

Americans don't live in partisan news echo chambers

Popular belief holds that with the increasing polarization of partisan politics, Americans increasingly consume only news sources that support their favored policy and ideology, especially online sources. Using survey research, [R. Kelly Garrett](#), [Dustin Carnahan](#) and [Emily K. Lynch](#) find the purported 'echo chamber effect' to be false. Not only are Americans not abandoning mainstream news sources for partisan sources online, those who do use news sources that share their point of view are more likely to also use sources that have an opposite agenda.



There is a popular, but inaccurate belief that in an era of partisan cable news and online news personalization, Americans have abandoned contact with other viewpoints, instead spinning a cocoon of news media affirming their beliefs. Cass Sunstein calls this the [echo-chamber effect](#), Eli Pariser talks about [Filter Bubbles](#), Julian Sanchez speaks of [epistemic closure](#), and the [list goes on](#). It's easy to see where this belief comes from, especially given today's political climate where Democrats and Republicans [hold each other in such low esteem](#). Even high-profile politicians have shown public scorn for news services with which they disagree, and an affinity towards services that are more favorable to their agendas. For instance, Vice President Dick Cheney famously required that, when staying in a hotel, televisions in his suite always should be [tuned to Fox News](#). And most of us have heard people condemn news outlets with which they disagree.



Although it's easy to understand why belief in a highly insular public is so compelling, this idea is wrong. Utilizing a series of random digit dial telephone surveys conducted in 2004, 2006, and 2008, with responses from over 9,000 Americans, [we found no evidence](#) that outlets offering like-minded partisan news are displacing those representing other viewpoints. To the contrary, we see that consumption of news supporting the favored party or ideology is consistently associated with using other more diverse news sources.



We looked for signs of a more balkanized news-consuming public in several ways. First, we asked whether Americans are abandoning mainstream news outlets for partisan alternatives available online. The answer is a resounding no. In each of the three election years we considered, Americans who used news sites with an explicitly ideological orientation were more likely to use mainstream news than those who did not. This relationship held even after accounting for other factors which might potentially promote news use in general, including age, education, and political interest. Furthermore, the relationship is stable over time; partisan news users in 2008 were just as likely to use mainstream news as they were in 2004 and 2006.

We next looked at how using like-minded news sources influenced Americans' contact with outlets with which they would tend to disagree. For example, are conservatives who rely on conservative news sites less likely to use liberal sites than those who do not? Again, the answer is no. Those who reported using sources sharing their ideological viewpoint were also more likely to use sources advancing an opposing agenda. This pattern was also evident in Americans' use of candidate websites during the 2004 and 2008 elections, as individuals who visited the site of the candidate favored by their party were also much more likely to visit the opponent's site.

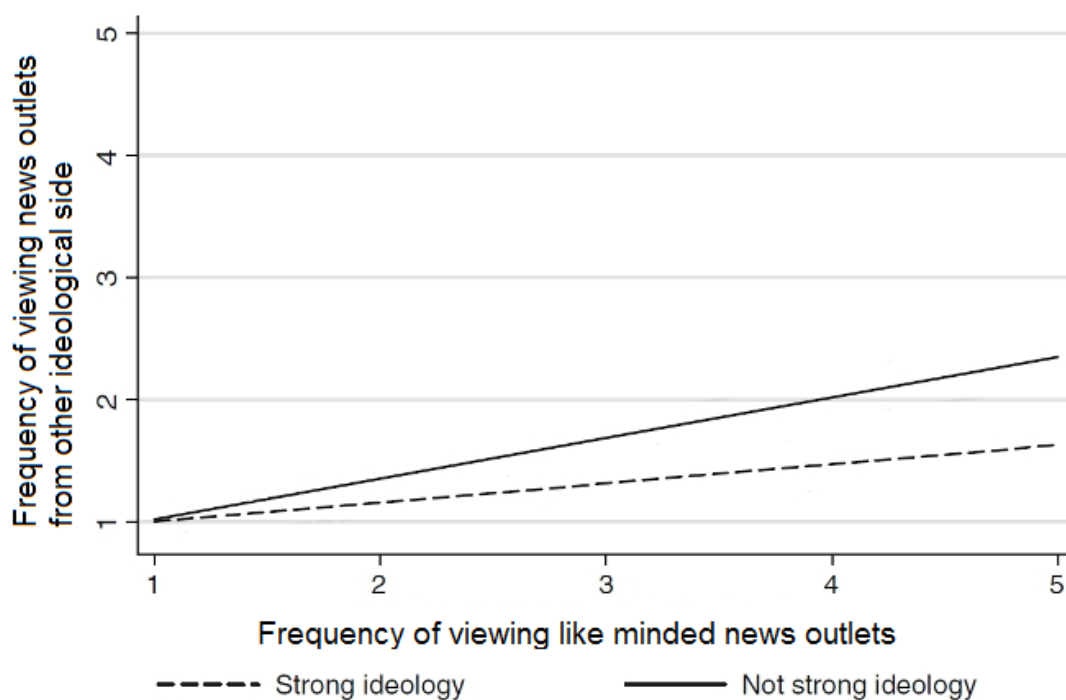
Finally, we considered the possibility that ideologues might engage in only token exposure to other viewpoints. For example, U.S. liberals might regularly consume news from the left, occasionally glancing at other perspectives in order to ensure themselves that they have considered both sides' arguments. Even here, the results are more encouraging than echo chambers would suggest. The more often an individual viewed like-minded news outlets, the more often they viewed outlets promoting the other side, as shown in Figure 1 below, though the frequency of the latter consistently lagged behind the former. Unsurprisingly, though, this relationship was weaker among strong ideologues.

Figure 1 – Predicted frequency of ideologically discrepant news site use by frequency of ideologically

consistent news site use



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Note: Response categories for frequency of media use are: 5 – Everyday or almost every day, 4 – Several times a week, 3 – Several times a month, 2 – Rarely, 1 – Never. All other variables held constant at their mean

The key take away here is that echo chambers are not the right metaphor for describing Americans' news consumption practices. Although citizens in the U.S. do exhibit a preference for information that affirms their viewpoint, they remain willing to look at what the other side has to say. These results are consistent with other research, including studies based on [experiments](#), and analyses of [users' actual online news consumption practices](#) and their [sharing practices on Facebook](#).

These results are based on self-reported Internet behaviors, and thus could be skewed by the desire among those we spoke with to answer questions in ways that make them appear more even-handed and deliberative.

Considering the ease with which partisans on both sides [criticize outlets with which they disagree](#), though, it is not entirely clear that using oppositional media would be perceived to be a good thing.

Questions about how people respond to the information they encounter on news sites remains an important open question. It may be that partisan news is contributing to increasingly negative feelings that Americans feel toward members of the opposing party, and that differences in trust felt toward these outlets may help to explain partisans' divergent political realities. But echo chambers are not the cause.

This article is based on 'A Turn Toward Avoidance? Selective Exposure to Online Political Information, 2004–2008' in the March 2013 edition of Political Behavior.

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