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Editorial

Selective Exposure in a Changing Political and Media Environment

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Abstract

Currently, the transformations occurring in media systems (especially those relating to technologies, the Internet and social networks) have led to a renewed interest in analysing the conditions that potentially foster selective exposure and, specifically, politically-oriented selection. As a result, that theory is now among the 21st century's top eight most used approaches (Bryant & Miron, 2004, p. 696). This thematic issue addresses some of the key questions about selective exposure and associated phenomena by means of two comment articles and three research articles.

Keywords

hyperpartisan news; information processing; motivated reasoning; populism; selective exposure; visual communication

Issue

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1. Introduction

Like many other theoretical approaches to media communication, selective exposure theory came about in the 1940s when the effects of the media were limited. The study by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) on the presidential campaign in 1940 noted that the effects of the media were nuanced by processes of selection, attention and retention, which served to reinforce individuals' prior predispositions and attitudes when faced with media content. In addition to selection, selective attention and selective retention were, as mediating factors, the reference groups, interpersonal communication, opinion leaders and the nature of the media outlets (Kappler, 1960, p. 19). These early studies understood that citizens looked for media content that was as concordant as possible with their pre-held ideas about reality (Stroud, 2010). Given that exposure is the step that precedes the attention and retention processes, the analysis of exposure became a particularly important research topic.

In the 1960s, there was some criticism of that approach (Stroud, 2011). Authors such as Freedman and Sears (1965) suggested that the correlation between opinions held by the media and those held by their audi-

ences could not be explained by the audiences' rejection of contrary opinions, but instead by the fact that the media environment tended to offer its audiences news that was more concordant than discordant (a situation they called 'de facto selectivity'). The ideas of Freedman and Sears (1965) had a major impact, so much so that the selective exposure theory fell into disuse in the 1970s and 1980s. In the second phase of selective exposure theory, evidence of the fact that individuals always looked for news concordant with their opinions was found not to be as strong as expected (Kinder, 2003; Zaller, 1992). In their meta-analysis of studies published between 1956 and 1996, D'Alessio and Allen (2002) corroborated that idea of moderate support ($r = 0.22$, $p < .001$) for the selective exposure hypothesis.

Today, the transformations occurring in media systems (especially those relating to technologies, the Internet and social networks) have led to a renewed interest in analysing the conditions that potentially foster selective exposure and, specifically, politically-oriented selection. As a result, that theory is now among the 21st century's top eight most used approaches (Bryant & Miron, 2004, p. 696). Bennett and Iyengar (2008) wondered if what we were seeing was a resurfacing of the minimal ef-

fects of the media due, among other factors, to the multiplication of media outlets from which news could be obtained. The growth of the Internet as a news source has actually reinforced that idea because the citizens' ability to search for and find information has increased (Valentino et al., 2009). For example, the personalised searches enabling websites to generate targeted content are linked to the process of selective exposure (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 261).

A revival of the notions behind the idea of media exposure driven by predispositions has led to a refinement of both the theoretical postulates and methodological designs. In their review of articles focusing on the selective exposure theory published in scientific journals since 1940, Günther and Domahidi (2017) identified a considerable increase in scientific production since 2000.

2. Contributions in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue addresses some of the key questions about selective exposure and associated phenomena by means of two comment articles and three research articles.

The comment article by Matthew Barnidge and Cynthia Peacock (2019) contends that we are now in a third phase of research into selective exposure. According to the authors, this phase is characterised by two new phenomena: diversifying social connections and hyperpartisan news. Hyperpartisan news is not only partisan, but also alternative. Such news is disseminated by media outlets that eschew the traditional journalistic routines and rules, and have found a broader audience on social networks. Social networks provide the media outlets with a free publishing platform and users with the ability to share messages regardless of the traditional media. The effects of hyperpartisan news are indignation and the generation of partisan emotions. But, more importantly for the authors, "the threat of hyperpartisan news is therefore less about exacerbating left-right divides and more about creating divides between those who support democratic political systems and those who want to undermine them" (Barnidge & Peacock, 2019).

Lindita Camaj (2019) states in her commentary that the selection process does not end with exposure to media content, but continues when audiences interact with information to make decisions. She proposes the theory of motivated reasoning as analytical approach, and specifically, she argues that both the theory of cognitive dissonance and the hostile media bias theory—although they are very richness theoretical perspectives—are not so useful to explore the link between exposure and opinion formation in order to understand the multi-faced aspects of selectivity in a more holistic way.

The article by Powell, van der Meer and Brenes Peralta (2019) addresses the contribution of visuals to partisan selective exposure, linking selective exposure theory and visual communication in a novel way. Through two experiments using news on immigration

and arms control in the United States, the authors show that visuals should not be excluded from future research despite the fact that bias in the headlines and the identification of the news source have more influence than visuals do on selective exposure.

The article by Benjamin Lyons (2019) argues that individuals do not solely expose themselves to the news offered by media outlets, and that interpersonal communication is another element of political communication. From that perspective, he contends that the activation of discussion in interpersonal networks could also be understood as a process of selective exposure, that is, as a second level of post-media-exposure selectivity. Through an experiment using news on statements made by President Trump, it was found that the densest and most cohesive discussion groups emerged in response to pro-attitudinal news, that is, those that were concordant with the views held by the group's individuals. Discussion activation was lower in the case of contra-attitudinal news.

The article by Cornelia Mothes and Jakob Ohme (2019) links the processes of selective exposure to populist movements, and takes the 2017 general elections in Germany as the case study. Their field experiment showed that those who voted for the populist party *Allianz für Deutschland* (AfD) and those who sympathised with that political party displayed different forms of engagement with news posts that were critical of the party. While committed voters avoided news that was not concordant with their views, the sympathisers showed themselves to be more open to news that contradicted their ideological preferences. However, the authors also underscore the fact that public sentiment cues on social networks, such as likes or emoticons, can also have a moderating effect on selective exposure.

In conclusion, in this thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, the reader will find a set of articles highlighting the relevance of the selective exposure theory to our understanding of both audience behaviour and the effects of the media on today's democracies, which are in the midst of profound changes and challenges.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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