Running Head: WHERE THE DIFFERENCES LIE?

Where the Differences Lie? –

Assessing Exposure to Dissimilar Political Views from Discussants, News Media and Online Groups

Abstract

Encountering dissimilar political perspectives increases tolerance, legitimizes the system, mitigates polarization, contributes to social cohesion, and results in a sound public opinion. It is thus crucial to assess which sources of information provide most challenging opinions. This study uses data from two national cross-sectional studies to analyze the level of disagreement elicited by interpersonal discussants, news media, and online groups. This analysis also addresses the debate on selective exposure and assesses whether and from which sources partisans and party extremists encounter dissimilar perspectives. As hypothesized news media expose people to more disagreement than computer-mediated communication, which elicits more disagreement than interpersonal discussions. Also, online groups generally reinforce the opinions of Democrats and political online groups specifically expose partisan extremists to consonant views.

Introduction

Scholars have touted deliberation as a crucial component of an effective democracy (see Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). A crucial component of deliberation, in turn, is exposing participants' to dissimilar political opinions. The ideal typical model of public agora has been applauded precisely because exposure to cross-cutting arguments would force consideration of challenging views and reconsideration of participants' predilections. Encountering dissenting views would also foster understanding of multiple points of view (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1989), promote "representative thinking and ... more valid ... final conclusions" (Arendt, 1968, p. 241), legitimize the outcomes of a political system (Bohman, 1996), and contribute to social cohesion (Lowell, 1914).

Research has indeed evidenced that people who are exposed to challenging views from the news media, family, friends, co-workers, or participants of structured and moderated online groups become less authoritarian, more tolerant, and more aware of arguments underlying own and oppositional perspectives (Altemeyer, 1996; Mutz, 1998, 2002; Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). Individuals with greater awareness of others' positions are, in turn, more likely to participate in public forums and contribute to exchanges in the process (Price & David, 2005). And specially organized public discussions that involve the exchange of diverse views educate participants on public policy issues (see, Gastil & Dillard 1999; Cook et al. 1999).

Since exposure to diverse opinions is beneficial on individual and societal level, it is of importance to scrutinize what sources of political information provide people with cross-cutting views. Two forms of communication have been analyzed in this context: interpersonal exchanges (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; McLeod et al., 1999; Mutz, 2006) and mass-mediated contact with ideas beyond the confines of one's personal relationships (Mutz, 1998). The internet has introduced a new analytic dimension, computer-mediated-communication

(CMC). The increasing penetration of the new medium, the unprecedented individual control over online content (see Shapiro, 1999), and the popularity of online discussion groups (see, Horrigan, Rainie, & Fox, 2001) underscore the need to juxtapose the relative contribution of interpersonal contacts, news media, and online communities with regard to exposing people to dissimilar political views.

This is the aim of this study. It contributes to the literature on political communication by using data from two national cross-sectional studies to assess the level of disagreement evoked when citizens discuss politics face-to-face, obtain information from the news media, and participate in online chat rooms and message boards. This paper first reviews the literature on political communication and proposes that the news media will expose people to dissimilar information to a greater degree than CMC, which will elicit more disagreement than face-to-face discussions. Next, this study examines the role of selective exposure in promoting exposure to like-minded as opposed to cross-cutting political ideas via available sources asking whether partisans and partisan extremists tailor their information environment so that it reflects their predilections.

"Don't Talk to Me If You Disagree" - Personal Communication

We have only limited control over what perspectives we encounter during everyday interactions. This is because opinions people receive depend on the construction of their groups and the uncontrolled environmentally generated supply. That is, the flow of political information is a "consequence of individual preference operating within larger environments of opinion" (Huckfeldt et al., 1995, p. 1025). With regard to the former factor – group construction - citizens rarely meet the normative ideal prescribed by theorists. Since,

according to the concept of homophily, [1] people select acquaintances based on similarities, political discussions in which they engage are likely to confirm their positions. Encountering consonant opinions is yet more likely because of the individual tendency to discuss politics, i.e. national and local government, economy and foreign affairs, with groups of family and close friends (Knoke, 1990; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000). Since attitudes are formed primarily within closely tied groups that are fostered within the same climate of opinion (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) and since the subsequent transfer of attitudes occurs as a result of frequency of interaction and multiplexity of relationships (Erickson, 1997; Granovetter, 1973, 1982), these groups of friends and family are usually homogeneous.

Perhaps discussions with less intimate associates convey cross-cutting opinions? Although political communication occurs beyond the boundaries of cohesive groups (Huckfeld & Sparague, 1995; Huckfeldt et al. 1995) and sometimes provides dissimilar views (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), its contributions are also likely to be limited. This is because the expression of cross-cutting views is thwarted by people's tendency to avoid disagreement (Green, Visser, & Tetlock, 2000), adhere to politeness standards, and pursue safe topics (Dillard et al., 1997; Holtgraves, 1997). Even voluntary organizations, where weakly tied and civically oriented individuals converge, do not meet the ideal of deliberative forums. Due to self-selection and attrition, participants are usually like-minded. They also tend to silence themselves in meetings, ignore members who insist on political discussions, downplay the salience of politics, and focus on neighborhood dog parks instead (Eliasoph, 1998). Consequently, as Mutz (2006) finds, "[t]he number of association memberships is ... not predictive of greater cross-cutting exposure," but is rather related to encountering consonant political views (p. 36).

[1] Homophily is a principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people. "The pervasive fact of homophily means that cultural, behavioral ... or material information that flows through networks will tend to be localized" (Mc Pherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, 416).

Scholars also alarm that the potential of the uncontrolled environmental context to expose citizens to political diversity has been declining. This is due to the increasing geographical polarization and residential homogeneity motivated by reasons of religion, schooling, housing, income, or race. That is "[p]eople are moving places where they feel comfortable. ... If you are gay and into tech, you move to San Francisco or Austin. But if you are Christian and into tech, you move to Dallas" (Bishop, 2004). Since this lifestyle migration is connected with partisanship, districts or neighborhoods become unanimous and reinforce voters' political opinions (Bishop, 2004; Gimpel, 2004; Prior, 2006). This research suggests that individual inclination to form homogeneous groups and the societal trend towards residential balkanization hampers the potential of interpersonal contacts to expose citizens to dissimilar views.

"Controlled Exposure" - Mass Media

Research indicates that people also tend to be selective with respect to their news sources and obtain information that is consistent with their predilections (Chaffee & Miyo, 1983; Stroud, 2006). This tendency could be facilitated in the contemporary media environment, in which "competition for audiences creates incentives for content providers to aim their messages at more segmented and narrow audiences" (Iyengar, 2001, p. 1). If the audience were taking advantage of this fragmentation, the hopes that the media could offer dissimilar viewpoints would be unwarranted. The inconsistencies in the findings and the identification of other pertinent factors, however, leave room for hope.

First, experiments show that individual characteristics that predict "attitude-consistent" attention, such as knowledge or curiosity, also predict counter-attitudinal exposure (Chaffee et al., 2001) and that people sometimes do and sometimes do not select ideologically consonant messages (Frey, 1986; Sears & Freedman, 1967). What seems to be driving the

choice of content is not partisan selectivity resulting from psychological defenses but rather issue-selectivity guided by interests and the perception of issue's utility (Cho, De Zuniga, Rojas, & Shah, 2003; Iyengar et al., 2001). Secondly, the practice of covering two sides of a controversy and the fact that the media "do not reflect the structurally dictated homogeneity of immediate neighborhoods or communities" (Mutz & Martin, 2001, p. 99) guarantee that the media present diverse political opinions. Moreover, mass-mediated dissonant views are less easily avoided than those expressed by acquaintances. Further, the norms that prioritize smoothness of interpersonal interactions and thwart the expression of dissent during face to face political talk do not apply to the news media, increasing the likelihood that people attend to the diverse opinions presented. It is therefore newspapers, magazines, television, and talk shows that have been found to expose people to cross-cutting political viewpoints to a greater degree than interpersonal discussants (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

"A Click Away From Echo-Chambers" – Computer-Mediated Communication

Are internet users exposed to dissimilar political views in the course of their interactions with online discussion groups? Although some scholars have hoped that the internet will reinvigorate deliberative public sphere (Broten, 2004; Downey & Fenton, 2003), others have pointed to the ideological fragmentation of the online environment (Sunstein, 2001; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997). It results from structural features of the internet, such as decentralization and end-to-end communication (see, Lessig, 2001), which facilitate the emergence of and geographically unbound access to myriad online groups, i.e. "individuals or organizations that come together ... through an electronic medium to interact in a common problem or interest space" (Plant, 2004, p. 54).

Studies suggest that internet users have carried the patterns of homophily to their computer mediated associations and visit online groups that reinforce their ties with

attitudinally or ideologically similar others (Norris, 2002). That is, online "[d]iscussion groups might transcend the spatial community ... *precisely* by linking people with similar interests" (Calhoun, 1998, p. 385, emphasis in original). When these similar interests pertain to sociopolitical issues, participants' of political online groups are likely to be unanimous and their discussions are not expected to entail high levels of contentions. The question arises with regard to the deliberative potential of nonpolitical online groups. Since there is usually one primary interest that links participants of non-political chats or forums, such as a hobby or a particular television show (Katz & Rice, 2002), these participants might differ with regard to ideology or partisanship. When political discussion arises within such online spaces, it is likely to expose participants to challenging views. The anonymity of online interactions, the lowered sense of social presence, and the absence of non-verbal cues additionally encourage expression of dissent (Stromer-Galley, 2003) and contribute to greater tolerance of opposing views among internet users (Robinson et al., 2002).

The foregoing review leads to proposing the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis1: News media, i.e. newspapers, news magazines, television news, and talk shows, will expose individuals to more dissimilar political views than face to face and computer-mediated communication in online chat rooms and message boards.

Hypothesis2: Online chat rooms and message boards will expose individuals to more political disagreement than face-to-face political communication.

Hypothesis3: Nonpolitical online groups will expose participants to dissimilar political views to greater extent than political chats and message boards.

Do relative contributions of the analyzed information sources persist when accounting for party affiliation and its strength? Perhaps firmly held beliefs lead extreme partisans to frequently disagree with their interpersonal discussants? Or, alternatively, partisans and party

extremists might be particularly motivated to maintain unanimous relationships and limit interactions with dissimilar people (see, Mutz & Martin, 2001)? With regard to the news media, partisans and partisan extremists might either successfully identify sources that confirm their views or be susceptible to the hostile media effect, reporting exposure to oppositional views to greater extent than moderates (Vallone, Rose, & Lepper, 1985). Finally, political resources on the internet generally and online discussion groups specifically attract the involved and knowledgeable internet users (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002), whose party attachments are likely to be strong (Zaller, 1992). Strong partisans, in turn, tend to obtain information from attitude-consistent online news sources (Best, Chmielewski, & Krueger, 2005; Iyengar & Morin, 2006) and be most active in Usenet and AOL communities politically dividing the online public sphere (Hill & Hughes, 1998). Partisans and party extremists who participate in online groups might therefore encounter more reinforcing views than moderates and than they would from other sources.

Since partisan selectivity to ideologically consonant content might fragment the public sphere and increase polarization (Prior, 2006) it is of societal importance to assess the relative contributions of news media, interpersonal discussants and online chat rooms or message boards when accounting for partisanship and strength of party affiliation (Research Question).

Method

Data for this study come from secondary analysis of two cross-sectional studies that assessed the extent of disagreement generated by three distinct sources of political information: social networks, news media and online discussion groups. The first data set comes from a representative national telephone survey of 780 respondents sponsored by the Spencer Foundation and conducted by the University of Wisconsin in 1996. It contained a battery of questions on political talk, political disagreement with discussants, use of various

news media and exposure to dissimilar opinions presented in the coverage (for recruitment and question wording see appendix A). The second data set comes from an online survey sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics at the University of Pennsylvania and conducted by Knowledge Networks Inc. of Menlo Park, California, in March 2006 of 1028 adult Americans, who participate in online discussion spaces. It contains measures of the types of online groups people visit, the occurrence of political discussions, and the extent of exposure to dissimilar political views within online chat rooms or message boards (for recruitment and question wording see appendix B). Together, these data make it possible to compare the contribution that interpersonal discussants, news media, and online groups make to exposing citizens to cross-cutting political views.

Measures

Interpersonal Political Discussion. The Spencer survey asked respondents to identify up to three individuals with whom they discuss political issues (76%, 59%, and 31% named first, second, and third political discussant respectively). If respondents could not think of three individuals with whom they talk politics, they were asked to name a person with whom they had informal conversations and subsequently about the frequency of talking politics with him/her. Those who reported having discussed political issues with their informal discussant were included in the analysis. Overall, 92% of respondents talked politics with at least one individual, 78% with two discussants, and 57% with three.

Political News Media Use. The Spencer survey asked about the use of newspapers, television news, current events magazines, and talk shows in the past week. Overall, 82% of the sample read a newspaper in the past week, 58% watched a national news program on television, 27% watched or listened to a talk show, and 19% read news or current events magazines.

Online Political Discussion. The Knowledge Networks survey asked respondents to select up to three, out of 11 provided, types of online chat rooms or message boards they visited most frequently in the past year. For each selected non-political online group respondents were asked whether or not other participants talk about political topics or controversial public issues. Overall, 58% of respondents talk politics in the first online group selected, and half of those who selected two and three online groups discuss sociopolitical issues in the second and third chat or message board.

Exposure to cross-cutting political opinions.

Interpersonal Discussants. The Spencer survey probed about the frequency of disagreement with the political opinions expressed by each of the named discussants with whom a respondent talked about politics.

News Media. The Spencer survey also contained a question about the frequency of disagreement with political views presented in each news medium that a respondent used for political information. [2]

Chat Rooms and Message Boards. The Knowledge Networks survey asked respondents who report discussing politics in the chat room or message board they visit whether and how strongly they agree or disagree with opinions that other participants express on political topics or controversial issues.

Results

Research suggests that encountering dissimilar political perspectives contributes to more tolerant and knowledgeable citizenry. This analysis, therefore, assessed the potential of

[2] The Spencer questionnaire also asked whether respondents perceived their views to be the same as or different from their discussants and from the news media they used, whether the discussants/news sources shared or opposed respondents' opinions, and whether the discussants/news sources favored the same political party and presidential candidate as respondents. Only the measure of the frequency of disagreement with political views presented by discussants and by the media outlets was included in this analysis to maintain the relative comparability of the disagreement measure in the Knowledge Networks survey, which contained one measure of political disagreement.

interpersonal conversations, regarded as an important part of the public sphere (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000; Scheufele, 1999), the news media, which make "an extremely important contribution to awareness of diverse political perspectives and thus to national political integration" (Mutz & Martin, 2001, p. 110), and the popular and understudied online chat rooms and discussion forums to expose citizens to dissimilar views. Since the analysis on interpersonal and mass-mediated disagreement relies on the same data that the study conducted by Mutz and Martin (2001), it parallels their findings to certain extent. It also complements them by introducing the increasingly prevalent source of political information, computer-mediated communication.

The Spencer's data shows that 85% of the respondents who read newspapers and 87% who read magazines of their choosing disagree with what they read sometimes or often. Eighty two percent of television news viewers and 68% of talk show viewers or listeners are exposed to cross-cutting information. In comparison, only 49% of those who talk politics with first discussant and 48% and 47% of those who talk politics with the second and third discussant respectively disagree at least sometimes. Additionally, 72% of those who discuss politics in the first selected online discussion group report some disagreement, 63% in the second and 55% in the third online group. On average, 85% of news media users, 48% of those who discuss politics face-to-face, and 63% of the participants of online chat rooms or message boards disagree with the views they see and hear.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 presents the overall mean levels of exposure to cross-cutting political views from all the analyzed sources, with higher values indicating greater exposure to dissonant views. Clearly, the news media constitute the main source of disagreement, followed by online chat rooms or discussion boards. To test whether the differences between the discussants and the news media are significant, paired sample t-tests that account for

interdependence between answers of a particular respondent were conducted. The significance of the differences in mean level of disagreement between interpersonal and mass-mediated sources and online discussion groups, obtained from two different samples, was assessed with independent sample t-tests. The results of both analyses are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Consistent with the first hypothesis, the news media expose citizens to most challenging political views. Especially newspapers provide more dissonant opinions than any other source. Importantly, paired tests compare the users of any two sources to themselves, thereby removing the threat that exogenous variables of knowledge, demographics or socioeconomic status explain the differences in the level of dissimilar views encountered from the discussants and the media. The tests also confirm the second hypothesis that face-to-face discussions are more ideologically consonant than two most frequently visited online chat rooms or message boards. That is, regardless of the selectivity facilitated in the new media environment, ideologically driven homophily in interpersonal contacts is more pronounced.

Research on ideologically motivated selective exposure in the new media environment leads us to expect greater agreement in political rather than nonpolitical online groups, in which political talk inadvertently occurs (H3) (Shapiro, 1999 Sunstein, 2001). To test whether the data support the third hypothesis, the types of online chat rooms and message boards were categorized into professional (groups of trade, educational, or professional associations), leisure (groups that share a hobby, interest or activity, provide support, revolve around socializing and romance, fan groups for a particular TV show, actor, movie, musical group, or sports team, and general trivia groups), and political (groups that discuss political issues, are associated with a political party or cause, promote sociopolitical change, and also ethnic,

civic, and religious groups that were found to be highly politicized, with respectively 70%, 63%, and 56% of participants encountering political talk there). [3]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 shows that political online groups are indeed more ideologically consonant than the other two categories of online communities and that leisure oriented online groups are characterized by the highest levels of contentions when political discussions arise. [4] As indicated in the note, one-way ANOVA and post-hoc comparisons of mean disagreement across the three categories of online groups demonstrate that political online spaces are indeed more unanimous than online groups categorized as leisure and professional. That is, internet users who go online purposefully to talk politics select chat rooms and message boards that reinforce rather than challenge their predilections. Conversely, those who inadvertently exchange political opinions while discussing technological gadgets, sitcom characters, or fashion trends participate in diverse public spheres.

Perhaps the differences in exposure to dissimilar views are less pronounced when accounting for party affiliation and the strength of partisanship? Might the inclination of partisans and party extremists to obtain information from agreeable news sources alter the contribution of the media relative to interpersonal and computer-mediated communication? Alternatively, might the tendency for partisans and extremists to perceive media content as oppositonal lead them to overestimate the disagreement with information sources (Vallone et al., 1985)? To address the research question as to the extent of cross-cutting views that the

[3] The categorized measure of online groups is on a respondent-online group level of analysis. The measure was created by assigning value 1 to each respondent who at least once selected one of the leisure online groups, 2 to a respondent who selected a professional online group in one of the prompts, and 3 to each respondent who chose one of the three political, and the religious, ethnic, or civic online groups at least once.

[4] This finding is of importance, as roughly half of the participants of the nonpolitical chats or discussion forums report discussing political topics and controversial public issues. The most frequently visited online groups revolving around shared hobby, interest or activity are quite politicized (52% of visitors encounter political talk). Even the online chat rooms of social and romance, which involve the least political talk, engage participants in sociopolitical discussions (with 35% of visitors talking politics while socializing or flirting).

partisans and party extremists obtain from the available sources of political information, the hypotheses were retested accounting for partisanship.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 presents mean disagreement with all the analyzed sources across respondents' party affiliation and its strength. Comparisons of means show that the Democrats, Republicans and Independents do not differ with regard to the levels of dissimilar views obtained from political discussants (omnibus F=1.05, df=651, p=.350) and the news media (omnibus F=1.70, df=672, p = .183). [5] Perhaps it is not the partisanship but rather its strength that matters? [6] Comparing the means of disagreement across the levels of partisan extremism evidences that while party extremists disagree with their discussants as much as those leaning towards one of the two parties (omnibus F=1.05, df=633, p = .371), they encounter more consonant views than the moderates from the news media (M difference =.237, df=653, p<.05).

Do the news media offer more dissimilar views than face-to-face discussants to partisans and party extremists? They do. The note to Figure 3 presents the results of paired sample t-tests that evidence that the Republicans, the Democrats, and the Independents alike receive more cross-cutting information from the media than from interpersonal discussants (all differences significant at p<.000). The contribution of the media persists when accounting for the strength of partisanship. All the groups, i.e. the moderates, those leaning towards the Democrats or the Republicans, those not strongly affiliated with the two parties, and

[5] The analysis of the same data conducted by Mutz and Martin (2001) found significant differences between Democrats and Republicans with regard to the disagreement with television, newspaper news, and talk shows. The differences in findings likely result from the fact that the current analysis focuses on mean disagreement encountered from all the news media and uses one measure of disagreement as opposed to an index used by Mutz and Martin. The unit of analysis is an individual and the measure of disagreement with discussants, the news media, and online groups was created by adding and averaging reported disagreement across the three discussants, the four media sources and the three groups.

[6] A measure of party extremism was created by folding the 7-point scale of party affiliation with the highest value, 4, indicating the most extreme category of self-identified "strong" Democrats and Republicans, 3 indicating the "not strong" Democrats and Republicans, 2 identifying those "leaning towards" one of the two parties and 1 being the least extreme partisans, referred to here as "moderates."

especially the party extremists, disagree with the news media more frequently than with political discussants (all differences significant at $p<.001$). These findings suggest that partisans and party extremists exercise ideological homophily in their interpersonal contacts more successfully than politically-motivated selective exposure to mass media.

Supporting and complementing the first hypothesis when accounting for partisanship, independent sample t-tests presented in the note to Figure 3 also demonstrate that the Republicans, the Democrats, the Independents, and also those who are leaning towards one of the two parties, are not strongly affiliated with neither, and especially the party extremists, disagree more with what they hear or read in the media than with other participants in the online chats or forums they visit (all differences significant at $p<.05$). Only the moderates encounter similar levels of cross-cutting information from online groups and the news media, perhaps because no online groups unanimously reflect the political positions of the independents. These findings demonstrate that the online environment is more ideologically agreeable than the traditional media environment regardless of partisanship.

Does the existence of myriad like-minded and easily located online groups decrease the relative contributions of the online environment over interpersonal discussants for partisans and party extremists? This is not the case. Confirming the second hypothesis when accounting for party affiliation and its strength, independent sample t-tests demonstrate that the Republicans ($t = 6.15$, $df=411$, $p < .000$), the Democrats ($t = 2.43$, $df=412$, $p <.05$), the Independents ($t = 5.90$, $df=335$, $p < .000$), the moderates ($t=3.05$, $df=100$, $p<.05$), those who lean towards one of the parties ($t=4.68$, $df=393$, $p<.000$), not strong partisans ($t=5.49$, $df=377$, $p<.000$), and also the party extremists ($t=3.33$, $df=437$, $p<.000$) encounter more cross-cutting views when discussing politics online than offline. This indicates that regardless of the facilitated selective exposure to ideologically consonant online content, interpersonal contacts reinforce the partisan predilections more than the computer mediated communication.

Finally, to scrutinize whether explicitly political chat rooms or message boards are more unanimous and whether they expose partisans and party extremists to more consonant views than the nonpolitical online groups, a hierarchical regression model predicting perceived disagreement with online groups was constructed. It included a host of controls (age, race, gender, education, household income, marital status, and a measure of whether or not a respondent worked outside the home), a dummy variable representing Republican party affiliation (the Democrats and the Independents were the reference category), a dummy measure of political online chats and forums which included the highly politicized groups of ethnic, civic and religious organizations (political versus other), followed by two interaction terms (Republican × political online spaces and extremism × political online spaces). The interaction terms, aimed to assess whether proponents of one of the parties or rather strong partisans encounter more consonant views in political online groups, were formed from standardized main effect variables in order to avoid multicollinearity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

As Table 2 demonstrates, the Republicans are more likely to encounter *dissimilar* political views online than the Democrats and Independents, the younger more likely than the older, and the never married, divorced, or widowed more than the single participants of online groups. As expected, strong partisanship and participation in political online groups predict exposure to consonant views regardless of demographics and party affiliation. Above and beyond these main effects, the coefficient of the second interaction term indicates that extreme participants of political online groups are particularly *unlikely* to encounter dissonant views while discussing sociopolitical issues with other internet users. Two aspects of these findings are especially noteworthy. First, the online communication environment generally resonates with the Democrats, although they are not more likely to have their views reinforced

in political online groups than other partisans. Second, extremists tend to self-select themselves to homogeneous political chat rooms and message boards.

Discussion

Scholars have long touted the benefits of exposure to political views that challenge our own preconceptions. If my friends disagree with me, the theory and research posit, I will take their views into account, reconsider my opinions, and arrive at a balanced position. Obtaining information from the media, which present views outside of my personal associations, will increase my awareness of differing perspective and the salience of other citizens' opinions in my political decision making (Mutz, 1998). Connecting with online public groups will moreover expose me to broader range of opinions than I encounter in my immediate surroundings. Consonant with the reports of participants of politically heterogeneous online groups, hearing dissimilar others talk will give me a "general sense of how the rest of the country feels or looks at an issue," so that I will gain "an insight into what other people from all walks of life have in their minds" (Stromer-Galley, 2003, p. 11).

So far so good. Research suggests, however, that my friends tend to have views similar to mine, that diverse people I meet in public places prefer to focus on neutral topics rather than engage in political debates, and that my neighborhood is likely to be composed of ideologically similar individuals who value the density of churches, the proximity of a good private school, or the rainbow "Peace" flags hanging from the porches just as much as I do (Bishop, 2004; Gimpel, 2004). Some research also shows that I am more inclined to obtain information from the media that do not challenge my political views (Stroud, 2006) and to visit online news sources or online communities that make my ideological attitudes seem just and rational (Best et al., 2005; Iyengar & Morin, 2006; Sunstein, 2001).

Given the importance of exposure to dissimilar political views to informed positions, social cohesion, sound public opinion, and the legitimization of the political system, it was crucial to scrutinize whether the available sources of information challenge people's predilections and contribute to more deliberative, or at least more mutually understanding, citizenry. Although seminal research has been conducted in the area by Mutz and Martin (2001), the proliferation of the internet and the increasing popularity of online groups have underscored the need for a study that compares the potential of interpersonal discussants, news media, and online chats or message boards with regard to exposing individuals to cross-cutting views. This was the aim of this analysis.

As hypothesized, the news media occupy the highest end of the disagreement continuum. People are exposed to more dissimilar opinions when obtaining information from newspapers, television, magazines, or talk shows than when discussing politics face to face. This is because, as individuals select like-minded friends and as the residential balkanization increases, interpersonal political discussion occurs primarily with similar others who do not offer challenging perspectives. Consequently, as "segmentation by lifestyle choice, market position and other factors limits direct relationships increasingly to similar individuals ... [m]ass media become ... predominant sources of information about people different from oneself" (Calhoun, 1988, p. 219). The news media also expose citizens to dissimilar views to greater extent than computer mediated discussions in online chats or forums. The relative unanimity of online interactions might result from the unprecedented user control over online content that and from the facility of locating like-minded groups.

Computer mediated communication with online groups, in turn, exposes users to more political disagreement than face-to-face discussions. This finding, which holds for partisans and for party extremists, suggests that the online public sphere is more contentious than communication in the offline environment. Important distinctions arise, however, with regard

to the type of online groups. Participants who converge around a particular show, movie, hobby, problem, or profession and inadvertently discuss politics encounter more dissimilar views than the visitors of political online groups. Moreover, it is especially the extreme participants of political chats and forums who encounter reinforcing opinions. That is, online political chat rooms or message boards constitute "chambers," in which members communicate with like-minded others "echoing their own voices" (Sunstein, 2001, p. 75).

Perhaps the different levels of disagreement in political and nonpolitical online groups indicate a broader differentiation between motivated and inadvertent political talk? That is, may be those who go online to discuss politics select like-minded chats and forums? Conversely, perhaps internet users who visit nonpolitical online groups do not intend to discuss sociopolitical issues, join relatively heterogeneous groups, and are exposed to dissimilar perspectives when political topics arise? Extrapolating this distinction to face-to-face political talk raises the question of whether political discussants are more ideologically similar than informal discussants with whom people occasionally exchange sociopolitical information? Fortunately for this post-hoc analysis, if respondents to the Spencer survey could not think of a political discussant, they were asked to name a person with whom they had informal conversations and to report whether or not political topics arise during those conversations. Scrutinizing the level of political disagreement that the informal discussants incite might provide insight as to the benefits of casual conversations. [7]

Although the findings regarding online groups would lead us to expect that political interlocutors offer more reinforcing views than informal discussants, this is not the case. Computing the mean disagreement experienced during informal and explicitly political

[7] The measure of political discussants was created by assigning value 1 to all respondents who named only explicitly political discussants. If, asked to name the second or third political discussant, they could not think of one and named an informal discussant instead, they received value 0. Similarly, the measure of informal discussants was created by assigning value 1 only to those respondents who could not name any political discussants and 0 to those who had at least 1 political discussant. These two measures therefore are mutually exclusive.

discussions evidences greater and significant consonance of the former ($t=-2.62$, $p<.05$). Additional independent sample t-tests demonstrate that while face-to-face political talk is more deliberative than the one in explicitly political online groups ($t = 2.09$, $p<.05$), the *informal* interpersonal discussion is as ideologically consonant as the one occurring within *political* online chats and forums ($t=-.22$, $p=82$).

These findings suggest that internet users who go online to talk politics, rather than are unwillingly exposed to others' opinions, select groups that do not offer challenging perspectives. Conversely, those people who engage in sociopolitical discussions face-to-face expose themselves to interlocutors' cross-cutting views while those who inadvertently exchange political information encounter consonant perspectives. The greater consonance of inadvertent face-to-face political talk might be attributable to the fact that informal conversations take place primarily within closely bound circle of attitudinally and ideologically similar family and friends who are not likely to offer novel and dissonant political perspectives when political topics arise (Erickson, 1997; Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000).

Two aspects of these findings are especially noteworthy and have implications on both societal and theoretical levels. First, individual motivation - political or nonpolitical - for engaging in interpersonal or online communication partly determines exposure to disagreement. Political talk inadvertently occurring in nonpolitical online groups provokes disagreement while accidental exchange of political views during informal interpersonal discussions does not involve cross-cutting exposure. This finding underscores the need for political communication researchers to account for the differences between purposeful and inadvertent political talk and for the deliberative contributions of each.

Secondly, although interpersonal political discussions have been regarded as an integral part of vibrant public sphere (Wyatt et al., 2000; Scheufele, 1999) and have been contrasted with the reinforcing communication with unanimous online groups (Sunstein,

2001), face-to-face political talk does not seem particularly beneficial to deliberative democracy. That is, discussions with immediate associates are generally more ideologically consonant than discursive exchanges with participants of online chats and message boards. This finding problematizes the idealistic vision of citizens engaging in deliberative interactions offline. It also suggests that juxtaposing the presumed diverse offline public sphere with the homogeneous online echo chambers might be inaccurate. At the same time, however, although citizens' predilections are more likely to be reinforced in interpersonal than in computer mediated discussions, explicitly political online groups are both particularly ideologically consonant and especially likely to reflect the perspectives of partisan extremists.

A number of issues need to be addressed. They result from the fact that this study utilized two cross-sectional data sets collected at divergent points in time. First, the Spencer survey that captures the disagreement generated by newspapers, magazines, television news and talk shows was conducted in a media landscape that substantially differs from the contemporary one. Not only have the available media options dramatically increased (Bimber & Davis, 2003), with the average number of television channels in an American household doubling between 1989 and 1999 (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Also, more diverse content is easily available. The emergence of ideologically profiled cable stations and satellite radio has resulted in channel specialization, targeting to niche audiences, and "demassification of the media" (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 369). This trend connects with the decreasing standards of balanced reporting and objective journalism and creates partisan news media environment (Patterson, 1993). Since the increased multiplicity and diversity of media options facilitate the selection of ideologically consonant sources (Barlett, Drew, Fahle, & Watts, 1974; Frey, 1986), traditional media might not expose citizens to the same level of disagreement they did a decade ago.

Secondly, the measures of exposure to dissimilar political views are not the same in the two questionnaires. The Spencer's survey asked about the frequency of disagreement with the political opinions expressed by interpersonal discussants and obtained from the news media while the Knowledge Network's survey assessed the occurrence and the strength of disagreement with political views encountered in online chat rooms and discussion boards. This might create certain degree of non comparability of the reported exposure to cross-cutting views.

Third, the findings rely on self-report and might not accurately capture the amount of political disagreement that the analyzed sources of information actually generate. With regard to interpersonal discussions, people tend to report agreement because they fail to notice that others are different or alternatively, perceive differences in opinions when none exist (Huckfeldt et al., 1995). Partisans might also report exposure to oppositional views regardless of the media content (Vallone et al., 1985). These perceptual inaccuracies might not matter, however, because people are also influenced by the views they *perceive* others have not only by their actual views (see Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995), as "(i)n some instances, what is not said may be just as important (or even more important) than what is said" (Glynn, Ostman, & McDonald, 1995, p. 259). In other words, exposure to cross-cutting political views is beneficial when people are convinced that their discussants, news media, or online groups are ideologically dissimilar regardless of the accuracy of this perception.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates that mass media provide more cross-cutting information than online groups, which are more dissimilar than interpersonal discussants, regardless of partisanship and strength of party affiliation. Since exposure to challenging opinions validates diverse perspectives and increases knowledge and tolerance, "news use ... (is) likely to contribute to the quality of the deliberation in public forums" (McLeod et al., 1999, p. 765), underscoring the need for reevaluation of the extant criticism of

the news media. Evidencing the deliberative contributions of the leisure oriented online discussion groups might also legitimize the generally disparaged entertainment-motivated use of the internet, as it is precisely those citizens who socialize or discuss pop culture online that seem to take part in deliberative public sphere. Moreover, in the light of the presented findings, the appraisals of interpersonal political discussions as a crucial component of effective democratic society might need to be reconsidered.

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APPENDIX A. THE SPENCER SURVEY

Design

This national telephone survey was conducted by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center from September through November 1996 using random digit dialing. For details on survey design and administration, see Mutz (2002).

Discussant Generator

"From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics with other people. We'd like to know the first names or just the initials of people you talk with about these matters. These people might be from your family, from work, from the neighborhood, from some other organization you belong to, or they might be from somewhere else. Who is the person you've talked with most about politics? [Discussant #1] Aside from this person, who is the person you've talked with most about politics? [Discussant #2] Aside from anyone you've already mentioned, is there anyone else you've talked with about politics? [Discussant #3]" If at any point the respondent could not give a name: "Well then, can you give the first name of the person with whom you were most likely to have informal conversations during the course of the past few months?"

Media Source Generators

Newspapers: "During the past week, did you read one or more newspapers? Which newspaper was that?"

Television News: "During the past week, did you watch any national news programs on television? What national news show was it that you watched? Which news program do you watch most often [if respondent names more than one]?"

News Magazines: "During the past week, did you read any news or current events magazines, such as U.S. News, Time, Newsweek, or some other news magazine? Which magazine was that?"

Political Talk Shows: "During the past week, did you happen to see a talk show on television or hear a talk show on the radio that included some discussion of political or social issues? What talk show was that?"

Frequency of Political Discussion

Discussant: "When you talk with [named discussant], do you discuss politics a lot, some, a little, or very rarely?"

Media: "When you read/watch [named media outlet], do you read/watch stories about politics a lot, some, a little, or not at all?"

Exposure to Dissimilar Views

Discussant: “When you discuss politics with [named discussant], do you disagree often, sometimes, rarely or never?”
Media: “How often do you disagree with political views you [read/hear] about in/on the [media outlet]? Often, sometimes, rarely, or never?”

Partisanship

“Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, independent, or what?”

APPENDIX B. KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS ONLINE GROUP SURVEY

Design

The Knowledge Networks survey was conducted in March 2006 of a multi-wave sample of 1028 adult Americans, selected from a nationally representative panel of survey respondents maintained by Knowledge Networks, who participate in online discussion spaces. In the first wave, a survey of a nationally representative sample (N=22,964) identified 2480 individuals who reported having visited an online chat room or a message board in the past year. From this group, 1786 respondents were randomly selected to participate in the final survey and 1386 completed it (completion rate of 77.6%). The 1386 respondents were asked to confirm their participation in online discussion spaces; 358 of them reported not participating in chats leaving a sub-sample of 1028 respondents to be used in the current analyses. The final response AAPOR Response Rate #3 is 28%. It is relatively low because the approach taken was to calculate the pertinent response rate for each RDD panel recruitment replicate that contained a case sampled for the study. This mean value for the replicate was assigned to the case that was sampled from that replicate. The mean rate across all the sampled cases was then calculated for the panel recruitment response rate.

Online Discussion Group Generator

“Please check the type of online chat room or message board that you have visited *most frequently* in the past year?” And for the second and third online space: “What other types of online chat rooms or message boards have you visited in the past year, if any?”
Categories provided were (1) A trade, educational, or professional association (2) A group for people who share a particular hobby, interest or activity (3) A support group, such as for a medical condition or personal situation (4) A group that promotes social or political change, such as an environmental organization (5) A group associated with a political party or political cause of some kind (6) A fan group for a particular TV show, actor, movie, musical

group, or sports team (7) A group that discusses political issues and controversies (8) A religious group or organization (9) An ethnic group or organization (10) A charitable group or civic organization (11) Other, please specify.

Political Talk Online

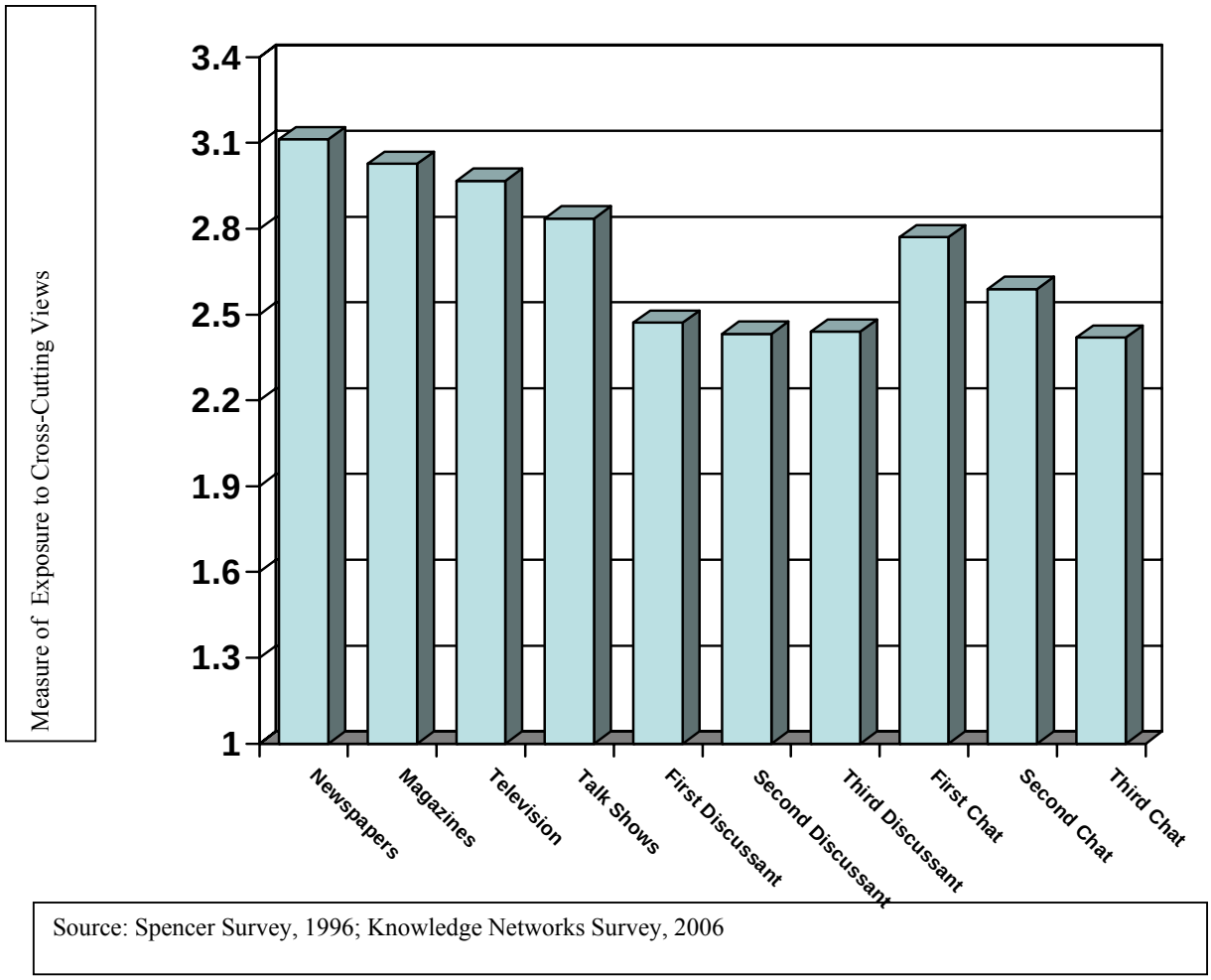
"Do people using the [first/second/third] chat room/message board you mentioned ever talk about political topics or controversial public issues?" Responses were coded as 0 if political discussion does not occur within the online group and 1 if it does, with the four politically oriented groups being coded as 1.

Exposure to Dissimilar Views

If political discussion occurred in a given online discussion group

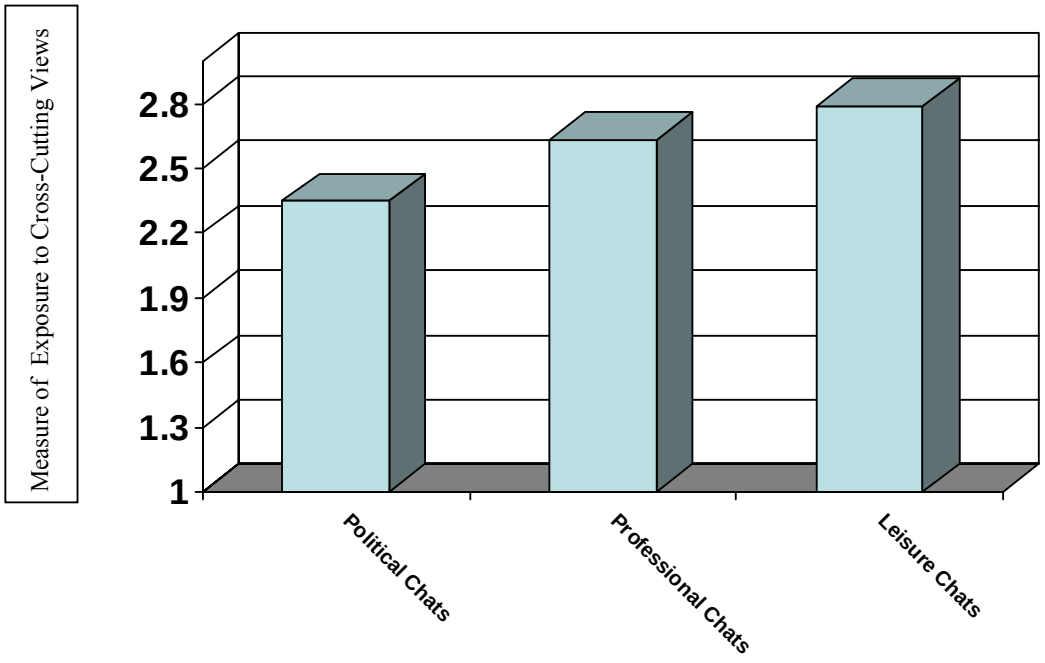
"(1) When the people using this [first/second/third] chat room/message board express opinions on political topics or controversial issues, do you generally agree with the views that are expressed, disagree with the views that are expressed, or neither?" and (2) Would you say that you strongly [agree/disagree] with the views expressed on this message board or chat room, or only somewhat [agree/disagree]?" The responses to these two questions were combined into a scale of disagreement that ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), with 3 indicating "neither agree nor disagree" and later recoded using the visual bander so that the final measure and had four levels and was consistent with the Spencer's data.

Figure 1. Mean Exposure to Dissimilar Political Views Across Analyzed Sources



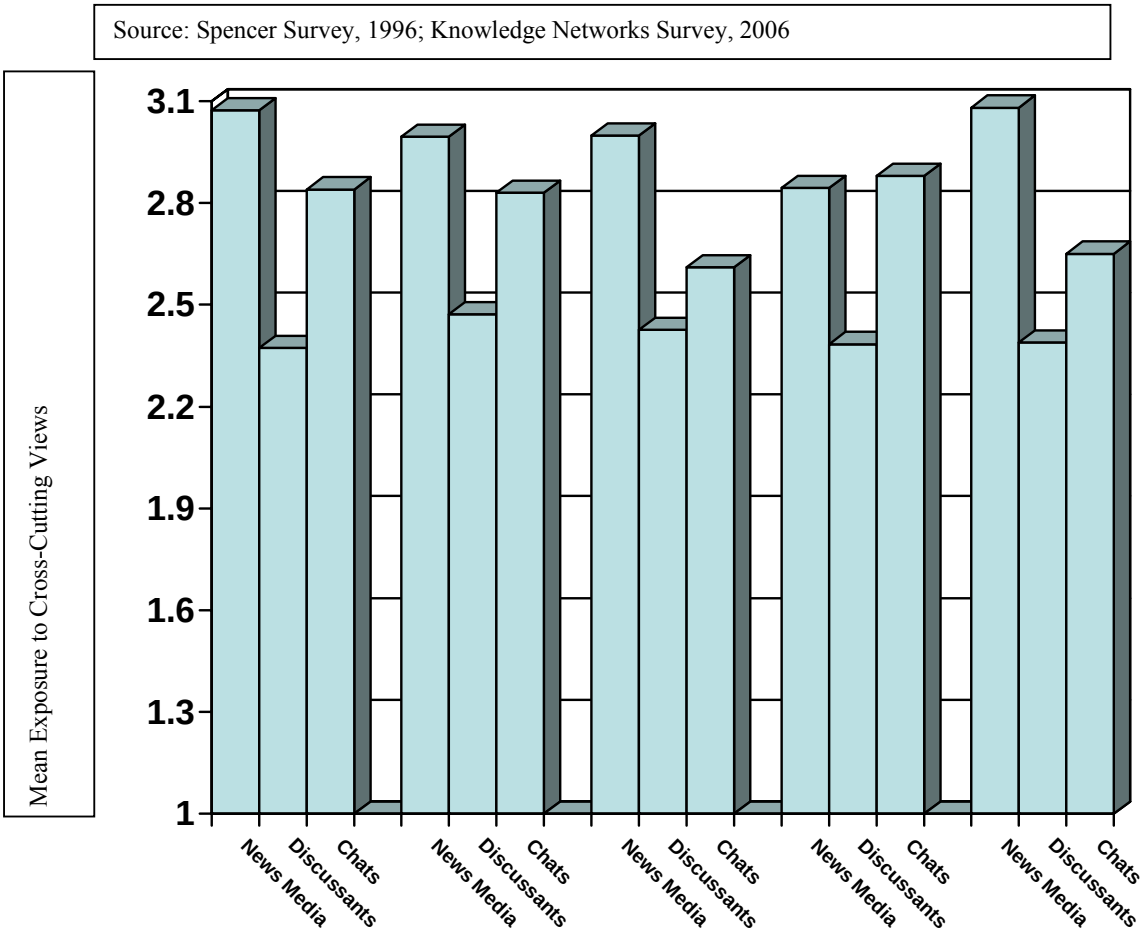
Source: Spencer Survey, 1996; Knowledge Networks Survey, 2006

Figure 2. Mean Disagreement with Political Views Expressed in Three Categories of Online Discussion Spaces.



Source: Knowledge Networks Survey, 2006
Note: 4 indicates the greatest exposure to cross-cutting views; Tukey post hoc test shows that mean differences between political and leisure and professional groups are significant at $p<.05$ (mean difference=-.44 and -.28 respectively).

Figure 3. Mean Disagreement Across the Analyzed Sources and Across Partisanship and trength of Party Affiliation



Republicans	Independent	Democrats	Moderates	Extremists
Note: Paired t-tests Media-Discussants t=-11.25, p<.000 Independent Sample t-tests Media-Chats t=-3.47, p<.001 Chats-Discussants t=6.15 p<.000	Note: Paired t-tests Media-Discussants t=-8.42, p<.000 Independent Sample t-tests Media-Chats t=-277, p<.05 Chats-Discussants t=5.90 p<.000	Note: Paired t-tests Media-Discussants t=-8.77, p<.000 Independent Sample t-tests Media-Chats t=-3.47, p<.001 Chats-Discussants t=2.42 p<.05	Note: Paired t-tests Media-Discussants t=-3.47, p<.001 Independent Sample t-tests Media-Chats t=0.02, p<.816 Chats-Discussants t=3.05 p<.05	Note: Paired t-tests Media-Discussants t=-10.09, p<.000 Independent Sample t-tests Media-Chats t=-5.93, p<.000 Chats-Discussants t=3.33 p<.000

Table 1. Significance of the Differences in the Levels of Exposure to Cross-Cutting Political Opinions from all the Analyzed Sources

Table 1.

Significance of the Differences in Exposure to Cross-Cutting Political Opinions by Source

Source	***Dis1*** ***(678)***	***Dis2*** ***(571)***	***Dis3*** ***(419)***	***Talk Show*** ***(177)***	***News Mags*** ***(143)***	***TV News*** ***(432)***	***Paper*** ***(621)***	***Chat1*** ***(601)***	***Chat2*** ***(322)***
Dis2	.159								
Dis3	.190	.525							
Talk Show	.003	.014	.001						
Magazine	.000	.000	.000	.673					
TV News	.000	.000	.000	.007	.369				
Newspaper	.000	.000	.000	.001	.052	.001			
Chat1	.000*	.000*	.000*	.354*	.000*	.000*	.000*		
Chat2	.059*	.016*	.028*	.003*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.038	
Chat3 ***(187)***	.496*	.874*	.815*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.000*	.013	.183

Note: Sample sizes are in the first raw in parentheses, two-tailed significance levels as noted.
Statistical tests are based on pairwise comparisons.
* Statistical tests are based on independent sample t-tests.

Table 2. Hierarchical OLS Regression Predicting Perceived Exposure to Cross-Cutting Views From Chat Rooms and Discussion Forums

Table 2.

Predicting Perceived Exposure to Cross-Cutting Views From Chat Rooms and Discussion Forums (N=680)

	Before-Entry b	*Before-Entry Beta*	*Final b*	*Final Beta*
Age	-0.01*	-0.10	-0.01*	-0.10
Education	-0. 03	-0.06	-0. 03	-0.06
Gender	0.01†	0.00	0.01	0.01
Income	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Married	0.18**	0.12	0.18**	0.18
Work Outside Home	-0.04	-0.02	-0.04	-0.03
Race	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Political Online Spaces	-0.16*	-0.10	-0.15*	-0.09
Republican	0.19**	0.11	0.19**	-0.11
Extremism	-0.12***	-0.15	-0.10**	-0.13
Incremental R^2 (%)	6%			
Interaction Terms				
Republican × Political Online Spaces			-0.09	0.03
Extremism × Political Online Spaces			-0.16*	-0.09
R^2 (%)			7%	

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$, †≤.1

Note: White=1; Other=0; Gender Male=1; Work Outside Home=1