Changing Minds or Changing Channels?

Media Effects in the Era of Expanded Choice

Kevin Arceneaux

Associate Professor of Political Science

Institute of Public Affairs Affiliate

Temple University

kevin.arceneaux@temple.edu

Martin Johnson

Associate Professor of Political Science

Media & Communication Research Lab

University of California, Riverside

martin.johnson@ucr.edu

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Chapter 1

The Expansion of Choice

Walk into the average American home, turn on the television, and enter a variegated world of news and entertainment. The old standbys of the broadcast networks are on the line-up, with serious news programs at the appointed hour and soap operas, game shows, sitcoms, and dramas the rest of the time. Venture into the channels on most cable packages and find ever more, specialized viewing choices. A half-dozen channels or more are devoted to the news 24-hours a day, seven days a week. The shows on these networks range from the sedate anchor-behind-a-desk format to lively opinionated talk shows where the hosts and guests lob invective and unsubstantiated claims without compunction.

Keep flipping the channel and happen on all sorts of diversions from the worries and cares of the day. On MTV, to take one example of many, cameras follow *Jersey Shore* star Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino to the gym, tanning salon, laundromat, nightclubs, and back home. Elsewhere on cable television, viewers can find endless depictions of more interesting things like people building unique motorcycles, decorating impossibly elaborate cakes, crafting beautiful tattoos, rescuing endangered animals, and catching catfish with their bare hands. Of course, there are also stations devoted to second-run movies and fresh scripted dramas like *Mad Men* on the AMC channel.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the emergence of cable television has been revolutionary. Devised as a technology for bringing television to areas where broadcast signals founder, it also expands the number of channels available for

programming. In the 1970s, the average household in America had six or so channels from which to choose. Many of these were of poor broadcast quality on the UHF spectrum. By the end of 2010, the majority of homes—over 90 percent—have access to either cable or satellite television, giving the average home in the U.S. access to more than 130 channels (Nielsen Company 2008).[1]

More channels translate into more choices, and the expansion of choice afforded by cable television has not only changed the face of television news and entertainment, it also has profound implications for the reach and effect of news media.[2] Before the rise of cable television, viewers could watch news programming a few times a day at fixed intervals and had little in the way of televised entertainment options during those newscasts (Prior 2007). In contrast, today's cable television provides something for almost everybody (Webster 2005). The array of choices is vast, and the content itself is more varied and increasingly specialized as television programmers seek audience niches (Mullen 2003). People can choose from a number of cable outlets that offer news programming or diversion 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

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[1] For simplicity sake, when we refer to cable television, we implicitly include satellite television since the programming packages and multi-channel offerings are similar across both platforms.

[2] A similar expansion of choice has spawned tremendous interest in political communication and the Internet (e.g., Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010; Nie et al. 2010). We focus on television and the choices afforded by cable.

Four decades ago, when cable television was a far less developed resource, the trustees of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation commissioned respected political leaders and scholars to assess the cable television industry of the day and forecast its harms and benefits in the future.[3] The report that emerged from the Sloan Commission saw much potential in the new medium and the potential viewing options that it might eventually offer (Parsons 2008; Mullen 2003). It viewed cable television as a boon to viewers—particularly the possibility that the expansion of programming afforded by cable television would help edify the public:

> [Cable television] cannot, of itself, create a politically aware citizenry, for no one can be forced to twist the dial to the channel carrying political information or political news. But cable television can serve, as perhaps no medium before it has been able, those who wish to be part of the political process, and skillfully used it might very well be able to augment their number…Politics, whatever opprobrium may sometimes be attached to the word, is important. The cable can literally bring that fact home, and in doing so help the entire political

[3] The 16-member commission was chaired by economist Edward S. Mason, Dean Emeritus of Harvard University's Graduate School of Public Administration. The commission's membership was composed of political leaders such as the mayors of Atlanta and Boston, public policy experts from The Brookings Institution, The Urban Institute, The Rand Corporation, and other scholars, including James Q. Wilson of Harvard.

process function efficiently and effectively in the public interest.

(Sloan Commission 1971, 122)

As with many other innovations, though, cable television's promise has given way to disappointment. Instead of supplying the public with the informative and edifying content envisioned by the Sloan Commission, cable news outlets have become purveyors of pitched, partisan discourse. Many see the news channels that have emerged on cable television as a nuisance at best and more likely a destructive force in the American polity.

In particular, the emergence of partisan news options on cable television has led many observers to fret that the expansion of choice has enabled people to live in a world where facts neatly fit their ideological preconceptions and wall themselves off from reality (Manjoo 2008; Sunstein 2007). We agree that the partisan news offered by cable television makes this possible, but it is only one aspect of the new media environment. The choices available to viewers today go well beyond public affairs programming. There is a world of far less meaningful programming being issued on entertainment channels. Although it receives less attention from scholars who study news media, the expansion of entertainment choices is just as important of a phenomenon as the rise of partisan news shows because it alters the reach and influence of news media. If we wish to understand how partisan news media shapes people's political views and behavior, we cannot study it in a vacuum. At the same time, Rachel Maddow (MSNBC) and Sean Hannity (Fox News) have become household names in certain, distinct households, so have people like "The Situation"

(MTV), Kim Kardashian (E! Entertainment Television), and Cesar Milan, the Dog Whisperer (National Geographic Channel).

In this book, we investigate media effects in the context of choice. The television landscape has changed so dramatically in the types of programs it offers viewers and the raw amount of them. We are most interested in the political implications of this expansion of viewing options—in particular, the claims that the new cable news, featuring the expression of politically ideological reporting, polarizes the public, affects distinct partisan issue agendas, and diminishes confidence in political and social institutions. We argue television viewers are active participants in the media they consume. They are not, as many scholars and media observers implicitly assume, an inert mass, passively and unquestioningly soaking in the content to which they are exposed. Viewers make choices about what to watch on television—be it partisan news or something else—and those choices shape how they react to the content they watch.

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Placing Partisan News Media in the Context of Choice

Ideologically slanted news is certainly available today, primarily on Fox News and MSNBC. If the presence of these partisan news shows were not bad enough, many scholars and public intellectuals worry that "the inclination to seek out or selectively expose oneself to one-sided information" creates a public increasingly encouraged to only view the world from their point of view and, as a result, one that adopts more extreme and polarized political attitudes (Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 214; see also Stroud 2008, 2010). As people are "exposed largely to

louder echoes of their own voices," it may result in "misunderstandings and enmity" (Sunstein 2007, 73), as well as the creation of "parallel realities" in which liberals and conservatives no longer even share the same facts (Manjoo 2008, 25). These worries coalesce into the broader concern that the rise of partisan news on cable television threatens the functioning of American democracy, as politics increasingly becomes two strongly opposed ideological camps talking past each other rather than deliberating toward sound public policies on matters of collective, and not particular, concerns.

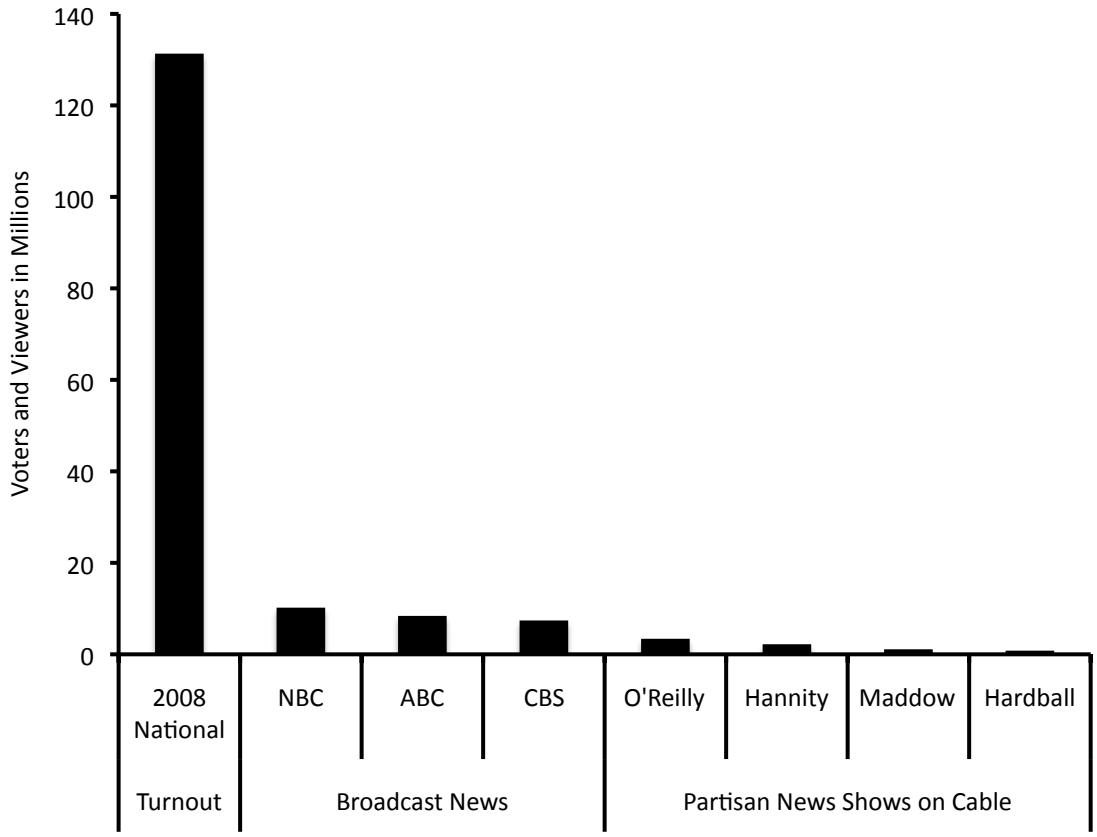
The partisan news media may indeed have a deleterious effect on democracy, but we doubt that partisan news shows are *directly* responsible for polarizing the mass public. For one, partisan news shows attract small audiences. The week of January 16–20, 2012, offers a more or less representative snapshot of broadcast and cable news audiences. According to the Nielsen Media Research Group, which rates television programs, the top-rated primetime partisan news programs drew in anywhere from 0.8 million (*Hardball with Chris Matthews*) to 3.4 million viewers (*The O'Reilly Factor*), on average. In contrast, the broadcast evening news programs drew 7.4 million (NBC) to 10.2 million viewers (CBS), on average. This broadcast news audience is smaller than it was in the past (Webster 2005), but it is more than three times the size of the partisan news audience. Even if we assume that there is no overlap in partisan news audiences, the four top-rated shows draw roughly 7.5 million viewers on any given day. This is a lot of people to be sure but, as Figure 1.1 shows, it pales in comparison to the 130 million individuals who vote in national elections.

[Figure 1.1 about here]

Not too long ago, things were different. In the 1970s, most people got their news from one of the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, or NBC). The news shows on these networks were nearly identical: an anchor sitting behind a desk reading the news and showing video footage of events. Reporting followed shared standards of objective journalism. Remove, balance, fairness to all sides, and impartiality were the goal in network reportage. The reporter and news anchor were cast in the role of Joe Friday, the fictional police detective on the hit 1950s television show *Dragnet*: "All we know are the facts, ma'am." What's more, many Americans watched the news simply because *there was little else to watch* (Prior 2007).

Today, television is so diverse that it can precisely map to the interests of its viewers. The vast array of choices viewers have at their disposal allow Americans to watch only news by tuning into 24-hour cable news channels or to avoid watching any news at all (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007). Analyses that draw a straight line from content of partisan news shows to normatively undesirable political outcomes, such as polarization or declining trust, often fail to appreciate that the availability of so many viewing options gives people unprecedented control over the content they consume on television. People do not have to watch the news because they lack other alternatives. There is a plethora of entertainment options, which should limit the reach of partisan news and substantially blunt its direct effects on American society.

Figure 1.1. News Audiences and the National Electorate



Source: Nielsen Media Research Group as reported by TV by the Numbers (2012a, 2012b). Bars represent average viewers per day during the week January 16 – 20, 2012.

Some may consider this to be good news—and others will likely consider it to be too good to be true. However, the downside we suggest is that this abundant choice also means that the capacity of television to educate its viewers and to engage them in public life is *also* limited. Television informs the informed who want to learn more. It provides specialized knowledge to particular people—information about partisan politics to partisans, home improvement training to people who like that sort of thing, and so on. If we wish to understand the effects of the partisan media, we must place it in this context of expanded choice.

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Partisan News Media Require a New Kind of Media Effects Research

At the turn of the 20th century, the seemingly successful use of mass media to rally the country behind World War I led many scholars to worry that the expansive reach of the news media would give it the unparalleled power to shape and mold mass attitudes (Lasswell 1927 [1972]; Lippmann 1920). The rise of the Nazi Party in Germany and its masterful use of propaganda to maintain power and motivate unspeakable acts of violence and genocide only fueled such concerns. In these early models of media effects, consumers of mass media were characterized as easily manipulated victims. Subsequent scholars derisively described these models as treating the mass media like a "hypodermic needle" that injected propaganda into the veins of consumers who could not resist its effects (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). By mid-century, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. Failure to find consistent and lasting media effects through quantitative empirical research (e.g., Hovland 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) led Joseph

Klapper (1960) to declare in his influential meta-analysis, *The Effects of Mass Communication*: "Mass communication *ordinarily* does not serve as necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences" (p. 8, emphasis in original). Communication designed to persuade, in particular, "… functions more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change" (p. 15).

Soon after the "minimal effects paradigm" became the dominant framework, scholars began to consider the more subtle and nuanced ways through which the media could influence mass attitudes. These scholars eschewed the early scholars' fascination with persuasion, focusing instead on the ways in which news media can set the agenda by reporting on some issues at the expense of others (Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1972). By setting the agenda, news media are capable of influencing the criteria by which citizens evaluate public officials (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Moreover, in the process of creating a narrative, even news stories that attempt to be balanced end up defining issues in particular ways. The "frame" of a news story has the ability to shape how people think about an issue and, in turn, conceptualize the solution (Iyengar 1991).

Research on the effects of partisan media brings the study of persuasion effects back into focus. Unlike mainstream media news, the ostensible goal of partisan news *is* to persuade. Recently, scholars offer evidence that exposure to partisan media does persuade (Feldman 2011), polarize attitudes (Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Stroud 2011), and misinform (Farleigh Dickinson University 2011; Ramsay et al. 2010). In addition to persuasion, partisan media are also designed to

bolster and reinforce that preexisting attitude of like-minded viewers, suggesting that attitude reinforcement, which was seen as evidence of the media's minimal effects by Klapper, should be reconceptualized as a media effect (Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). The potential for the partisan media to create insular worlds in which "parallel realities" exist requires that we reconsider the nature of agenda-setting effects in a media environment that features multiple conversations rather than a common conversation (Mutz and Martin 2001). The content of partisan media is also in direct contrast to the gentile world of mainstream news. Hosts yell at guests, their absent opponents, and the audience. Pundits make dramatic and histrionic claims. Heated arguments are frequent. These displays of hostility and aggression may only serve to damage viewer's trust in news media (Coe, et al. 2008; Ladd 2010) and the political system (Mutz and Reeves 2005).

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Competing Models of Viewing Behavior and Reception

Much like scholars in the mid-20th century found, how we conceptualize viewers shapes how we think about and ultimately investigate partisan media effects. In this section, we contrast the model implicit in many current accounts of partisan media effects with the theoretical model we offer in this book.

Passive Reception

In the pursuit of cataloguing the effects of partisan media, previous scholarship has implicitly adopted a *hypodermic needle* model of reception in three important respects. First, these models ignore political avoidance and proceed as if exposure to partisan news is ubiquitous. Second, these models assume that

exposure to news has strong direct effects on political attitudes. Third, viewers are treated as passive recipients of partisan news media. Take Jamieson and Cappella's (2008, 216) argument as a representative example: "In circumstances in which an audience is exposed regularly to a single, coherent, and consistent point of view and the voices championing that in-group view identify alternative points of view as suspect, the audience's dispositions would be expected to be reinforced or made more extreme…" Partisan news is like a powerful, addictive drug that people are powerless to resist once exposed to it.

Interestingly, while research in this vein implicitly characterizes reception as passive, many scholars view the decision to seek out attitude-consistent information as a facilitator of media effects rather than a foil as those in the minimal effects tradition saw it. Part of the difference in interpretation lies in the fact that the partisan media wish to reinforce preexisting attitudes through selective exposure, whereas the persuasive communication Klapper considered was designed to convert mass audiences (e.g., campaign propaganda). Consequently, scholars today are more likely to view selective exposure as a key mechanism through which partisan media are able to bolster and polarize the attitudes of its audience members. Selective exposure to like-minded news creates a "reinforcing spiral" wherein the viewer's attitudes become more extreme, which in turn feeds their desire to consume more like-minded media (Slater 2007).

Nonetheless, many models of partisan media effects do not characterize partisan news audiences as active beyond their decision to consume it, and even here an individual's decision to watch partisan media, like-minded sources in

particular, is almost treated like a moth drawn to the flame. The passive audience assumption is all the more obvious when we consider the antidote to the reinforcing spiral is exposure to alternative viewpoints (e.g., Jamieson and Cappella 2008, 83–84; Sunstein 2007, 158). If only people exposed themselves to news media that present ideas contrary to their predispositions, the argument goes, it would have effects in the opposite direction and moderate their attitudes in the process.

Agency, Learning, and Motivation: The Active Audience

In contrast to previous approaches, our model of media effects emphasizes the role of human agency in selecting what to watch on television. Put simply, audiences are not passive; they are active. People tend to watch shows that they enjoy (Bowman 1975) and use media to satisfy a variety of gratifications and needs (Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch 1973–1974). We highlight people's motivations for information and diversion. When choosing among news channels, partisan selectivity reflects a learning process. With time, consumers learn about qualities of products, including television programming (Chan-Olmstead and Cha 2007; Sung and Park 2011). At the advent of Fox News, many viewers may not have been aware of its partisan tilt, but since its inception, partisanship has increasingly predicted who tunes into Fox News (Morris 2005), suggesting that news consumers have learned where Fox News stands relative to other cable channels. In a more definitive and ingenious study, Baum and Gussin (2008) presented individuals with the same news transcript but randomly varied whether it was attributed to CNN, Fox News, or a fictional TV station. Even though the content remained the same, study participants perceived a liberal bias if it was attributed to CNN and a conservative

bias if it was attributed to Fox News (see also Stroud 2011, Chapter 4).

Cable news programs are not fooling many people. Viewers generally know where the political news networks stand, and they must be motivated to watch it before they will do so. As such, our theoretical model considers more than just the motivation to seek out partisan news, but also the motivation to avoid news. Individuals who are not motivated to watch partisan news will tune it out and watch entertainment instead. Furthermore, we posit that individuals are active consumers of the information they choose to view, choosing to accept some messages and rejecting others (Zaller 1992).

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Our Argument

We advance our own *Active Audience Theory*, conceptually associated with but distinct from the uses and gratifications approach (Ruggiero 2000). We argue, and hope to demonstrate in the pages that follow, that understanding the effects of the partisan media requires treating television viewers as active participants and not inert, passive receivers. People have agency over what they watch and they exercise this agency when given a choice. More important, the act of choosing has implications for the extent to which the media influences people.

Two central propositions form the core of our book. First, an active audience brings some level of scrutiny to the messages it receives. Like-minded news shows are able to reinforce and strengthen preexisting attitudes because people are motivated to maintain those preexisting attitudes (e.g., Kunda 1990) and not simply because people are easily persuaded. Furthermore, when individuals are confronted

with opposing news programs—either by choice (Garrett 2009a, 2009b) or accident—"motivated skepticism" (Taber and Lodge 2006) should lead them to be more critical and dismissive of the opposing viewpoints they encounter. Consequently, exposure to alternative opinions on opposing partisan news channels should not lead to attitude moderation as many of our contemporaries hope. Instead, opposing news shows should behave much like like-minded news shows, reinforcing and perhaps even strengthening preexisting attitudes.

Second, an active audience makes purposive viewing decisions.[4] The presence of both entertainment-seekers and entertainment options should mute the reach and overall effect of the partisan news media as entertainment-seekers select themselves out of news audiences. This will include some viewers with partisan inclinations who would rather watch an old episode of *Friends* than the 6:00 news. We argue that two important forces blunt the effects of partisan news in a hyperchoice media environment: dilution and differences in effects.

[4] At first blush, it may seem like a contradiction to say that people make purposive viewing decisions and yet may be exposed to opposing news programs. Although many people do prefer like-minded news shows over ideologically inconsistent news programs, some people appear to seek out opposing viewpoints or, at the very least, do not actively avoid them (Garrett 2009a, 2009b; Stroud 2011). Furthermore, we should also recognize that there are moments when people's ability to act on their preferences is constrained, such as when they endure a television show (perhaps on Fox News or MSNBC) while they wait to see their dentist, get their car serviced, or to catch a plane.

At the most elementary level, the availability of entertainment choices leads to the *dilution* of partisan news effects. To understand how dilution works, imagine we still lived in a time of little choice but, rather than only having broadcast news available at 6:00 p.m., television viewers received only partisan news shows, and, for lack of anything else better to do, a large "inadvertent audience" tuned into the news each day. Because many scholars have not updated their conception of the news audience—the presence of a large inadvertent news audience in particular—this is essentially the world envisioned by those who worry that partisan sorting into news audiences destroy reasoned debate and comity (e.g., Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Mutz and Reeves 2005; Slater 2007; Sunstein 2007, 2009; Manjoo 2008). Our contention is that simply offering individuals the choice to not watch partisan news shows means that many will choose to watch something else, shrinking the size of the inadvertent news audience and diluting the overall direct impact of the partisan news media. As we explain below, our empirical studies seek to simulate both this imagined world with a large inadvertent audience and one in which individuals have some freedom to engage in entertainment-seeking.

The second force constitutes a more subtle implication of our active audience framework. People do not simply react to media content, as many theories and studies of media effects implicitly assume. People make choices above what to watch and their choices may influence how they react to media content. The presence of an active audience makes exposure to partisan news endogenous to the viewer's preferences and goals. Consequently, we cannot make the assumption that

the media effects we would observe in a media environment that includes a large inadvertent audience would be the same, but simply smaller, than the ones we would observe in a media environment that empowers audiences to sort by interest. We must entertain the possibility that partisan news shows have a different effect on news-seekers than they do on entertainment-seekers. Because news-seekers tend to have stronger predispositions and a larger store of considerations on controversial political issues, they are less likely to experience massive media effects on average (Zaller 1992), leading us to expect that entertainment-seekers are more susceptible to partisan news effects than are news-seekers.

While we argue that the current media environment should attenuate the effects of partisan media by both diluting their reach, as people sort out of the news audience, and having a smaller differential effect on those who sort into the news audience, we are *not* arguing that the partisan media *do not* matter. It is important to keep in mind that we are talking about the overall *direct* effect of partisan news media; that is, the effect of partisan news media has on those who watch it. The direct effect may be smaller than the one we would observe in a media environment with a large inadvertent audience, but we do not argue that this effect is zero. Furthermore, in diminishing the argument that partisan news media have massive direct effects, our research underscores the need to rethink the ways in which news media are relevant in the current media environment.

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Our Approach

In addition to reshaping how we think about the effects of news media, the

hyperchoice media environment complicates how we empirically study media effects. It has always been difficult to study media effects using observational data because the self-selection of research subjects into news audiences vitiates our ability to disentangle cause from effect. By expanding the dimensions on which television viewers can sort themselves, the current media environment only exacerbates this problem.

Twenty-five years ago, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987) reinvigorated media effects research by reminding scholars that randomized experiments offer one way to circumvent the selection bias problem and gauge the potential effects of news media. In the updated version of their seminal work (Iyengar and Kinder 2010, 143), they note that while the rise in the profile experimental research has been a boon to political science, they worry that "our experiments erase a distinction that looms important in natural settings"—the fact that in natural settings people can opt out. This concern, of course, is more pressing now than it was 25 years ago because the inadvertent news audience is smaller. Increased opportunities to engage in selective exposure led Iyengar and W. Lance Bennett to counsel "it is important that experimental researchers use designs that combine manipulation with self-selection of exposure" (Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 724).

Our research offers two contributions in this direction. We theorize the effect of media, given self-selection, and employ experimental designs that explicitly recognize and allow for the choices people make. The standard experimental design used by Iyengar and Kinder and many other media researchers randomly assigns

subjects to forced exposure conditions. While this design is quite strong at estimating the effects of exposure to news media, it does so by *assuming everyone watches*. As Iyengar and Kinder (1987, 61) explain, the treatment effects observed in forced experimental protocols "… pertain primarily to the *capacity* of television news to influence opinion among different sorts of people, should those people be tuning in with roughly equal attention" (emphasis in the original).

We employ two experimental protocols that augment the standard forced experimental design. The first is the *selective exposure protocol*, which adds a choice condition to the forced exposure design. In the choice condition, participants are given a remote control that allows them to flip the channel among all of the stimuli featured in the forced exposure conditions. Just as is the case in natural settings, participants in the choice condition can watch as much or as little of partisan news shows as they would like. The selective exposure protocol allows us to simulate a media environment in which there is a large inadvertent partisan news audience using the forced exposure conditions as well as a media environment in which participants have a minimal amount of choice. As we explain in Chapter 3, we give participants a minimal amount of choice in order to estimate the *maximal* effects of partisan news media in an environment that allows for limited sorting news-seekers and entertainment-seekers.

While the selective exposure design allows us to demonstrate that even a modicum of choice can significantly attenuate the effects of partisan news media, it doesn't tell us why. In this regard, we employ a design used in randomized drug trials called the *patient preference protocol* (Macias et al. 2009; Torgerson and

Sibbald 1998). This design also builds on the forced exposure design by assigning subjects at random to conditions in which they have no choice over what to watch. However, before participants watch the assigned program, we asked them what they would want to watch of the possible alternative if given a choice. As a result, we are able to divide the sample into news-seekers and entertainment-seekers a priori to their exposure to the stimuli, allowing us to investigate the differential effects of the partisan news media.

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Plan of the Book

Before we launch into our theoretical model and empirical findings, it is necessary to place the study of partisan news effects in contemporary and historical context. Chapter 2 provides an intellectual history of media effects research. It also describes the historical events that gave rise to the explosion of choices on cable television and the rise of ideologically-oriented cable news networks. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how this media fragmentation has influenced recent media effects research.

With the recent changes in the media environment placed in historical context, we devote Chapter 3 to making the case that partisan news audiences, and television viewers in general, are active rather than passive. Individuals select into partisan news *because* they have political opinions. Other people, with less established political views or interests, choose to watch other kinds of programs. Next, we lay out our theoretical model of selective exposure, differentiating between partisan motivations to watch cable news, which has received a great deal of

attention from extant research, and the motivation to be entertained, which has received less attention. We conclude Chapter 3 with an argument for experimental research and a description of our experimental designs and studies.

Chapters 4 through 7 constitute the empirical core of our book. Across these chapters, we analyze 11 experimental studies that collectively draw on nearly 1,700 participants. Many of these studies go beyond the typical college student sample by including nonstudent adults drawn from broader community populations. We investigate the potentially polarizing effects of partisan news media in Chapter 4. Here we show that exposure to *both* pro- and counterattitudinal news shows have the capacity to polarize attitudes. When participants are given the option to select out of partisan news shows, we discover a substantial attenuation in the polarizing effect of partisan news programs. We go on to demonstrate that much of the polarization effects that we do observe are among the inadvertent audience, as news-seekers are generally less affected by exposure to partisan news than entertainment-seekers.

In Chapter 5, we consider whether the partisan news media can polarize political attitudes through a subtler route. If the partisan news media strengthen preexisting attitudes, it may make viewers more resistant to opposing arguments. We find evidence that the partisan news media can do just this—though mostly among those who enjoy thinking about arguments. Once again, we find that choice attenuates reinforcement effects and tends to have more powerful reinforcement effects on the inadvertent audience (i.e., those who would seek out entertainment if given the option).

Next, we go beyond the persuasive power of partisan news and consider the ways in which the partisan news media shape viewers' understanding of the more nuanced media effects developed during the broadcast news era. In Chapter 6, we entertain the possibility that partisan news shows may be able to influence the public agenda. We show that, like the mainstream news media, partisan news shows can transfer salience to issues simply by discussing them. We also show that when the partisan news media talk about different issues, they potentially diminish the common conversation taken for granted during the broadcast news era. Nonetheless, we also demonstrate that choice attenuates the agenda-setting effects of partisan news media. Interestingly, we also find evidence that partisan news shows can have a stronger agenda-setting effect on entertainment-seekers and can have the same effect on both entertainment- and news-seekers. Notably, though, we find that even though partisan news media can shape the agenda for news-seekers, it is less likely to have success in framing those issues.

In Chapter 7, we consider how the partisan news media shape perceptions of media bias and trust in the political system. We show that while the partisan news media can increase hostility towards oppositional news media and decrease trust in the political system, a media environment with choice attenuates these effects. Moreover, we demonstrate that the negative effects of partisan news media are largely driven by those who would typically avoid watching cable news shows.

Finally, we summarize our findings in Chapter 8 with the help of a meta-analysis, which statistically aggregates the findings of our many studies. This is particularly instructive in part because it shows that viewer choice blunts, rather

than erases, media effects associated with partisan news. In this chapter, we also consider an array of other potential explanations for mass polarization and perceived mass polarization in the U.S. Here, we present a final study that shows the availability of partisan news choices accentuates concerns about extremism and the voice partisans have in U.S. politics: We find that the availability of partisan news in a broad choice environment is not the driver of polarization that many think it is, but that these options available alongside each other heighten concerns that partisan news divides Americans. Taking stock of what we have learned, we discuss fruitful paths forward in media research, particularly the need to study the possible *indirect* effects of the partisan news media.

Chapter 3

Selective Exposure and Media Effects

What does selective exposure mean for media effects theory and research? Contemporary research tells us that people are increasingly able to sort themselves into more optimally congenial programming, regardless of their specific predispositions. As touched on in the previous chapters, the heightened potential for partisan-motivated selective exposure animates current-day concerns that partisan news media exacerbate ideological rifts in the polity and debase our politics in the process. We offer a different perspective. We primarily expect that opportunities for choosing should blunt the role the media, in and of itself, plays in changing attitudes and militate against large aggregate effects associated with particular types of television content—including partisan news. Outside of the Super Bowl or some universally captivating news story (e.g., the beginning of a military conflict), not enough of the general population pays attention to a single channel or event in order for there to be large aggregate effects. Instead, we expect that what people watch on television increasingly indicates what type of person they are—whether that is an angler, a foodie, a sports fan, a dog lover, or a liberal or conservative—assuming they are interested in politics in the first place.

In this chapter, we elucidate our thinking about how the expansion of news and entertainment choices on television affects the influence of mass media and establish the foundation for the rest of the book. To motivate both our theoretical model and empirical approach, we begin with a particularly current and intriguing proposition that the contemporary partisan cable news environment may cause

greater ideological polarization in the mass public. As discussed at the conclusion of Chapter 2, this proposition brings media research full circle to concerns at the beginning of the 20th century that mass media have massive persuasive effects. Moreover, the unabashed ideological nature of partisan media that makes it a potentially polarizing force requires us to recontextualize the more subtle effects attributed to the mainstream media, such as attitude reinforcement, agenda setting, and hostile media perceptions.

Our first order of business is to demonstrate that *prima facie* polarization in political attitudes and differences in political knowledge among cable and broadcast news audiences could just as easily be attributable to individuals sorting into audiences based on interest than the effects of partisan news shows, consistent with our claim that audiences are active, not passive. Our descriptive analysis sets up a discussion of how an active audience, which seeks out television programming to fill needs and achieve goals, may actually diminish the influence of partisan news shows in a hyperchoice media environment. With the intuitions behind our argument in place, we lay the theoretical foundation of the book by drawing on psychological theories of motivation to develop a more complete model of selective exposure—one that considers the motivation to consume partisan news and the motivation to be entertained by television programming.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to our empirical approach to testing the expectations generated by our theoretical model. The dominant contemporary approaches to the study of media effects—survey research and traditional laboratory experiments—are limited in their ability to test the effects of media in

this new environment. To address these limitations, we develop and describe a novel set of experimental designs, building upon and augmenting contemporary political communication experiments, and applying these research designs to investigate a wide range of potential media effects.

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The Apparent Effects of Partisan News

How might we go about determining whether partisan news on cable television affects viewers' attitude extremity and political knowledge? A common, but limited, approach would be to identify members of these audiences and ask them their views on political and social issues. Its principle weakness, in spite of claims made by many scholars, is that this research design does not allow the identification of a causal relationship between media choice and whatever characteristic someone might find of interest. But, at a *minimum*, it should elucidate differences between these audiences. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press regularly conducts exactly this kind of survey research project. They ask a random sample of the American public questions about how they stay informed about politics, both the forms of media they use (e.g., newspapers, television, the Internet), as well as specifics, such as the television networks and programs they watch. Pew generously shares these data with the public, allowing us to analyze the politics of news audiences.

Using Pew's June 2010 media consumption survey (June 8–28), we identify four television audiences: 1) those who say they regularly watch any of the three major broadcast network television newscasts, 2) regular viewers of Fox News

Channel's opinionated talk shows, 3) regular viewers of MSNBC's opinionated talk shows, and 4) survey respondents who claim to not regularly pay attention to any source of news—newspapers, television, radio, or Internet news consumption.[12] Other than this last group of news-inattentive survey participants, these are not mutually exclusive audiences. At least hypothetically, a survey respondent could be in all three of the viewing audiences if she reports regularly watching mainstream television news, as well as both Fox News and MSNBC talk shows and newscasts. Obviously, the world is more complicated than these four groups, but we believe it is a useful simplification that allows us to compare regular partisan news watchers to mainstream news viewers and the inattentive public.

The survey included a variety of questions about the respondent's political orientations. We begin with self-reported political ideology. Respondents were

[12] We counted *CBS Evening News*, *ABC World News*, and *NBC Nightly News* as major broadcast news shows. Fox's opinionated talk shows included programs hosted by Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, as well as *The O'Reilly Factor* with Bill O'Reilly. MSNBC's talk shows included *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, and *The Rachel Maddow Show.* Pew interviewed 3,006 respondents and asked all about specific talk shows. We identify 446 respondents who said they regularly watch one of the Fox News talk shows (14.8 percent) and 189 who watch MSNBC talk shows (6.3 percent). We use the full sample to identify inattentive people (203, 6.8 percent). The survey restricted questions about broadcast newscasts to 1,509 respondents. Of these, 466 regularly watch broadcast news (30.9 percent).

asked whether they consider themselves to be very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, or very conservative. We coded these identifications running from 1 for self-described very liberal respondents to 5 for very conservative ones, with moderates coded 3. We computed a simple average for each of the four audiences we identified. These averages are graphed in Figure 3.1.

[Figure 3.1 about here]

The figure conforms to a set of intuitive expectations about these audiences. The inattentive respondents are centrist on average. The network news viewers are also in the center of the distribution on average, but slightly more conservative than the non-news consumers. Fox News and MSNBC talk show viewers are more conservative and liberal, respectively, creating anchors of a seemingly polarized public. What accounts for this pattern? As we explain in the next section, despite the intuitive appeal, these data do not offer unambiguous evidence that partisan news causes viewer polarization.

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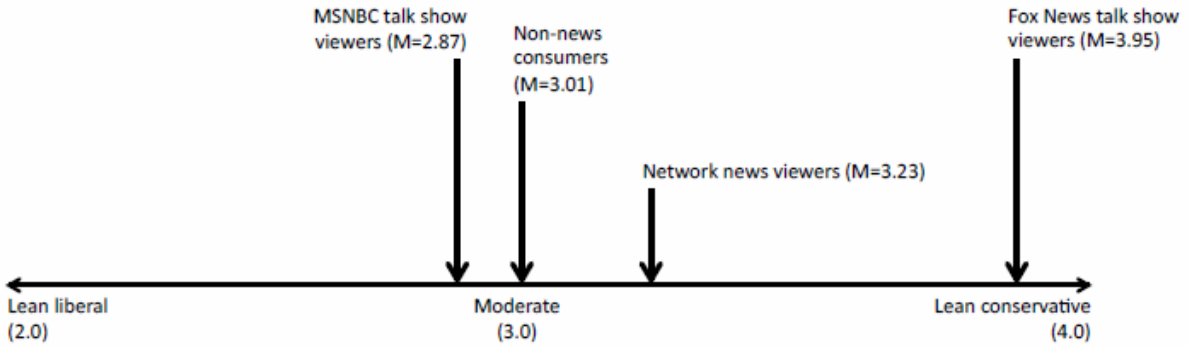
Ideological and Demographic Sorting in News Audiences

We go beyond self-reported political ideology in Table 3.1, which considers a broader array of political judgments. The table reports the profound differences between broadcast news viewers of news and opinionated talk shows in terms of partisanship, evaluations of President Obama, and identification with a variety of social groups. We need not belabor the point, but highlight a couple of distinctions. In the final two columns, we see that only 12 percent of Fox News talk show viewers approve of the job that President Obama is doing, while 71 percent of MSNBC talk

Figure 3.1. Ideological Self-Placement of News Audiences



show viewers approve of the president. Broadcast news audiences and the inattentive public fall in the middle, with 54.9 and 44.8 percent approving of the president, respectively. We see the same pattern in social identifications. Respondents were asked whether they identify with conservative interests (the Tea Party, Christian conservatives, the National Rifle Association, pro-business, and Libertarians) and liberal interests (gay rights supporters, environmentalists, and progressives). In seven of eight of these, there are substantial differences between the viewers of Fox and MSNBC talk shows.

[Table 3.1 about here]

Clearly, these audiences are different from each other politically and discernibly polarized in meaningful ways. But are these audiences politically different from each other because people sort by political interest and self-select into different news audiences, or are they different from each other because of the differences in news content, reflecting the rhetorical power of the media to persuade them to adopt liberal views in the case of MSNBC or conservative ones in the case of Fox News? A third alternative is that both are happening.

At a minimum, people are sorting themselves into these audiences. In addition to the political differences we see in Table 3.1, we chart *demographic* differences across these audiences in Table 3.2. For example, Fox News and MSNBC talk show viewers express different levels of economic affluence. About 63 percent of Fox News viewers report incomes higher than the 2010 median U.S. income, while 54 percent of MSNBC news viewers have incomes over the median. Taken together, partisan news show audiences are more affluent than broadcast news

Table 3.1. Political Differences among News Audiences

			Talk Show Viewers	
	Inattentive	Broadcast News Viewers	Fox News	MSNBC
Percent Liberal	23.5	17.0	3.0	32.6
Percent Conservative	28.2	37.8	77.4	25.5
Percent Democrat	43.8	53.0	12.3	69.8
Percent Republican	29.6	37.1	81.4	20.6
Approve of Obama	44.8	54.9	11.9	71.4
Disapprove of Obama	27.6	35.0	85.2	26.5
Don't Know/Refused	27.6	10.1	2.9	2.1
Tea Party	13.8	22.1	68.4	16.4
Christian Conservative	37.9	45.7	74.4	32.3
NRA	32.0	38.6	67.0	31.7
Pro-business	35.0	57.3	81.2	59.8
Libertarian	12.8	14.4	22.4	17.5
Gay Rights Supporter	33.5	36.7	24.0	54.5
Environmentalist	48.8	68.0	48.2	78.8
Progressive	27.1	48.7	22.9	57.4

audiences (50 percent above median income) and the inattentive public (31 percent above median income). As compelling as Glenn Beck was during his run on the Fox News Channel, we doubt he was directly generating wealth for his viewers.

[Table 3.2 about here]

We see the same pattern for marriage: A larger proportion of Fox News talk show viewers are married (nearly 68 percent), compared to MSNBC talk show viewers (nearly 52 percent). This pattern holds with age and ethnic composition as well. As with income, we cannot imagine that anyone would sincerely argue that Keith Olbermann makes people less likely to be married than Bill O'Reilly, that Sean Hannity ages people more than Rachel Maddow, or that Glenn Beck and Chris Matthews change the race or ethnicity of their viewers. In short, these demographic differences suggest that news audiences are socially distinct and polarized, but do little for the argument that the shows' content produces polarization by persuading viewers to adopt more extreme positions.

News Audiences also Differ in Attention and Knowledge

The Pew survey reveals some other differences among these audiences we consider to be quite important: differences in the extent to which these audiences pay attention to news, how much they know about politics, and differences in their evaluation of news media. We compare the four audiences across these dimensions in Table 3.3. Here, the picture that emerges is qualitatively different than what we saw with political opinions and most of the demographic items. The people who watch talk shows on Fox News Channel and MCNBC are very engaged with politics and political information. Partisan talk show viewers also see more political bias in

Table 3.2. Demographic Differences among News Audiences

			Talk Show Viewers	
	Inattentive	Broadcast News Viewers	Fox News	MSNBC
Percent above median income	31.0	50.0	63.3	54.0
Percent married	33.5	54.7	67.7	51.9
Average age	40.7	57.6	56.5	54.4
Percent college educated	15.4	34.6	40.8	39.6
Percent male	42.9	35.6	48.2	49.7
Percent white	69.4	76.6	85.7	63.4
Percent black	10.6	13.9	3.2	17.2
Percent Latino	12.6	5.4	4.9	10.2

news media reports than network news viewers, and, perhaps as a consequence, they are more likely than the inattentive and broadcast news audiences to prefer news shows that share their point of view. In these regards, partisan news audiences on the left and right are quite *similar*.

[Table 3.3 about here]

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that there are huge gaps in attention, knowledge, and engagement between people who disregard all news sources and people who do pay attention to news (e.g., Zaller 1992). That said, cable talk show viewers are even more interested than broadcast news viewers, with about 80 percent of talk show viewers reporting that they enjoy keeping up with news "a lot" versus 62 percent of broadcast news watchers. Partisan news viewers at least claim to be paying more attention to major news stories of the day (Pew asked about the economy, congressional elections, and Afghanistan). They also know more of the news facts Pew quizzed them about, including identifying the majority political party in the U.S. House of Representatives, the company Steve Jobs headed at the time, Eric Holder's position in government, and the country whose volcanic eruption disrupted international air travel in spring 2010. In each case, broadcast news viewers paid more attention to politics or knew more than inattentive viewers and the respective cable talk show audiences surpassed the broadcast news audiences.

But Doesn't Fox News Under-inform People about Politics?

Seeing evidence that Fox News viewers have levels of political knowledge comparable to or even exceeding MSNBC and broadcast news viewers may come as a surprise to some readers. Beyond the pervasive perception that partisan talk

Table 3.3. Information Differences among News Audiences

			Talk Show Viewers	
	Inattentive	Broadcast News Viewers	Fox News	MSNBC
Enjoys keeping up with news "a lot"	4.9	62.2	80.5	79.9
Following condition of the U.S. economy	6.9	47.6	70.6	57.1
Following congressional elections	2.0	23.4	48.0	34.4
Following events in Afghanistan	3.9	38.2	41.7	39.7
Average knowledge items correct	1.0	1.9	2.6	2.4
Percent registered to vote	66.5	88.2	94.2	91.5
Sees “a lot” of political bias in news	34.5	52.2	81.6	66.1
Trusts a few media more than others	29.1	63.3	81.8	77.8
Prefers news with shared point of view	18.2	23.1	35.4	32.8

shows are misleading, in late fall 2011 researchers at Farleigh Dickinson University earned a great deal of publicity for their study of 612 New Jersey adults and their finding that "some outlets, especially Fox News, lead people to be even less informed than those who say they don't watch any news at all" (Farleigh Dickinson University 2011). Specifically, they found that survey respondents who said they watch Fox News were far less likely to answer correctly a question about the overthrow of the Egyptian government in February 2011. On the other hand, the researchers characterize news programs like the mainstream media's Sunday morning talk shows as more informative: "Viewers pick up more information from this sort of calm discussion than from other formats," said Daniel Cassino, a scholar at Farleigh Dickinson. In fact, respondents who said they watch these Sunday morning broadcast shows were much more likely to answer the question correctly.

The researchers want to make a direct causal inference here: Fox News causes ignorance. That may be, but their survey design does not provide sufficient evidence. People select into the Fox News audience, which always leaves open the possibility that they are simply different than those who choose to do something else, like watch network news or no news at all. Moreover, reliance on self-reports of viewing behavior further distorts these potential selection problems (Prior 2009). People may say they watch news shows whether they do or not.

The Farleigh Dickinson researchers are less concerned about the problems of self-selection, because they analyzed responses to the question using a statistical technique called logistic regression. When estimating the relationship between self-reported viewing of multiple sources of information and correct responses to the

question about the removal of former president Mubarak, the researchers accounted for other potential variables that could affect whether survey respondents answered the question correctly, including their party identification. Many people colloquially refer to these as *control* variables; the hope is that they "control" for the effect of those other factors and allow one to estimate the true causal relationship between the variables of interest: "Because of the controls for partisanship, we know these results are not just driven by Republicans or other groups being more likely to watch Fox News" (Farleigh Dickinson University 2011).

The major problem with this logic is that statistical controls are insufficient in the face of selection bias. The statistical model employed by the Farleigh Dickinson researchers makes two assumptions: (1) Partisanship and the other controls account for all preexisting differences in knowledge, so that we can treat the selection into the Fox News audience as if it were random; and (2) Partisanship and the other controls do not causally affect selection into these audiences (i.e., Democrats that watch Fox are no different than Democrats who do not watch Fox). These assumptions strain credulity. It is just as plausible, if not more so, that people choose to watch news *because* of the characteristics measured by the "control" variables, and, at the very least, it is highly dubious that partisans who watch Fox are no different from partisans who choose not to watch Fox. Treating variables that cause people to select partisan news as if they are exogenous control variables risks *overstating* the effects of cable news shows (see Achen 1986; Arceneaux 2010). In short, selection bias vitiates our ability to disentangle cause and effect from the

standard type of methods employed by the Farleigh Dickinson University researchers.

A similar effort by researchers at the University of Maryland in December 2010 came to similar conclusions: Fox News underinforms. This study concluded that Fox News viewers were more likely than others to hold a wide-ranging set of mistaken beliefs. The researchers took essentially the same approach to dealing with the problem of partisan selectivity: "The effect was also not simply a function of partisan bias, as people who voted Democratic and watched Fox News were also more likely to have such misinformation than those who did not watch it" (Ramsay et al. 2010, 20). The only difference from the Farleigh Dickinson study is that the Maryland researchers controlled for partisanship by using a less sophisticated statistical technique to compare partisans to other like-partisans by news source.

This approach also assumes that the difference between partisans who watch Fox News and those who do not is random. In order to make this problem more concrete consider the following: If partisans who watch Fox News are, say, more interested in domestic than international politics, we would expect Fox News watchers to be less informed about international politics *irrespective* of Fox's influence. Indeed, Fox News could even make these individuals more informed about international events than they would have otherwise been. Neither of these research teams has access to what statisticians call the *counterfactual*. A counterfactual is the product of a thought experiment: What would have happened in an alternate reality where Fox News does not exist? Would the same Fox News viewers in the reality we do observe know more or less about politics if they lived in

the alternate reality? The fundamental obstacle to causal inference is that we can never simultaneously observe what actually happens and the counterfactual.

All of this isn't to say that these researchers are necessarily wrong; it very well could be that Fox News is a poor source of information. Our point is that without a convincing research design neither of these attention-grabbing reports should be taken as persuasive. Both are simply indeterminate on the question of whether Fox News causes viewers to become ignorant about public affairs or whether people who are ignorant about public affairs choose to watch Fox News.
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The Implications of Partisan News Choice

At this point, we hope it is clear that partisan news audiences are different from broadcast news audiences on many dimensions. So what? What implications does this have for studying the effects of partisan news? We suspect that the people who choose to watch cable news and cable news talk shows, in particular, have relatively stable opinions about politics. They are certainly more opinionated. For example, Table 3.1 showed that only 3 percent of Fox News talk show viewers and 2 percent of this audience for MSNBC were unable to evaluate the job President Obama was doing at the time. Ten percent of regular broadcast network news viewers were unable to do so and 28 percent of inattentive viewers refused to answer the question or pled ignorance.

These markers of attentiveness and attitude strength can limit the influence of the news media (Zaller 1992), and underscore our contention that television audiences are active rather than passive. In addition to ideological orientations,

demographic characteristics, and political engagement, these audiences exhibit different patterns of trusting media outlets and use different criteria to select news. Fox News and MSNBC talk show viewers see more political bias in news media reports than network news viewers. They also extend their trust to news media outlets more narrowly than news viewers and the inattentive. Fox and MSNBC viewers also more likely indicate a preference for news programming that shares their political point of view. The implication of this audience comparison is that news consumers are *selective* in choosing sources of information, they are relatively guarded when considering programming, shop for news and act on their preferences, and sort into networks and shows. What's more, those who change the channel to something other than partisan news are being selective as well. In the next section, we offer a theoretical model of selective exposure and draw from it a set of expectations about how media choice shapes the reach and influence of partisan news shows.

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Active Audience Theory

We are certainly not the first to propose that scholars should treat television audiences as active—consisting of individuals who exercise agency over what they consume and what messages they accept. Our theoretical model is heavily indebted to the *uses and gratifications* paradigm that emerged during the minimal effects period of media research. It was conceptualized as a foil to the hypodermic needle model's presumption that individuals are unable to resist media influence. In contrast, researchers applying the uses and gratifications framework argue that

people used the media to satisfy their own needs, which limited media influence (Cantril 1942). Subsequent research in this mold sought to understand how and why people use the media to attain their needs (e.g., Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1974), but failed to generate a unified theory of media use (Blumler 1979).

Uses and gratifications "theory" became an eclectic and sometimes contradictory collection of musings. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify common elements that unite disparate articulations of the uses and gratifications framework (Biocca 1988). Active audience members have needs (e.g., desire for information or diversion) that they use media programming to satisfy. Those needs translate into intentional choices about what to consume. Given these choices, individuals actively involve themselves in the media they have chosen (e.g., counter-arguing, talking back to the television). As such, individuals do not randomly consume media programming. They select into audiences. Ultimately, uses and gratifications scholars expected the goal-directedness, intentionality, and selectivity of active audience members in the extreme to generate "imperviousness to influence" (Biocca 1988, 54).

Our *Active Audience Theory* shares some but not all elements of the uses and gratifications framework. We, too, presume that individuals are guided by needs and goals when they consume media, leading them to make purposive decisions and, when possible, selecting programming that best fits their needs and desires. However, we certainly do not conclude, ergo, that individuals are impervious to media influence. Just because people select which television shows they want to watch does not mean they are unaffected by them. Instead, our argument is that

there is no guarantee that the information presented by the shows people choose to watch will be taken at face value. Selected programming may profoundly affect viewers, but not necessarily in the ways intended by the program's creator and the same program could have different effects for different viewers, given their characteristics and interpretations.

We also do not treat the media as a monolithic entity from which all individuals must defend themselves (see Morley 1993). Perhaps this approach made sense, at least as a simplification, during the broadcast television era. The availability of so many news and entertainment outlets on television nowadays (not to mention the radio, Internet, and social media) compels us to conceptualize media as a multifaceted, heterogeneous collection of options. Today, more than ever, people can create a media environment that does not challenge their cherished views (Bennett and Iyengar 2008)—if that is what they want.

Finally, at the heart of our Active Audience Theory is a set of midlevel theories recruited from political science and psychology to construct a model of selective exposure, which specifies how motivations shape reactions to media content and generates empirically falsifiable expectations. Our approach contrasts with many scholars in the uses and gratifications tradition who advance overly abstract functionalist theories of media use that end up explaining everything and, therefore, nothing at all (see Seaman 1992). It is not our goal to explain why people watch what they watch. We take this as a given and proceed to theorize how preferences over media programming conditions the effects and reach of partisan news media.

A Motivational Model of Selective Exposure

In an effort to understand how selective exposure alters media effects, we start by considering the motivations of television viewers. Psychologists have long considered much of human behavior and reasoning to be rooted in one's goals, needs, and desires (Kruglanski 1980; Kunda 1990). We define motivation broadly as any goal-directed preference over what to watch on television. These goals may reflect the desire to defend one's political attitudes (Taber and Lodge 2006), obtain accurate information (Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey 2008), or to be entertained (Prior 2007).[13] Although this is, in many ways, another way of saying that people do the things they want to do, the motivational framework allows for differences in intrinsic individual traits (e.g., personalities), as well as situational constraints and incentives shape motivations. It offers a valuable starting point for the project here, because television programming in a free society attracts audiences by catering to people's desires and needs, and, when given a choice, people tend to watch the shows that best fit their tastes (Bowman 1975).[14]

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[13] Our broad conceptualization of motivation mirrors work in psychology, which has identified a set of motivations that commonly guide individual behavior—including the *epistemic* motivation to hold accurate beliefs (see Kruglanski 1989), *defensive* motivation to defend one's beliefs (see Kunda 1990), and *hedonic* motivation to seek out pleasure and avoid pain (see Higgins 1997).

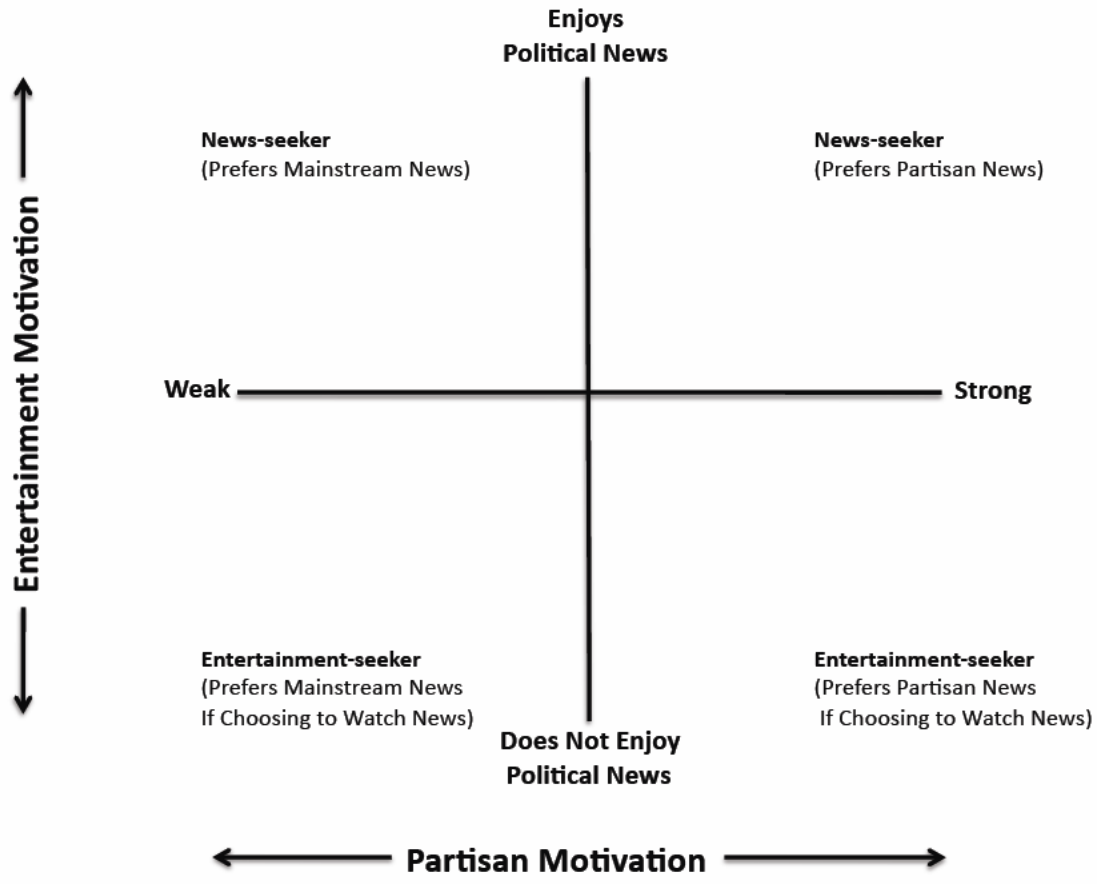
[14] Even in authoritarian states, individual motivations to view types of programming (i.e., news versus entertainment) on television affect the reach and influence of political messages (Kern and Hainmueller 2009).

[Figure 3.2 about here]

In our model of news viewing behavior, we posit that two fundamental motivations figure into people's viewing decisions: the motivation to receive news from a partisan viewpoint and the motivation to be entertained. The model shown in Figure 3.2 makes it clear that we assume both motivations fall on a continuous dimension. Some individuals prefer more partisan news than others, while some individuals are more entertained by the news in general than others. Recently, a great deal of media scholarship has been devoted to partisan motivations in news-watching behavior (e.g., Bennett and Manheim 2006; Garrett 2009a, 2009b; Manjoo 2008; Goldman and Mutz 2011; Iyengar and Hahn 2007; Iyengar et al. 2008; Mutz and Martin 2001; Stroud 2008, 2011; Sunstein 2009; Valentino et al. 2009). Much of this work focuses on whether the rise of partisan media creates a world in which people consume ideologically congenial news, while screening out opposing viewpoints.

Scholars building upon a rich literature in psychology on selective exposure to attitude-consistent information (Festinger 1957; Fischer et al. 2005; Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey 2008; Frey 1986; Sears and Freedman 1967), more or less agree that many people gravitate toward attitude-consistent news (e.g., Garrett 2009a, 2009b; Garrett, Carnahan, and Lunch 2011; Iyengar and Hahn 2007; Iyengar et al. 2008; Mutz and Martin 2001; Stroud 2008, 2011). However, there is some disagreement over the degree to which individuals actively screen out attitude-inconsistent news (see for example, Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 2010; Garrett 2009a, 2009b; Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010). It appears that some individual news

Figure 3.2. A Motivational Model of Selective Exposure



viewers, albeit a minority, may even seek out contrary viewpoints (Stroud 2011, 169).

In our framework, we remain agnostic about whether individuals are motivated to screen out oppositional news while consuming only ideologically congenial news. The partisan motivation dimension encapsulates the motivation to watch any partisan news—be it ideologically congenial or otherwise. It is most likely the case that the decision to consume ideologically congenial news at the expense of oppositional news is a function of differences in individual traits and situational factors (see Kirzinger, Weber, and Johnson 2012 for a discussion of the roots of these kinds of motivations). Some individuals are compelled to view information that comports with their view of the world, while others are equally compelled to hear diverse viewpoints (e.g., Kruglanski, Webster, and Klem 1993). At the same time, particular circumstances motivate people to appear objective and sample from opposing viewpoints (e.g., Fischer, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey 2008). These factors are important, but outside the scope of our current study.

Our overarching goal here is to explore the implications of the choice *to screen out news altogether*. In the drive to understand the effects of selective exposure to partisan news, scholars have paid less attention to this related form of selective exposure to political news in general (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Scholars who have tackled this question conclude that the hyperchoice media environment has made it possible for more and more Americans to wall themselves off from political information (Baum and Kernell 1999; Prior 2005, 2007). In addition to filtering news based on one's partisan predispositions, "selective exposure enables

the popular lifestyle choice of political avoidance" (Bennett and Iyengar 2010, 721). We call this *news selectivity* and argue that it is just as important, if not more important, than partisan selectivity.

If we simplify the model in Figure 3.2, four ideal types emerge. Starting at the top left corner of the two-dimensional space are individuals who enjoy watching news, but of a nonpartisan variety, which means that in the current media environment, they would likely gravitate toward mainstream news if given a choice. Moving to the top right corner are individuals who enjoy watching partisan news and, if given a choice, should gravitate toward partisan news programming. In the bottom quadrants are individuals who, if given a choice, would typically not watch political news. All things being equal, these viewers would opt for entertainment programming. If induced to watch the news (e.g., a major event that piques their interest), individuals in the bottom right corner would gravitate toward partisan news, while individuals in the bottom left corner would opt for mainstream news.

This theoretical model opens a number of avenues for research but, like most researchers, we cannot explore all of these questions at once. Because a great deal of research has focused on the effects of partisan selectivity, while comparatively less research has been devoted to news selectivity, we choose to focus on the effects of partisan media given the presence of entertainment choices. Consequently, we hold constant the motivation to watch partisan news and focus on the motivation to watch news versus entertainment, simplifying our typology further to two ideal types: *news-seekers* and *entertainment-seekers* (see also Prior 2007).

We apply this theoretical framework to investigate how the presence of

entertainment choices shapes the influence of partisan news shows. We explore the effects of partisan news on a number of outcomes—attitude polarization, resistance to persuasion, issue salience, hostile media perceptions, and political trust—which have been prominent in previous media effects research. For the purposes of our study, we draw three expectations from our model:

Expectation 1. *People view television programming through the lenses of their own partisan motivations.* These motivations not only influence what programming individuals choose to watch, but also shape how they process the news. People are motivated to defend preexisting attitudes, and, therefore, should be more likely to accept messages that are consistent with their predispositions and resist those that are not (e.g., Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006).[15]

Expectation 2. *In the presence of choice, entertainment-seekers select out of*

[15] There are a number of mechanisms through which individuals can discount counterattitudinal information. They could view the source as untrustworthy (Hovland and Weiss 1951). They could see the arguments, themselves, as weak and unpersuasive (Taber and Lodge 2006). They could also use different evaluative criteria than the one invoked by what they would concede is a strong counterattitudinal argument (Gerber and Green 1999)—a liberal who values fair treatment of the accused would be unmoved by the argument that harsh interrogation tactics are effective. Other possibilities surely remain. Nonetheless, we are less interested in identifying the mechanism by which people change or maintain attitudes than we are in establishing how people respond to partisan news shows.

news audiences and attenuate partisan news effects in the process. The exit of entertainment-seekers shrinks the partisan news audience and dilutes its overall effect in the process.

Expectation 3. *On average, partisan news shows have smaller effects on news-seekers than on entertainment-seekers.* This expectation is the product of our motivational framework—people's motivations generate chronic viewing habits (e.g., news-seekers and entertainment-seekers)—combined with scholarship on the effects of chronic exposure to a stimulus (e.g., news). On a general level, research across a wide range of domains, including biological and psychological, has found that successive exposure to the same stimulus leads to habituation and diminished responsiveness (see Thompson 2009). In the context of our model, habituation would cause people who regularly watch partisan news to become inured to its effects. On a more specific level, John Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (R-A-S) model of opinion formation predicts that those who chronically avoid the news (i.e., entertainment-seekers) are the most susceptible to news media effects, but the least likely to experience those effects because they fail to consume information that might affect their views (e.g., partisan news). Meanwhile, those who chronically expose themselves to news (i.e., news-seekers) are regularly exposed to messages that could influence their attitudes, but because they possess very well-formed opinions, they cannot be easily influenced (see also McGuire 1968).

These expectations guide the development of hypotheses that are specific to the media effects under investigation. In chapters that follow, we elaborate on the rationale for these specific hypotheses, as informed by these general expectations.

Empirically evaluating these hypotheses requires careful thought given to the research design, and the remaining sections of the chapter are devoted to explaining and justifying our approach.

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The Case for Randomized Experiments

We have already seen that the direct observation of people who watch different news programs does not tell us exactly what we want to know about whether and how partisan cable news talk shows influence public opinion. The shortcoming of the survey research design we discussed at the beginning of this chapter is that it allows us only to observe the correlation between news viewing behavior and political attitudes. This kind of analysis alone cannot conclusively tell us whether watching Fox News causes viewers to become conservative or whether being conservative causes people to watch Fox News. Indeed, given the research on the partisan selective discussed above, we know that a person's ideology plays a role in deciding what news networks he watches (e.g., Stroud 2011) and trusts (Iyengar and Hahn 2007). The analysis of all observational data is complicated by the well-known dictum in statistics that *correlation does not equal causation*. After all, both ice cream consumption and homicides tend to increase in the summer months, but it would be ridiculous to claim on the basis of this correlation that eating ice cream causes people to go on killing sprees. Even though the claim that partisan news causes a shift in political attitudes is far less ridiculous, researchers must still be careful when adducing the cause of partisan media from observational data.

Randomized experiments offer a better strategy for isolating causal effects. The use of randomized experiments to study the effects of political news enjoys a rich tradition in media research, so this is hardly a new approach. The postwar experiments conducted by Carl Hovland and his colleagues contributed significantly to the minimal effects model dominant around the mid-20th century (see Klapper 1960). Likewise, the seminal experiments conducted by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder in the 1980s informed our understanding of the impact of network news during the broadcast era. In a randomized experiment, the researcher assigns individuals to different levels of the factor believed to cause something to occur, or *treatments*, in statistics parlance (e.g., watching partisan news or an entertainment program, taking a new drug or a placebo). By making assignment to the different treatments at random—imagine the researcher flipping a coin to decide what treatment a person receives—we can be sure that the treatment that people receive is not affected by some other factor that may also affect the outcome we are interested in studying, such as their age, political beliefs, and so on.

In essence, random assignment gives researchers a way to create an answer to the counterfactual question underlying all causal inference: What would the same people do if they *did not* watch partisan news shows? Obviously, we cannot directly answer that question. Short of inventing a time machine, we cannot simultaneously observe the state of the world in which the same person does and does not watch partisan news. However, random assignment allows us to create groups of individuals who are highly similar and, therefore, comparable. If we randomly assign some people to watch Fox News, while assigning others to watch an

entertainment show, we know that the people in the Fox News group will, on average, be similar to the people in the entertainment show group—they come from the same underlying population and differ only in the fact that they are assigned to different treatments at random. If we simply assigned people at random to different groups and then did not administer the treatment, there should be no differences between the groups with respect to the typical political views these participants express in a survey. As a result, if we do administer the treatment to these groups and find that those who watched Fox News express more conservative attitudes than those who watched the entertainment program, then it is likely that exposure to Fox News caused people to express more conservative attitudes.[16] (Mathematically-inclined readers can see a formal proof of this in the appendix.)

[16] It is important to note that differences across randomly-constructed groups can happen by chance in any given sample. If we were to conduct an infinite number of experiments using an infinite number of random samples and took an average of the differences across treatment groups, we would be certain that any differences were caused in some way by the treatment. Of course, we cannot conduct an infinite number of experiments. Fortunately, we do not have to do so because it is possible to calculate the probability that we would have observed a difference among treatment groups even if there were none. As long as that probability is low, we can proceed as if the observed difference was caused in some way by the treatment (see Arceneaux 2010 for a more extended discussion of the interpretation of treatment effects in the context of political communication research). We report these tests of statistical significance in relevant footnotes and in the Appendix.

Political communication researchers have learned a great deal about the effects of media on opinions using experiments featuring random assignment to fixed treatment conditions. However, their major limitation is that they identify the causal effect of political messages provided people are exposed to them—forced to watch. Theoretically, we know media effects are *conditional* and shaped by audience choices, but this kind of classic experimental design relies on an operational hypodermic needle delivery of stimuli to participants. The only choice participants really have is to decide whether or not to participate in the experiment at all. More fundamentally, if we ignore the fact that the act of choosing to consume media programming in naturalistic settings is endogenous to the characteristics of the programming, "captive audience" designs can lead to a distorted understanding of media effects (Hovland 1959).

A recent article in the journal *Political Communication* offers an example of this limitation in the context of understanding the effects of partisan news. Lauren Feldman (2011) assigned people at random to clips of talk shows hosted by conservative commentator Glenn Beck, progressive talk show host Keith Olbermann, and the PBS *NewsHour* program. The clips featured discussions of then-President Bush's veto of the State Children's Health Insurance Program bill in October 2007. She found that people who watched Beck, independent of partisanship, were more likely to shift their opinions in opposition to the bill, and people assigned to the Olbermann viewing condition were more likely to shift their opinion toward support of the bill (Feldman 2011, 171, Figure 1). Feldman, for one, sounds what we consider to be an appropriate—if not essential—caution about her

findings: “Although the experimental methods permitted causal inferences, by forcing exposure to the stimulus, the influence of selective exposure was obscured” (Feldman 2011, 176).

We do not intend this observation to be a critique of previous experimental studies. For one, randomized experiments that assign subjects to forced treatment stimuli are extremely valuable to the scientific study of media effects because they allow researchers to isolate the causal effects of political media far better than observational studies, such as the ones discussed earlier in this chapter. In addition, the design of initial experiments in an area *should* be parsimonious and aim to capture maximal effects. Establishing the maximal effect of political communication points the direction future research should go. Until recently, scholars could credibly assume that mainstream media coverage would reach most people and maximal effects were potentially even good barometers of the overall effect of political communication. During the broadcast television era, many people were exposed to political news despite their lack of political interest (Prior 2007). However, the rise of cable television and the Internet and the fragmented political media market produced in its wake force us to reconsider experimental designs and develop an expanded set of tools to study media effects.

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Experimental Design

The design of an experiment is crucial. The inferential power of an experiment comes from its ability to isolate causal effects through the careful manipulation of treatments. The design of those treatments directly affects what can

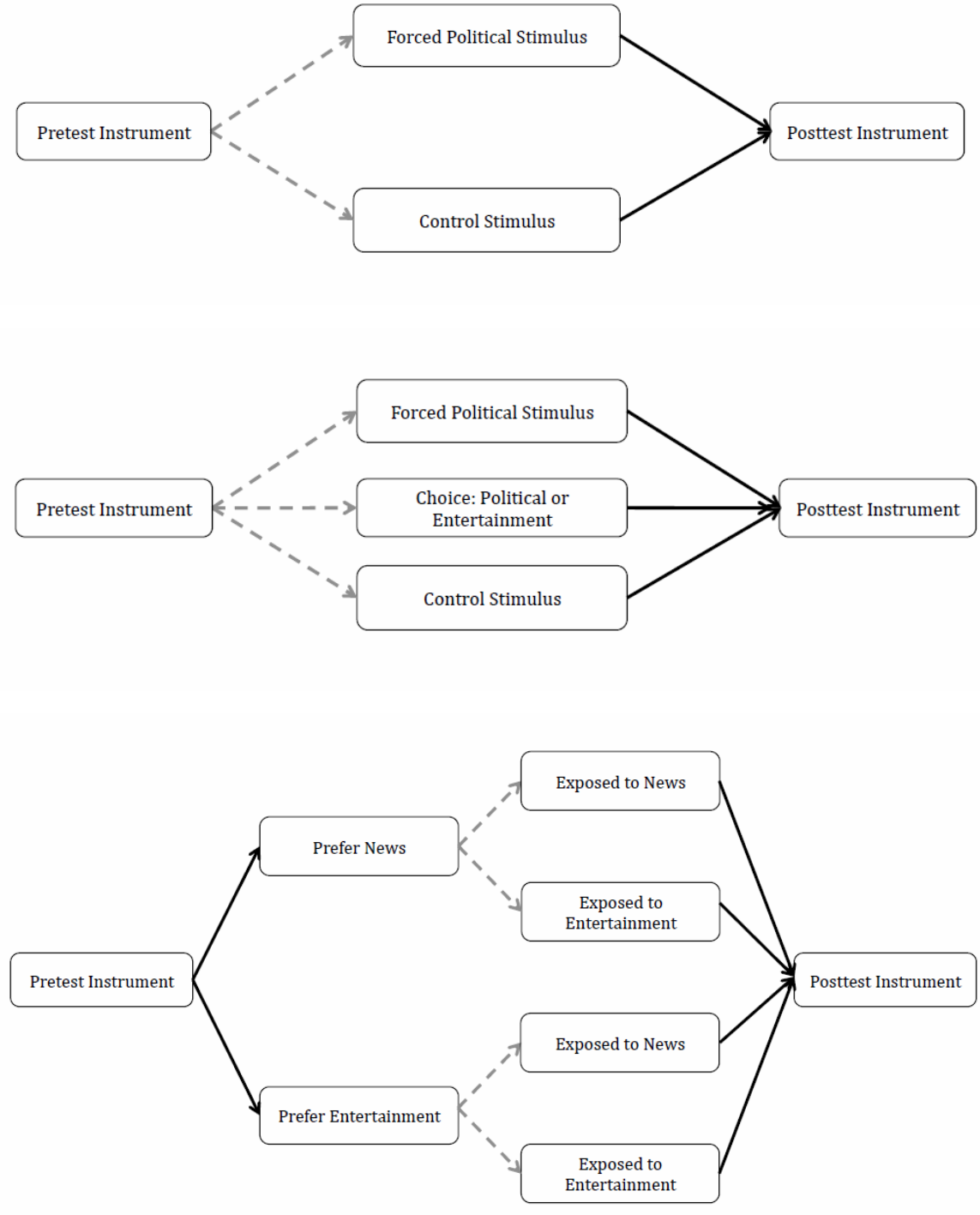
be learned from the experiment. In our project, we rely on three experimental designs to study the effects of partisan news media: a traditional experimental design that assigns participants to one of several specific, forced viewing conditions at random, as well as two novel designs that allow us to assess how the choices research participants make about viewing options condition the effects of those programs. The broad outlines of these designs are displayed graphically in Figure 3.4, and a formal explanation of how these designs jibe with our theoretical model is discussed in the Appendix.

[Figure 3.3 about here]

Forced Exposure Design

The traditional experimental design used in political communication research is displayed in Figure 3.3a. This design precedes much in the way discussed in the example above. Study participants are recruited from a population, usually students at a university or nonstudents from the surrounding community, and compensated for their time in some way (e.g., course credit for students or monetary inducements). The study typically takes place in a controlled setting called a laboratory where assignment to treatments can be administered and monitored. When subjects arrive at the lab, they are typically asked to answer a set of questions before the study begins. This *pretest questionnaire* measures baseline characteristics (e.g., political ideology, media viewing habits, demographic information) of each of the participants. Next, participants are randomly assigned to treatment conditions. In the simplest design, subjects are randomly assigned to watch some political stimuli, such as a news program, or control stimuli, such as an

Figure 3.3. Experimental Designs for Studying Media Effects



Note: Solid lines indicate non-random assignment and dashed lines indicate random assignment

entertainment program. After watching the experimental stimuli, participants are asked to complete a *posttest questionnaire* that measures the outcomes under investigation, such as political attitudes.

The forced exposure design is useful for estimating the maximal effects of political stimuli. Because subjects had little choice in the matter (aside from closing their eyes and ears), any posttreatment differences between the treatment and the control group likely represent the largest effect of political news possible. In an era of hyperchoice, forced exposure political communication experiments are increasingly plagued with limited external generalizability—a growing disconnect between the ways people use television at home and in a controlled laboratory setting. Experimentalists and other researchers have always been concerned about whether the things that happen in the laboratory meaningfully mirror what happens outside of the lab. However, the hyperchoice environment available to cable television subscribers exaggerates these concerns. Thus, if we wish to understand the effects of selective exposure, "… it is important that experimental researchers use designs that combine manipulation with self-selection of exposure" (Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 724). We do so with the help of two different designs.

Selective Exposure Design

First, we use a novel experimental design, shown in Figure 3.3b. It builds on the forced exposure design by assigning subjects at random to a forced treatment and control condition. The added wrinkle is the choice condition in which participants are given a remote control and allowed to flip among the stimuli

showcased in the forced conditions.[17] Similar to sitting on one's couch with remote control in hand, participants can spend as much time on each program as they like and can flip back and forth as much as they want. By comparing posttreatment outcomes in the choice condition to those in the control and forced treatment conditions, it is possible to gauge the effects of choice and, by extension, selective exposure.

In these studies, participants were recruited to visit our research laboratory at University of California, Riverside, and assigned to one of several conditions, including forced viewing scenarios as well as this novel choice treatment. In the choice treatment, after completing a pretest questionnaire, subjects accessed multiple television channels on their private television monitor. The studies reported here included either three or four channels of programming played for subjects using a four-input audio/video switch unit that emulates a set-top cable box. Research assistants played the programming for each participant using DVD playback devices in a control room adjacent to the viewing rooms in the UC-Riverside laboratory, starting all programs at the beginning of the viewing session.

Subjects in the choice condition held a remote control and could change channels among these fixed viewing options as they wished during the viewing sessions. They could watch a given program for the length of time they wished. For

[17] Media scholar Dolf Zillmann and his colleagues used a research design similar to this during the late 1970s to study how children are affected by educational television provided viewing alternatives (see e.g., Wakshlag, Reitz, and Zillmann 1982; Zillman and Bryant 1985; Zillmann, Hezel, and Medoff 1980).

example, the subject could linger as long or short a time as she wished on Channel 2, then change the channel to a different option, perhaps Channel 4, and then return to Channel 2 or move to a different channel entirely. Of course, just as in a natural viewing environment, the subject would join each of these options in progress. Consequently, the viewing options were fixed for each choice condition participant and played back in a manner that quite closely simulates the experience of watching television.

Although the selective exposure design stimulates conditions present in natural settings, it does not perfectly replicate those conditions. All laboratory experiments trade a degree of generalizability in return for control and, as a consequence, strong internal validity. The selective exposure design is no different. Subjects assigned to the choice condition are not simply sitting on their couch at home. They are sitting in a laboratory, and they know they are being studied. Moreover, their choices do not include the 100-plus channels that most Americans have available on their home televisions, but are instead constrained by the number of stimuli present in the experimental design (typically three to four choices). As a result, the inference that we can draw from the selective exposure design is *the maximal effect of partisan news when a limited number of choices are available*. On the one hand, if we find little difference between the choice condition and the forced exposure to political stimuli condition, it suggests that limited choice does not mute the effects of partisan media. On the other hand, if we find that the effects of partisan news are muted in the choice condition, it suggests that selective exposure attenuates the effects of partisan media. Ascertaining whether the effects of partisan

news are attenuated in the presence of choice—even limited choice—is an important first step because it gives us an indication of what would happen if the choice set were expanded even further.

However, a clear limitation of the selective exposure design is that it does not allow us to investigate conclusively *why* the effects of partisan media are attenuated in the face of choice. Expectation 2 offers one possibility: By allowing entertainment-seekers to remove themselves from the audience, choice dilutes the effect of partisan news. Expectation 3 offers the additional possibility that partisan news has a more pronounced effect on entertainment-seekers when they cannot look away—as is the case in the forced exposure setting. In technical terms, partisan news may have *differential treatment effects*, such that typical news-seekers are affected differently than typical entertainment-seekers. If we force individuals to watch partisan news, the average of these differential treatment effects will not approximate the effect in choice settings. Indeed, in the most extreme case, if news-seekers are unaffected by partisan news while entertainment-seekers are massively affected by it, then forced exposure designs will greatly exaggerate the effects of partisan news.

So, the question is, how do we estimate the existence of differential treatment effects? Again, it may be appealing to use the information obtained in the choice condition to back out the "effects" of partisan news among those who chose to watch it versus those who chose to watch something else. Unfortunately, this runs afoul the same problem we encounter in observational studies. Keep in mind that what people choose to watch in the choice condition is endogenous to the

characteristics of those shows (e.g., the topic they covered, likability of the host, etc.). Consequently, we cannot know whether partisan news caused news-seekers to think differently than entertainment-seekers or whether news-seekers simply think differently than entertainment-seekers.

Participant Preference Design

In order to investigate possible heterogeneous treatment effects, it is necessary to identify who the news-seekers are and who the entertainment-seekers are *prior to treatment*.[18] We do so by borrowing an experimental design from the medical trials literature. Medical researchers call this the patient preference design (Macias et al. 2009; Torgerson and Sibbald 1998). Given the nature of our research, we refer to it as the *participant* preference design. This protocol asks subjects which treatment they would prefer to receive before randomly assigning them to a treatment. In our studies, we give subjects brief descriptions of the shows they could watch and ask them which one they would choose if it were up to them. After making their preference known, we randomly assign them to one of the shows using the standard forced exposure protocol (for a different approach, see Gaines and Kuklinski 2011). As shown in Figure 3.3c, this design allows us to estimate the effects of partisan news separately for those who prefer watching partisan news versus those who prefer watching entertainment programs. Because we measure subjects' viewing preferences prior to administering the treatment, we can be sure that some element of the treatment did not simultaneously affect their choice to watch and their resulting political attitude.

[18] We thank David Nickerson for suggesting this experimental protocol.

Participants

We recruited the nearly 1,700 individuals to participate in the studies reported in the chapters that follow using a variety of methods. In some studies, we recruited students at the University of California, Riverside, who received extra credit in their courses in return for participating in research at the Media & Communication Research Lab. For several studies conducted in the lab, we recruited nonstudent adults from the broader Riverside, California, community, working with a temporary employment agency. This agency distributed an initial recruitment notice to its staff of temporary workers, who were hired for a two-hour shift of research participation at a wage rate comparable to their normal earnings, several dollars per hour more than California minimum wage. One of the attractive aspects of working with this particular agency is the tremendous diversity of its staff, which included unskilled workers, employees from skilled trades, office workers with at least two-year college degrees, as well white collar professionals with four-year college degrees. All participants were informed that they were taking part in a study about "information processing," asked to provide their consent, and welcomed to exit the study at any time.

Finally, in one study, we recruited participants via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk and administered treatments over the Internet. Subjects in this experiment were adults living in the U.S., and were compensated with a small monetary credit towards their Amazon.com account ($0.50). Using Mechanical Turk as a recruitment tool for experiments has been on the rise in psychology, and has been shown to produce samples comparable to traditional convenience samples (Buhrmester,

Kwang, and Gosling 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, and Ipeirotis 2010) as well as successfully replicate canonical experiments (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).

Stimuli

Stimuli for partisan news and entertainment shows were draw from programs that actually aired on cable television.[19] Political stimuli were drawn from news talk shows on the major cable networks (i.e., CNN, Fox, and MSNBC). As for entertainment stimuli, we consciously chose programs that draw audiences of equal size to our political stimuli in order to give the political show a fighting chance in the choice condition. If we had offered participants an opportunity to watch a popular entertainment program, it would have been little surprise if most people—even frequent cable news watchers—opted for the popular show over the news program. Of course, there are numerous entertainment programs from which to choose. We narrowed our choices by first drawing up a list of basic cable entertainment programs that aired in the same timeslot as the political stimuli and that drew a similarly sized audience. We then randomly selected shows from this list.

We recorded political and entertainment shows using a DVR and edited the shows to fit the time constraints of the experiment (10 to 20 minutes) as well as the particular aspects of the show we wished to manipulate (e.g., partisan arguments, hostile interactions, etc.). Before using the clips that we created in an experiment,

[19] Because the focal point of our research is the effects of partisan news in a media environment that includes entertainment options, we do not study the effects of mainstream news programs in the current project. We discuss future research exploring broadcast news in Chapter 8.

we first ran a *norming study* in which participants were invited into the lab and asked to rate the shows across a number of dimensions. Armed with these data, we had a better sense that the clips we constructed possessed the characteristics that we wanted them to possess. In general, we selected entertainment shows that norming study subjects did not deem to be overtly political. As for political stimuli, all of the liberal news clips were drawn from MSNBC and all of the conservative clips were drawn from Fox News.

Our stimuli come from political talk shows like Maddow's and O'Reilly's for several reasons. First and foremost, these shows stand as exemplars of the sort of highly partisan and ideologically motivated discourse that contemporary critics of the partisan media bemoan (e.g., Jamieson and Cappella 2008). We appreciate that some observers are also concerned about the more subtle forms of ideological bias that exist in the more straightforward newscasts that appear on cable news (e.g., Brock, Rabin-Havt, and Media Matters for America 2012), but the crux of most observers' criticism, however, is that cable news programs transmit ideology to their viewers. Opinionated news talk shows exhibit stronger expressions of ideologically motivated reportage and, therefore, are more likely to have the sort of massive direct effects imagined by many media critics. Second, as a frontline study into the effects of the partisan news media, it is necessary to establish measureable media effects. These vivid and highly opinionated shows are designed to provoke more of a reaction than are straight newscasts. By employing these shows as stimuli, we are subjecting one of our main arguments—that choice blunts the overall effects of partisan news show—to a more strenuous test. Finally, we are trying to more

realistically capture viewing behavior than others have. These shows are germane because they are selected as sources of information for discernible audiences, as we see in the Pew study discussed above. While many protest, for example, that Fox News is not news, more akin to a political campaign (e.g., Brock, Rabin-Havt, and Media Matters for America 2012), the fact is that it is an information source for a reliable audience of viewers.

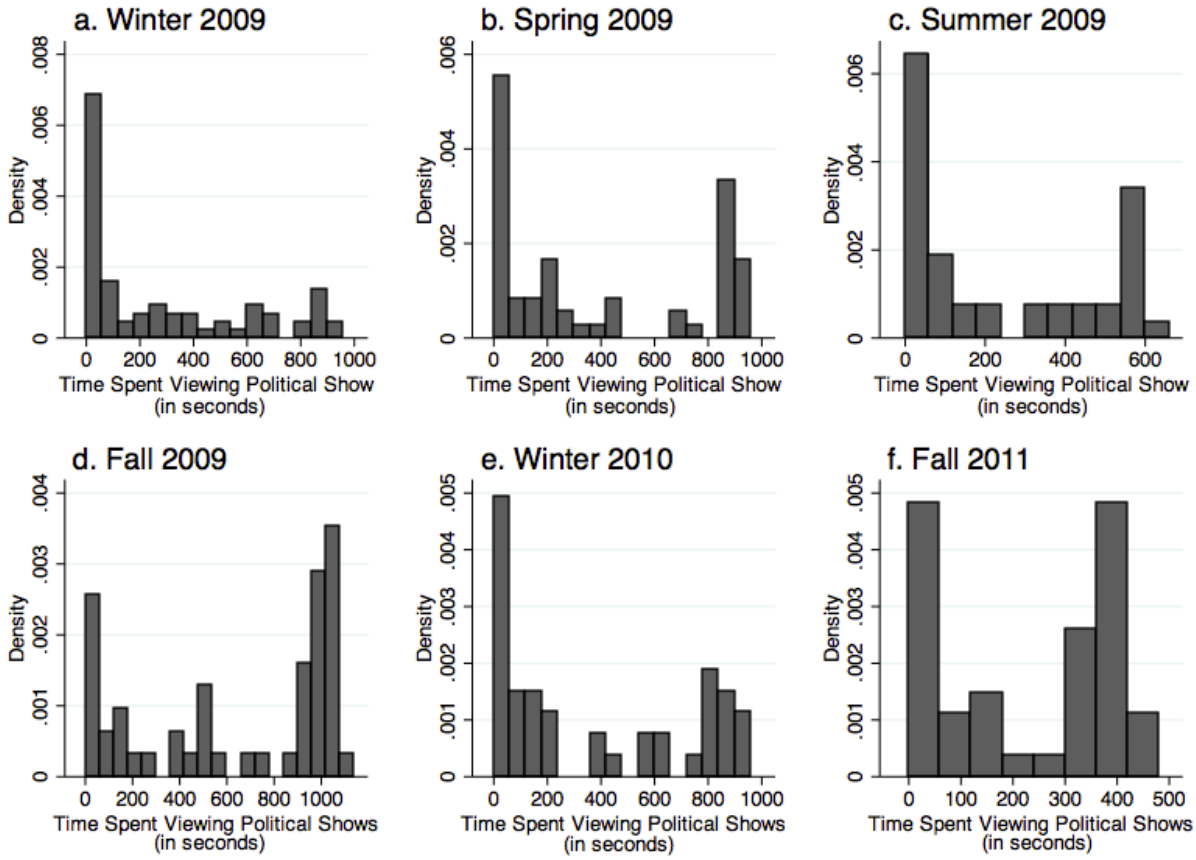
Studies

Throughout the remaining chapters of the book, we report the results of 11 forced exposure, selective exposure, and participant preference experiments. We conducted these experiments between June 2008 and November 2011. Table 3.5 provides a variety of details about each of the studies, including the timing of each study, the specific stimuli we used, and the number and nature of the participants. We use evidence from these studies to consider a variety of potential effects associated with aspects of the contemporary cable news media environment, including the extent to which they polarize the opinions of voters about policies and the job performance of politicians, openness to policy arguments, differences in policy priorities driven by attention to different news sources, perceptions of polarization in the contemporary media environment, and trust in media and institutions.

[Table 3.4 about here]

Before we present these analyses, we show some preliminary evidence about how people self-select into watching political news programs. Recall that in developing our theoretical expectations, we anticipate a fundamental division of

Figure 3.4. Distribution of Attention to Political Programs, Selective Exposure Experiments, 2009-2011



attention in the viewing public—some people want to consume political information while another large group of viewers do not. In Figure 3.4, we graph the amount of time people spent viewing the political news or talk show programming we offered them in the choice conditions of each of the six selective exposure studies we conducted. The graphs demonstrate substantial variation in the amount of time devoted to watching the political programs among these research participants. In the appendix, we further breakdown viewing patterns by ideological groups. Moreover, in virtually every study, we see a bimodal distribution of participants. A cluster of participants spends virtually no time viewing political programming, while a sizable group spends substantial time viewing these shows. This is consistent with the deliberate simplification of our theoretical model to essentially two types of people: those who tend to watch cable news talk shows when given the choice (news-seekers) and those who tend not to watch something else when given the choice (entertainment-seekers). It appears that this simplification is empirically justified within the context of our experiments, and in the remaining chapters, we investigate how news selectivity influences the impact and reach of partisan media.

[Figure 3.4 about here]

Table 3.4. Summary of Experimental Studies

Study Type and Date Forced Exposure	Political Stimuli		Entertainment Stimuli	Participants
	Conservative	Liberal		
Summer 2008	*The O'Reilly Factor with Bill O'Reilly* (Fox News; composite of three segments aired in July 2008)	*Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC; composite of three segments aired in July 2008)	NA	49 UCR Students
Summer 2009	*Hannity & Colmes* (Fox News; composite of two segments aired in April 2006)	*Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC; August 19, 2009)	NA	71 Riverside Residents
Fall 2009	1) *The O'Reilly Factor* 2) *The Sean Hannity Show* (both on Fox News; composite of segments aired in late September and early October 2009)	1) *The Rachel Maddow Show* 2) *The Ed Show* *3) Countdown with Keith Olbermann* (all on MSNBC; composite of segments aired in late September and early October 2009)	NA	67 UCR Students

Selective Exposure

Winter 2009	NA	*Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC*;* composite of three segments aired in November 2008)	1) *Dirty Jobs* (Discovery Channel) 2) *Log Cabins* (Travel Channel)	167 Riverside Students
Spring 2009	NA	*Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC; March 17, 2009)	1) *The Dog Whisperer* (National Geographic Channel) 2) *Dhani Tackels the Globe* (Travel Channel)	139 Riverside Residents and 43 UCR Students (N = 182)
Summer 2009	NA	*Hardball with Chris Matthews* (MSNBC; August 19, 2009)	1) *The Dog Whisperer* (National Geographic Channel) 2) *Dhani Tackels the Globe* (Travel Channel)	120 Riverside Residents
Fall 2009	*The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox News; composite of segments aired in late September and early October 2009)	*The Rachel Maddow Show* (MSNBC; composite of segments aired in late September and early October 2009)	1) *The Dog Whisperer* (National Geographic Channel) 2) *Dhani Tackels the Globe* (Travel Channel)	117 UCR Students

Winter 2010	*The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox News; February 2, 2010)	*Countdown with Keith Olbermann* (MSNBC; February 2, 2010)	1) *The Dog Whisperer* (National Geographic Channel) 2) *Dhani Tackles the Globe* (Travel Channel)	132 UCR Students
Fall 2011	*The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox News; August 16, 2011)	*The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell* (on MSNBC; August 15, 2011)	1)*Pet Star* (Animal Planet) 2) *For Rent* (HGTV)	127 Riverside Residents
Participant Preference				
Summer 2010	*The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox News; June 17, 2010)	*Countdown with Keith Olbermann* (MSNBC; June 17, 2010)	1) *The Dog Whisperer* (National Geographic Channel) 2) *Dhani Tackels the Globe* (Travel Channel)	152 UCR Students
Fall 2011	*The O'Reilly Factor* (Fox News; August 16, 2011)	*The Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell* (MSNBC; August 15, 2011)	1)*Pet Star* (Animal Planet) 2) *For Rent* (HGTV)	502 Amazon Mechanical Turk Panelists