

## **Makale İncelemesi: A Critical Review of “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use”**

*Reha Atakan Çetin, Doktora Öğrencisi, The University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Political Science, E-posta: rehatakan@gmail.com*

### **Öz**

Bu eleştiride, Iyengar ve Hahn (2009) tarafından yapılan “Kırmızı Medya, Mavi Medya: Medya Kullanımında İdeolojik Seçiciliğin Bulguları” çalışması içerik, örnekleme ve metodoloji açısından eleştirel bir biçimde incelenecektir. Eleştiri boyunca, sorunlu bazı noktalara rağmen, medya kullanımı ve partizanlık ilişkisine odaklanan söz konusu çalışmanın, yeni medya ve siyaset bilimi literatürüne katkıda bulunan kapsamlı ve güncellenmiş bir örnek sağladığı vurgulanacaktır. Haber talebinin, bir kişinin siyasal tercihleri ölçütünde algılanan haber kurumunu yakınlığına göre değiştiğini ve partizan afinitesine dayanan seçici bir medya maruziyet modelinin var olduğunu savunan yazarlar, iddialarını yeterince detaylandırmakta ve deneysel desteklerin yanı sıra tutarlı ve destekleyici bir teorik çerçeveye hipotezlerini test etmektedir. Yazarlar, sırasız seçim modelini kullanarak haber etiketlerinin genel etkilerini, haber seçiminde seçmeli maruziyet bulgularını ve seçicilik ile partizanlık arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almaktadır. Daha iyi ve daha tutarlı bir analiz sağlamak amacıyla, bu çalışma aynı zamanda birkaç eleştiri de ortaya sunmaktadır. Bu eleştiriler arasında medya tüketicilerinin sorunlu genellemesi, örnek medya seçim prosedürlerinin yetersiz gerekçelendirilmesi, haberlerin belirsiz bir şekilde sınıflandırılması, medyanın izleyiciler üzerindeki rolünün yanı sıra sosyal medya araçları gibi diğer yeni medya türlerinin analiz içerisinde bulunmaması yer almaktadır.

### **Abstract**

In this review, the study of “Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use” which was conducted by Iyengar and Hahn (2009) will be critically examined in terms of its content, sampling, and methodology. Throughout the paper, despite several problematic points, it will be underlined that the study focusing on the media use and its relationship with partisanship provides a thorough and updated example that contributes to the new media and political science literature. While arguing that there exists a pattern of selective media exposure based on partisan affinity, where the demand for news varies with the perceived affinity of the news institution to an individual’s political preferences, the authors adequately elaborate their claim and test their hypothesis with a consistent and supportive theoretical framework as well as empirical backing. Using the unordered choice model, the authors consider the overall effects of news labels, evidence of selective exposure in news selection, and the relationship between selectiveness and involved partisanship. To provide better and more coherent analysis, this paper also provides several criticisms. These criticisms include the problematic generalization of media consumers, insufficient justification of sample media selection procedures, ambiguous categorization of the news, no mentioning of the role of media on audiences as well as the absence of other new media types such as social media outputs in the analysis.

## Introduction

Polarization and partisanship have been at the center of scholarly debates. For some, both American elite and society are polarized (Abramovitz and Saunders, 2006). Some underline that there is also a mass polarization, not necessarily reflecting centrist candidates and electorate voting along party lines, but reflecting the extreme nominations (Layman and Carsey, 2002). For some others, it is only an illusion and exaggeration to accept any polarization among the mass public (Fiorina et. al., 2005). In terms of the relationship between the media choices and partisan considerations, people choose supportive content and information, rather than unsupportive ones (Festinger, 1957). Following these cognitive consistency theories, early tests on media focused merely on political campaigns, rather than news stories (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948; Sears and Freedman, 1967). These studies also failed to differ motivated exposure and “de facto” ones (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). By the time, detecting consistent traces of partisans’ selective exposure has been problematic as political campaigns had become more media biased and less controllable by political parties (Polsby, 1983). With the emergence of diversified new media, more differential media use with different perceptions of hostile bias of both sides emerged (Pfau, Houston and Semmler, 2007). In this context, the study of Iyengar and Hahn (2009) provides a thoughtful and comprehensive framework that contributes to the literature and offers an updated outlook to the relationship between the new media and partisan attitudes. Despite some problematic points, the authors sufficiently elaborate their argument and test their hypothesis with a consistent and supportive theoretical framework as well as empirical backing.

## The Research

Iyengar and Hahn argue that there is a pattern of selective exposure based on partisan affinity where the demand for news varies with the perceived affinity of the news institution to an individual’s political preferences. Their first hypothesis is that “the demands for news stories would be heightened among Republicans and those with conservative political views when stories were labelled as Fox reports.” (p. 24). Conversely, for Democrats and liberals, they expect greater attention and interest for CNN and NPR. They further hypothesize that the influence of source manipulation will be greater where partisan divisions are higher, but weaker for the soft subject matters, such as crime and travel. Lastly, the interaction of political interest and partisanship/ideology would have an influence on the process of news selection.

In their well-designed experimental setting, they observed whether attention to the same news story was increased/decreased as the story was attributed to Fox News, NPR,

CNN, or the BBC. The researchers provide a brief headline accompanied by the logo of the news organization and participants were asked to click on a box involving five alternatives. Both hard topics (American politics, the war in Iraq and race relations) and soft topics (crime, travel and sports) have been included in the categories of the news. Additionally, as the control condition, they included a series of news with no logos as the participants were expected to decide based on the news headlines.

The authors effectively use the database of Polimetrix for acquiring a nationally representative sample of 1,023 (772 people for treatment and 251 people for control conditions). First, a number of respondents were selected as the target sample. Then, for each member of the target sample, another participant has been selected who are similar to that member of the target group in terms of different variables, including race, gender, age, education, party identification, and identity.

Using the unordered choice model in their analysis, they make appropriate analysis where “...individuals choose the option that gives them the most utility.” (p. 25). The authors outline their analysis under three fundamental considerations: overall effects of news labels, evidence of selective exposure in news selection, as well as the relationship between selectiveness and involved partisanship. Iyengar and Hahn first reveal the finding that news source labels are significant determinants for readers. The authors find that “the presence of a news organization label increases the appeal of news stories across all subject matter dimensions.” (p. 26) where the Fox label was the most appealing one for the participants. Second, considering the role of respondent attitudes in news selection processes, they find a weakening “Fox News effect” for non-political views whereas the influence of Fox label doubled for travel and sports stories among Republican participants. Republicans preferred the Fox label while avoiding CNN and NPR. Likely, although being in a weaker correlation, Democrats also showed similar tendencies where they preferred CNN and NPR labels across particular news sources. Their results further demonstrate that divide in news selection processes between conservatives and liberals is remarkable as the findings suggest that the Fox label attracted a large number of conservatives as the content was held constant whereas the coefficient estimates for CNN, NPR, and BBC were observed as negative.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning in this study that ideological polarization emerges in all subject areas. Their results consistently indicate that conservative and liberal division is larger in hard news, compared with the soft news categories. However, it is surprisingly found that even in soft news, conservatives prefer Fox while liberals

avoid it in the subject of sports. At this point, it is found that “...the liberals did not converge on a single source; instead they divide their selections between the non-Fox News channels making little distinction among them.” (p. 32). In other words, while liberals had a strong attachment to Fox, they hold no particular affinity for any of the non-Fox media organizations. As part of their third hypothesis, their tests successfully and interestingly reveal that for hard topics, the more interested conservatives (liberals) avoided (preferred) CNN. In a similar sense, the more engaged conservatives (liberals) chose (avoided) Fox News. Overall, their finding is that polarization exists, at least among the most interested in the context of controversial issues appearing in the media.

They explain this “Fox News effect” by arguing Fox News created a niche for itself, as part of the market competition in the media sector. To attract more consumers, media organizations response to the prejudices of readers that ends up with injecting more partisan and aggressive content (Mullainathan and Schleifer, 2005). When public (audience) is polarized, “news with an edge” offers the possibility of market success (p. 34). Combining their finding that people prefer supportive and consistent information parallel with their own beliefs and ideologies, the authors conclude that new forms of communication facilitate the ability to select the information by browsing, searching and filtering. As the authors critically state, “...internet technology will, in practice, narrow rather than widen users political horizons.” (p. 34) while keeping themselves away from topics that they prefer to avoid (Sunstein, 2001).

### **Analysis**

Overall, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) offer a qualified experimental study. Viewing the media consumption as an antecedent of polarization, they successfully highlight the relationship between the varying demand between the perceived affinity of the news organization and consumers’ political preferences. It contributes greatly to the polarization and partisanship literature in the sense that their findings are consistent with some of the scholars focusing on polarization in American politics. More specifically, they show that there is a strengthened tendency among more politically engaged consumers to select news based on anticipated agreement. This finding is consistent with Fiorina’s claim that polarization exists but limited with activists as the mass public shows more centrist tendencies (e.g. Fiorina et. al., 2005). In addition, their findings also prove that polarization exists even in soft issues (such as crime, travel and sports). This is very surprising in the sense that polarized views are not limited with controversial issues, as the more engaged individual may perform polarized attitudes even in soft news categories.

However, their research can be strengthened further in terms of some aspects. First, in an “approach-avoidance” behavioral pattern, they expect, “in a world of polarized consumers”, conservatives to prefer Fox News when the subject is something controversial (p. 23). They further state that conservatives are also expected to prefer Fox News when the news focuses on soft subjects (such as travel), yet to a lesser degree. Here, they assume all consumers are polarized. However, based on what we can make such a claim? In terms of the scope, this claim is problematic as neither this study nor any other empirical studies in the literature have such empirical proof. In that sense, this hypothesis involves a problematic generalization, even before outlining the findings. It is important to remark that they found most polarized attitudes among the most politically interested and engaged consumers, rather than among all. This claim is also problematic while basing itself solely on conservatives. Any review of prior studies or any claim of the behavioral attitudes of liberals has not been discussed as in detail as done for the conservatives. How about the liberals/Democrats? Can we make similar arguments of polarization as we do for the conservatives/Republicans?

Second, CNN and NPR have been selected as they were matching the preferences of Democrats, rather than the content of the Fox. They also explain that BBC has been selected because of the reason that it is “a foreign news source with a well-known reputation for independent journalism...” (p. 24) as the authors expect to have an indifference for this preference among Democrats, Republicans, and non-partisans. However, this is also debatable, since they do not mention any prior research focusing on the BBC and its indifferent effect on American society. Based on these, how can we make such an argument? Moreover, more discussions and analyses could have been conducted, regarding the influence of the BBC.

Third, the categorization of the news could be developed further. Although the umbrella categorisation of hard and soft topics seems sufficient, their sub-contents can be located and conceptualized more in details. For example, researchers include the subjects of politics, race relations and Iraq for the hard news, but these subjects are also cross-cutting and not very different from another. Politics may be a sufficient term covering others. However, there may also be additional hard topic categories such as economy, policies or healthcare, which could also be controversial issues for American society. Additionally, crime has been considered as a soft category. Yet, it can also be argued that the issue of crime is a major source of debate for many Americans. Crime can be associated with many controversial issues such as shootings, gun laws or immigrants). Thus, it might be better and logical to make it as a part of the hard news, with the aim of

a better-structured analysis.

Fourth, the research focuses on one-sided relation between the audience and news organizations in which the ‘polarized’ audience selects the news in accordance with his/her political affinity. However, there is also another side of this process where the news can also be influential on reinforcing existing beliefs and attitudes. In spite of mentioning this process as an “echo-chamber” effect, the study lacks in sufficiently explaining the role of media on the audience as it is instead focusing more on the argument that polarized and partisan media emerge as a result of polarized audience.

Fifth, they offer that new forms of communication are going to further lead to the process of selection with more filtering and browsing options. However, they make this claim based on research only focusing on the online news stories of particular news organizations. In order to be able to make such a claim on the new media, a more comprehensive approach covering other forms (such as Twitter) is needed. For instance, are these people also being selective while following the pages of these news organizations on Twitter/Facebook?

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the study of Iyengar and Hahn (2009) is an example of a comprehensive experimental media study. Despite the few points including the generalization of media consumers, insufficient justification of sample media selection procedures, ambiguous categorization of the news, no mentioning of the role of media on audiences and the absence of other new media types; their methodology, analysis and results offer fresh insight for scholars and students of political science as well as communication research. In that sense, such appealing findings on the pattern of selective media exposure based on partisanship also have the potential to contribute to the existing literature on the nexus of new media studies and politics focusing particularly on partisanship.

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