on party ID. In 2010, 40% of Republicans said they regularly watched Fox News, a network with a known conservative bias, while only 6% of Republicans regularly watched MSNBC, a much more liberal network (Pew Research Center, 2010).

“Echo chamber” is the term most often used to describe this media environment where people not only gravitate towards agreeing news, but almost entirely ignore news that contradicts their beliefs. Jamieson and Cappella define an echo chamber as, “a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal” (2008: 76). The term is apt as it describes a situation where news consumers are likely to only hear echoes of beliefs they already hold. Like an echo, beliefs are amplified or reinforced by transmission inside an "enclosed" space; the beliefs are never challenged and thus have a tendency to move towards extreme positions over more moderate stances.

Television News

Despite the massive proliferation of political news outlets, television remains people’s number one source of national and political news. A national survey conducted in January 2011 showed that 66% of Americans consider TV as their main source of news, compared with 41% who say they get most their news from the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2011). Looking back to the last presidential campaign of 2008, 68% of people named television as their main source of election information compared with 36% who relied on the Internet (Owen, 2010). TV plays an integral role in informing citizens about political happenings, and goes further in framing how these issues should be viewed by the public. People not only watch political news on TV, but it is also their conduit for experiencing actual political events such as inaugurations, political debates, or State of the Union addresses. Television has historically been, and still is today, one of the most pervasive and persuasive media outlets. Its reach and influence seem only to intensify when looking specifically at political information on TV.

Many consider the 1960 presidential debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the first to be broadcast live on television, as the beginning of the inextricable link between politics and TV. According to data from the Roper Organization, the early 1960s marked a shift in the way people consumed political news. At this time people’s response to the question, “Where would you say you get most of your news?” moved from newspaper to television (Roper, 1983). Kennedy himself recognized how important the TV debate was, when after his victory he said, “It was the TV more than anything else that turned the tide.” In 1984, Walter Mondale reiterated this emphasis on televised politics explaining, “Modern politics requires mastery of television” (Hart, 1999: 2).

It is not just the audience size that makes TV so important, but as Rod Hart puts it, “television’s power lies not
in the number of people it reaches but in the depth with which it reaches them” (Hart, 1999: ix). TV reaches people on a very deep and personal level, and thus has enormous persuasive power over how they view politics (Chalif, 2011). The first thing to consider is the body of work supporting a correlation between watching TV news and gaining political knowledge. Surveys conducted during the 1992 election campaign found that television news was at least as strong a predictor of political knowledge as newspapers (Chaffee and Kanihan, 1997). Another analysis found that television news was, “the most important correlate of knowledge of issue differences between the candidates” (Chaffee et al., 1994). A 1995 study by Weaver and Drew, found that not only was TV the most important correlate to political knowledge, but that exposure to TV news was the only significant predictor of knowledge of the differences between the two presidential candidates (Bush and Clinton) taking into consideration twelve media use measures and seven demographic variables (Weaver and Drew, 1995).

Next, we must look beyond the simple acquisition of political facts, to a more holistic understanding of how TV news effects people’s broader perceptions of politics and American government. Television’s power over public opinion comes in part from its format—TV is dynamic, colorful, and emotional. It is able, like no other form of media, to capture the collective imagination of Americans. One cable news study clearly concludes that, “In general, television’s visual realism and affective appeal appear to be its decisive advantage” (Ibelema and Powell, 2001). Hart explains, “television tells us what to feel, when to feel it, and how and why as well. Television is our emotional tutor, teaching us which of our feelings are proper and which are passé” (Hart, 1999: viii). When children are asked about the meaning of government, they most often respond with references to TV (Connell, 1971). In many ways, TV acts as a universal socializer, showing us from a young age what our government looks like, and how it operates. It is not only children who perceive politics through the lens of television. Consider the assassination of President Kennedy. Would our collective memory of this tragedy be the same without the now infamous Zapruder tape, which allowed networks to replay the moment Kennedy was shot endlessly on television (Lehrer, 1998)? Or more recently, the attacks of September 11th; when Americans think about that tragic day, what is it that they are remembering? It’s the television imagery of the towers collapsing into a sea of smoke, or the video of New Yorkers running through lower Manhattan covered in ash and debris.

Persuasive techniques such as agenda setting and framing are particularly prevalent on television news, and begin to shed light on the persuasive power of TV. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted an agenda setting experiment where identical groups of people were exposed to different media packages, with each group’s package highlighting a different area of concern for the country (national defense, energy, civil rights, etc). They found that across every group, people rated the issue they were exposed to as more important than the others, and as more important than they had prior to the experiment. Further, when partici-
plants were then asked to evaluate the current president, they all treated the issue they were exposed to on TV as a much more important factor in their overall evaluation. They clearly illustrated how television news powerfully influences which problems viewers regard as the nation’s most serious (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

Thomas Nelson et al. define framing as, “the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience” (1997: 221). Framing effects are particularly strong on TV because the outlet does not have to rely solely on text to create the frame, but can also utilize every element of their multimedia production (images, guests, tone, headlines, etc). Further, TV news is not limited to factual presentations, but often provides a lot of space for news anchors to comment on stories (Chalif, 2011). This becomes important to framing effects, as the informational content of news reports is less crucial than the interpretive commentary that surrounds it in creating these types of frames (Lond- don, 1993). Frames not only can change the way people think about a political issue, but they also can change the way people evaluate and explain political issues (Iyengar, 1987).

**Cable News**

Despite the predominance of television as America’s main source of political information, its place in the broader media landscape has recently been questioned as people begin to move online in search of news. At first glance, this is a valid interpretation of American news consumption patterns. National survey data show that between 2004 and 2008 the percentage of people who ranked TV as their main source of election news dropped from 76% to 68%, while those who ranked the Internet first rose from 21% to 36% (Owen, 2010). However, a closer examination of these television statistics reveals a stark discrepancy between network news and cable news. The number of people who ranked network news as their primary source of campaign information dropped precipitously from 29% in 2004 to 18% in 2008. On the other hand, cable news audiences continued to expand, with 40% ranking it first in 2004, compared with 44% in 2008 (Owen, 2010). This 44% becomes especially poignant considering that only 33% ranked print newspapers and only 16% chose radio as their main source of election information. Cable news broadcasts have clearly staked out a unique and important place in the political media landscape.

The era of 24-hour, all-news, cable networks truly began on June 1, 1980 with the birth of CNN (Morris, 2005). CNN’s original goal was to replicate the concept of all-news radio on television by creating a space people could turn to at any time for a summary of the day’s most important news (Auletta, 2003). Throughout the 1980s CNN garnered limited attention from mainstream America. However, this changed dramatically in the early 1990s, primarily because of CNN’s intense and unrivaled coverage of the first Gulf War. People began to take notice of this novel TV news format, and they began to recognize both the appeal and profitability of such a model, especially during times of heightened political attention or national crisis. It didn’t take long for MSNBC
There are many studies that strive to illustrate the ideological product differentiation across cable news networks. An early content analysis from 1998, showed that there was already a significant difference in the types of stories and levels of analysis found, both among cable news shows, and between cable news and network news (Bae, 2000). A report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism analyzed the cable news coverage of President Obama’s first 100 days in office and found that on Fox News the majority of Obama stories were clearly negative in tone—Fox News was the only outlet studied where this was the case. On the other hand, MSNBC contained a majority of stories that were clearly positive in tone; MSNBC was only one of two outlets to have such tilted coverage (PEJ, 2009). Further, it has been shown that not only do MSNBC and Fox News contain biased coverage of politics, but that both networks devote more time to denigrating the opposition than praising those they tend to agree with (Chalif, 2011). Interestingly, despite the clear evidence of ideological bias, several studies have found that audiences view cable news on TV as the most credible news outlet (Ibelema and Powell, 2001).

Hypotheses

Previous research shows that media selectivity is undoubtedly occurring, and that at least some of this selectivity is based on the news consumers’ political preferences. This study will test hypotheses dealing specifically with MSNBC and Fox News, as they are two of the most openly partisan news outlets used by large cohorts of the American
electorate. Further, it will examine the contentious issue of whether or not these two networks are equivalently fragmented according to partisan beliefs.

**H1:** Republicans and conservatives watch Fox News more frequently than Democrats and liberals.

**H2:** Democrats and liberals watch MSNBC more frequently than Republicans and conservatives.

**H3:** Republicans and Democrats will largely ignore MSNBC and Fox News, respectively.

**H4:** Exposure to Fox News is more strongly affected by political preferences than exposure to MSNBC.

**Data & Measures**

**Data**

A statistical analysis was employed to study the trend of media fragmentation according to political belief systems. The data used for this study originated from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press—their *Biennial Media Consumption Survey from 2010* (Pew Research Center, 2010). This telephone survey asked 3,000 adults, comprising a nationally representative sample, a wide range of questions about their demographics, political opinions, and most importantly, media consumption habits.

**Variables**

The dependent variables in this analysis are levels of exposure to MSNBC and Fox News. The survey directly asked people how often they watched or listened to a plethora of TV networks including MSNBC and Fox News. Respondents rated their use of each network on a four-point scale including, regularly, sometimes, hardly ever, or never.

The independent variables here all deal with measures of a person’s political orientation. The first variable, party identification, is measured with a survey question that reads, “In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent? Respondents also can choose No Preference, Other, and Don’t Know. For the purposes of this analysis, I included only those who answered, Republican, Democrat, or Independent (93% of total sample). The next political orientation variable deals with ideology asking, “In general, would you describe your political views as...” Respondents may then answer on a five-point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal. Finally, I created an integrated political belief systems variable, identified as “partyideo,” by combining party ID and ideology into a 10-point scale ranging from very conservative Republican, through moderate Independent, to very liberal Democrat.

**Analysis**

Bivariate crosstabulations were used to compare people’s self-reported party identification and political ideology with their frequency of exposure to
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MSNBC and Fox News (hypotheses 1, 2, and 3). Next, I developed ordinary least squares regression (OLS) models to test the relative predictive strength of the political orientation variables on cable news exposure (hypothesis 4). Two separate OLS regression analyses were run for each of the cable news networks with party ID and ideology as two distinct independent variables. Two additional regressions were run (for MSNBC and Fox News), but this time they each contained the single political belief system variable identified as “partyideo”.

Findings

Party Identification

Party ID has many weaknesses when it comes to tapping into underlying political belief systems. Considering that a great deal of the research on media selectivity and political preferences relies on survey data, we must consider how the survey respondents understand questions about party ID. For example, the Pew Research Center asks respondents, “In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent” (Pew Research Center, 2010). Does this mean which party did you vote for in the last election? Or which party have you voted for the most in your lifetime? Or which party do you feel is most inline with your political beliefs? The space for confusion here is quite clear (Chalif, 2011). For this reason, it comprises only the initial step in this study on fragmentation according to political preference. However, given the extensive past research done utilizing the party ID variable, it is prudent to examine its effects in today’s media environment, and to look at how it specifically affects exposure to cable news outlets.

There are many interesting conclusions that can be drawn from tables 1 and 2. Perhaps the most striking finding is the huge difference in exposure to the two channels between Republicans and Democrats (selectivity by party ID). The second major finding shows that many people report regularly watching the network that agrees with the platform of their chosen political party but overwhelmingly ignore the outlet they would likely disagree with (fragmentation by party ID). Looking first to Fox News (table 1), we see that while 45% of Republicans regularly tune in, only 15% of Democrats report this level of exposure. On the other hand, 46% of Democrats say they never watch Fox News compared to only 19.5% of Republicans who completely ignore the network. The MSNBC figures reveal similar trends (table 2), with 18% of Democrats regularly watching MSNBC compared with just 6% of Republicans. A striking 49% of Republicans say they never watch MSNBC as opposed to 32% of Democrats.
These numbers are quite telling regarding the second fragmentation finding. Almost half of Republicans regularly watch Fox News, while an even higher percentage admits to never watching MSNBC. The reverse is also true with less than 1 in 4 Democrats reporting regular exposure to Fox News. Importantly, while the trends are similar across the two networks the actual percentages reveal some important differences. While almost half of Republicans watch Fox News regularly, only about 1 in 5 Democrats regularly watch MSNBC. Part of this discrepancy may simply be because Fox News is much more popular than MSNBC in general. Another explanation may be that Fox News is more unique in its conservative point of view. Republicans have few other choices of news outlets if they want news with this conservative point of view, whereas Democrats can find ample news outlets with a perceived liberal bias, such as CNN, The New York Times, NPR, or Politico. Many conservative Americans view the traditional...
network newscasts on NBC, ABC, and CBS as slanted towards liberals (Alteman, 2004). Thus, Fox News becomes their only television option without a perceived liberal bias.

Political Ideology

Ideology too has its limitations, but it does provide a broader scale of political preference and does not require an institutional affiliation as does party identification. For these reasons, I expect the fragmentation by ideology to be even more pronounced than the party ID results above. Tables 3 and 4 support the notion that ideological fragmentation is even stronger than fragmentation by party ID. For Fox News, 59% of people who are very conservative and 39% conservative report regular exposure to Fox News. These huge numbers are only intensified when compared with people who are very liberal or liberal, both reporting regular exposure at only 11%. Again, we see the same type of fragmentation when it comes to ignoring cable news outlets. Only 14% of very conservatives and 22% of conservatives say they never watch Fox News versus 54% of liberals and 63% of very liberals. Looking to MSNBC in table 4, we see similar trends in the “regularly” category, with 23% of very liberal people and 17% of liberals regularly watching MSNBC compared to only 7% of conservatives and 9% of very conservatives. The never category is a bit more confounding, although the general trend remains intact. Not surprisingly, people who are very conservative report never watching MSNBC the most (58%). However, it is liberals (34%), not those who are very liberal (49%) who report the lowest percentage for ignoring MSNBC.

Table 3
Exposure to Fox News by Ideology

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Conservative</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Very Liberal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardly Ever</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>59.4%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
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Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$
Another interesting conclusion that is supported by the data is that people on the ideological extremes (very conservative and very liberal) are the most fragmented in their news consumption—they are much more likely to only watch TV that echoes their existing ideological position. It is worth mentioning again here, that the percentage of very conservatives who regularly watch Fox News (59%) is still much higher than the percentage of very liberals who regularly watch MSNBC (23%). Additionally, the number of people calling themselves very liberal who never watch Fox News (63%) is also greater than the number of those who are very conservative and who never watch MSNBC (58%). In general, these findings show that Fox News has a more ideologically fragmented audience than MSNBC.

**Political Belief Systems as Predictors of Outlet Choice**

We can see that ideology, as a survey variable, casts a wider net in encompassing people’s political belief systems than party identification. For example, while only 45% of Republicans say they regularly watch Fox News, 66% of conservatives (very conservative + conservative) so identify. With respect to MSNBC, liberals (very liberal + liberal) reported regularly watching MSNBC (31%) at almost twice the rate of Democrats (18%). This clearly reflects the fact that American political parties are umbrella organizations that encompass a range of ideologies (Epstein, 1989). However, it is still difficult to determine from these disparate models whether the differing effects of party ID and ideology on outlet choice are significantly different, as well as whether or not their strength varies between Fox News and MSNBC.

To answer these questions we first examine the Pearson’s R correlation values to get a sense of the relationship between political preferences and outlet choice. Looking first to Fox News, party ID has a correlation value of -.207 ver-

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<tr>
<td><strong>Never</strong></td>
<td>57.5%</td>
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<td>33.8%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hardly Ever</strong></td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sometimes</strong></td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regularly</strong></td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
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Significance of $\chi^2 = .000$
sus ideology, which equals -.352. MSNBC showed a similar trend with party ID correlating at .074 and ideology at .125. These correlations can also be used to compare the strength of the independent variables across the two cable news outlets as the two outlets were measured on identical scales. The data show that both party ID and ideology are stronger correlates to Fox News exposure than MSNBC exposure. Next, I employed a series of OLS regression analyses. Each dependent variable (Fox News and MSNBC exposure) was regressed on party ID and ideology. Each regression equation is statistically significant at p=.00. Here, we see that the relationship holds up even after the controls of party ID and ideology are introduced. Across the board, the results show that as predicted, ideology is a much stronger predictor of outlet choice than party ID. Tables 5 and 6 allow us to directly compare the effects of the two variables by examining the beta values. For Fox News, party ID (-.136) was about half as strong a predictor as ideology (-.324). MSNBC showed a similar trend with ideology (.114) scoring much higher than party ID (.046). Next, we will examine and compare the B values between table 5 and table 6. Party ID has a B value of -.203 for Fox News and .061 for MSNBC. Clearly here, party ID is a stronger predictor of exposure to Fox News than to MSNBC. Ideology has a B value of -.409 for Fox News and .128 for MSNBC. Again, ideology is a much stronger predictor for Fox News than for MSNBC.

**Table 5**

<table>
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<th>OLS Regression Analysis of Fox News Exposure on Party ID and Ideology</th>
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<td><strong>B</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
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<td>Ideology</td>
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$R^2 = .145$

**Table 6**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>OLS Regression Analysis of MSNBC Exposure on Party ID and Ideology</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
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<td>Ideology</td>
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</table>

$R^2 = .018$
As discussed throughout this study, both party ID and ideology are limited in their ability to tap into political belief systems. The results above show that the two variables do in fact work differently as they relate to cable news exposure and thus are likely tapping into two different, albeit overlapping, areas of political orientation. To move beyond some of these constraints and to form a more comprehensive political belief system variable, my final step was to combine the two variables into a new “partyideo” variable. This new variable improves on the original two in one very important way—it allows respondents to identify as both Republican and liberal or Democrat and conservative, something research has shown is not at all uncommon among Americans (Chalif, 2011).

I ran two new OLS regressions (for Fox News and MSNBC) with the combined “partyideo” as the single independent variable. In both cases, the resulting $R^2$ values were higher than any of the previous models. For Fox News, $R^2$ improved from .145 to .193, or put another way, 19.3% of the variance in exposure to Fox News can be explained by this single, integrated political orientation variable. $R^2$ improved from .018 to .048 for MSNBC, so 4.8% of the variance in exposure to MSNBC can be explained by ‘Partyideo’. Again, we see that political belief systems are a much stronger predictor of exposure to Fox News than to MSNBC.

**Discussion**

**Audience Effects—Polarization**

This study supports the notion that political news consumers are gravitating towards news that confirms their preexisting political preferences while largely shielding themselves from contradictory information. Taken in conjunction with other research that clearly shows major content differences across media outlets, the next logical question asks, what effect will this fragmented news environment have on news consumers and American democracy?

Political polarization, or the process by which public opinion is divided, and pushed towards the extremes, is a trend that dates back to the founding fathers who formed distinct factions and fiercely debated the role of the federal government and state’s rights. However, levels of polarization and partisanship today are higher than we’ve seen in recent history. Data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) illustrate this increase in political partisanship. The data show that between 1976 and 2008 there was a steady drop in the number of Americans identifying themselves as “independents” and a parallel rise in the number of self identified “strong partisans” (American National Election Studies, 2010). Even those scholars, who argue that there is still a large block of centrist voters, concede that partisans have become more partisan in recent years (Fiorina et al., 2004).

A 2002 study by David Jones takes the next step in this research—looking for a causal relationship rather than a simple correlation between exposure to partisan media and levels of polarization. Jones compared aggregate data from Rush Limbaugh listeners in 1992 and 1996 in order to test attitudinal change over time. He found that regular Limbaugh listeners were on average much more likely to call themselves conservative in 1996 than in 1992. Further, when asked to rate
the Democratic Party, regular listeners reported an 11-point drop between 1992 and 1996.

There seem to be two specific effects of this media environment on the audience that are leading to greater polarization—a lack of mutual understanding and opinion radicalization. As political news consumers move into distinct echo chambers of political information, one of the most obvious results is decay in their common frame of reference. As has been discussed throughout this study, our government relies heavily on deliberative democracy—a system where mutual understanding and compromise are paramount for success. Cass Sunstein notes that, “A possible consequence [of media fragmentation] is considerable difficulty in mutual understanding” (Sunstein, 2007). Importantly, people are not only exposing themselves to political information with which they agree, but for the most part, they are ignoring news outlets that counter their political preferences, which would be where they find countervailing opinions to help them understand where the other side is coming from.

Radicalization refers to the tendency of news consumers’ to move away from centrist, moderate political positions, towards more extreme political beliefs. An explanation for how echo chamber news leads to radicalization is found in studies on how people behave when confined to like-minded group settings. Sunstein explains that, “People who are part of groups comprised only of like-minded individuals tend to move towards greater attitude extremity” (Sunstein, 2007: 60). Once placed inside an echo chamber of agreeing news, people are very likely to take cognitive short-cuts and cues from other members of this echo chamber or the opinion leader (TV hosts) themselves. In the absence of opposing viewpoints, news consumers will hear only louder echoes of their own voices, making it extremely likely that any attitude change will be in the direction of the extremes. Further, several studies have shown that the mass media play an integral role in, “bracketing the range of acceptable opinion for the public” (Hallin, 1986). Clearly, as the voices get more and more extreme, the range of acceptable opinions will expand to include what were once considered “fringe” political voices.

During a 2010 commencement address at the University of Michigan, President Obama reflected on the problems that arise from this fragmented, partisan news environment, saying, “If we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we will become more polarized and set in our ways. And that will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from...It may make your blood boil; your mind may not often be changed. But the practice of listening to opposing views is essential for effective citizenship; it is essential for Democracy” (Obama, 2010). President Obama noted many of the negative effects mentioned in this discussion. He touches on problems regarding a lack of mutual understanding as well as radicalization. Further, he expounded on some possible
ways to improve the situation, encouraging the students to look outside their own echo chambers to find different opinions and viewpoints. The President clearly emphasizes that listening to opposing viewpoints is essential if our form of Democracy is to thrive.

Conclusion

This study supports all four hypotheses by quantitatively evaluating media fragmentation according to political belief systems on MSNBC and Fox News. I found that people with liberal political belief systems were largely gravitating towards MSNBC while almost entirely ignoring Fox News. The reverse trend was supported for more conservative news consumers. The results illustrated that not only do MSNBC and Fox News have distinct, loyal audiences, but also that cable news is largely comprised of two main echo chambers—conservative and liberal—with few people regularly exposing themselves to both points of view. The data further show that party ID and ideology are important predictors of news outlet choice, and that Fox News is more heavily affected by these characteristics than MSNBC.

This study opens the door for much future research on the subject of media fragmentation. First, it would be useful to move beyond the ordinary least square regressions to conduct logistic regressions, which would allow the researcher to find the probability of specific news consumers watching MSNBC or Fox News based on a variety of their characteristics. Further, the scholarship would benefit from an analysis of selectivity on online news outlets. This work would allow informative conclusions about the future trends of selectivity and fragmentation, as news consumers continue to move online in search of news.

References


