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Skipping politics: Measuring avoidance of political content in social media

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Abstract

Selective exposure is a growing concern as people become more reliant on social media for political information. While self-reports often ask about exposure to political content on social media, existing research does not account for the fact that even those exposed to political content may still choose to ignore it. To effectively account for this, we employ corneal eye tracking software, such that we can observe users' gaze and the amount of time they actually spend with political content. Consistent with expectations, the earlier a cue that a post is political, the faster a user skips over it. This trend is concentrated among those least interested in politics. Implications for how we think about social media and political information flows in the modern media environment are discussed.

Keywords

Selective exposure, social media, eye tracking, selective avoidance, political information

Introduction

With the rise of social media, concerns have been raised as to the extent to which people can use the customizability of networks to insulate themselves from undesirable content (Pariser, 2012). This concern is built on two assumptions: first, that people do not want to see certain types of content (political content, partisan content from the other side, etc.); and second, that people are able to effectively sort out less desired content from content they are more interested in or amenable to. While a great deal of evidence exists confirming the first assumption (Arceneaux et al., 2013; Garrett, 2009; Graf and Aday, 2008; Stroud, 2008), the second assumption is less clear.

In order to opt out of unwanted content, people have to effectively eliminate it from their attention in some way. This can happen in terms of exposure—people can unfriend or unfollow types of information flows they dislike on social media (Bode, 2016a)—but it can also happen in less extreme ways. Rather than opting out of whole streams of information within social media, people can simply skip over content in their feed that they are not interested in (Thorson et al., 2014). This gets at the heart of selective attention—picking and choosing among the information to which you are exposed, choosing to pay attention to only some types of content while ignoring others.

Within social media, political content is particularly likely to be subject to these selective attention pressures. Despite scholars' interest in the democratic value of political content on social media, it tends to be a salient, disliked, and oft-avoided form of content (Bode, 2016a; Vraga et al., 2015b; Vraga et al., 2016b). Yet little is known about how selective attention on social media occurs.

As part of the process of selective attention, people should respond to cues signaling the goal of the content being read. When those cues are prominent and easily understood—for example, featuring a political picture or a partisan word—users should be able to easily identify and avoid content they do not like.

Of course, selective attention is more difficult to study than selective exposure. Exposure is often asked via self-reports (Bode, 2012; Kim et al., 2013), whereas attention is harder to capture in this way. Attention is also more nuanced—people might start reading a particular post and stop only once they realize they are not interested. This would still count as exposure, but the question of how much

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attention has been paid is more complicated to answer. This study seeks to fill in this gap, to better understand how people avoid political information on social media.

To do so, we expose individuals to a simulated Facebook feed, comprising posts on a range of social, news, and political topics. We then use eye tracking technology to observe how much time they spend with different types of political posts and what encourages them to skip over political content more or less quickly. This allows us to determine not just exposure to politics on social media, which is constant for all of our subjects, but instead measure *attention* to such content, which varies by individual.

Literature review

In general, people just do not like politics (Eliasoph, 1998). As a result, most people do not produce political content on social media (Duggan and Smith, 2016), and many report disliking the presence of politics on social media (Vraga et al., 2015b). However, they do see political content on social media from their friends even when they are not necessarily looking for it (Bode, 2016b; Duggan and Smith, 2016; Kim, et al., 2013), although previous research suggests such incidental exposure may not garner much attention to political posts (Vraga et al., 2016b). This may result from individuals' motivation to avoid disliked content (Stroud, 2008; Taber and Lodge, 2006), which suggests they will be able to effectively ignore unpalatable political content on social media.

But what helps people realize that content is political? In general, people use cues to stand in for more complicated information. Known as heuristics or information shortcuts, when considering politics or political candidates, these cues include economic conditions, partisan identification, ideology, race, and gender (Atkeson, 2003; Grofman, 1995; Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994; Popkin, 1994). In the cacophony that is social media, cues should be even more important to direct individuals towards or away from certain types of content, depending on their interests.

We think there are three main cues that could alert readers to the political-ness of content. First, there are political words in each political post. Identifiers like political parties, recognizable politicians, or political institutions should offer a red flag that the post is political. The earlier those words occur, the more effectively users can skip over them—therefore earlier political words should mean less time spent with a post (H1A). Second, the more such words occur in a post, the more cues are available to a reader that the content is political. This, too, then, should lead to the ability to skip and therefore less time spent with the content (H1B). Finally, posts that include outside links also include pictures. Some, but not all, of these pictures are identifiably political—most often showing a known political figure like John Boehner or Hillary Clinton. These pictures should also serve as a cue that the post is political, and political pictures should therefore lead to more skipping, or less time spent on the post (H1C).

Additionally, this desire to skip content should depend on the extent to which people dislike the content. While many people prefer to ignore politics, some are quite interested in it (Zaller, 1992), and people are known to tailor their media choices to consume more politics if they are interested, and less politics if they are uninterested (Prior, 2007). For this reason, we expect that those lowest in political interest should be more sensitive to political cues and thus spend less time with political content when these political cues (including first political word (A), number of political words (B), and presence of political pictures (C)) are present (H2).

Finally, we test whether the presence of political cues intersects with the tone taken in the political post. A long line of research has debated the benefits and drawbacks of negative politics (see Lau and Rovner, 2009 for a summary). While we cannot weigh in on every aspect of this debate—we cannot say anything about its effects on turnout, trust, etc.—we can test what draws attention. Because the literature is mixed, we phrase this as a research question, asking whether people will spend more time on positive or negative posts (RQ1), and whether this relationship will be moderated by the placement and salience of political cues, such as the placement of the first political word in text, the number of political words in a post, or the inclusion of a political picture (RQ2).

Methods

To answer these questions, we pair two methods: corneal eye tracking and surveys.

Eye tracking

Eye tracking is a well-validated measure of attention to content (Duchowski, 2002; Pan et al., 2004), offering insight into precisely when people turn their attention from one post to another. This allows us to 'watch' respondents' attentional patterns, without relying on unreliable self-reports of attention, which are often flawed through inaccurate recall, unconscious processing, social desirability, and a tendency to rely on inferences of attention based on interest (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Prior, 2009; Schwarz and Oysermann, 2001; Vraga et al., 2015a).

Participants were allowed to scroll through 35 pages of a simulated Facebook feed, consisting of 120 posts about news, social or personal posts, and politics at their own pace, and were encouraged to view the posts as if they were scrolling through their own Facebook News Feed (analysis is restricted to only those who had Facebook to ensure this experience was as natural as possible)[1]. Two versions of the task were used to guarantee that the same posts did not always occur together, which could have influenced

attentional patterns (Pollatsek and Well, 1995), and the order of the 35 pages of posts was fully randomized.

The study began with a standard nine-point calibration, presented using Tobii Studio (Tobii Technology, Sweden). Eye movement data were recorded at 60-Hz (that is, 60 times per second) using a Tobii X60 (Tobii Technology, Sweden) corneal reflection eye tracker, and stimuli were presented using Eprime 2.0 (Psychology Software Tools, Inc., Sharpsburg, PA), standard for the method. Visual attention to the stimuli was measured with tens of milliseconds precision. To determine attention to each post, areas of interest (AOIs) were established around each post using a rectangular drawing tool (essentially a rectangle is drawn around the outside of each post, allowing us to measure whether any given gaze was directed at that area or at some other place). AOIs were 520 × 100 pixels for text posts and 520 × 355 pixels for picture and link posts.

Sample

The sample of participants was recruited from fliers posted on campus and course instructor emails at a Mid-Atlantic university in the summer of 2014. Participants took an online survey about social media habits and demographics, and then reported to the Psychology laboratory for the eye tracking task (the average time between the survey and the eye-tracking task was 3.8 days, standard deviation (*SD*) = 2.7). They then engaged in a liking task (viewing each post and indicating whether they liked or disliked it) and completed a post-test survey.

A total of 65 people participated, with mean age 23.31 (*SD* = 5.22), 54% female, and more Democratic in their party affiliation (48% Democrat, 30% Independent, 22% Republican, which mirrors national samples of this age cohort).[2] The 53 participants who had a Facebook account are similar (age mean (*M*) = 22.78, *SD* = 4.62; gender 53% female; party affiliation 46% Democrat, 31% Independent, 23% Republican) to the overall sample.

Post creation

Posts were created by researchers to resemble frequent topics of posts on Facebook, including social posts, news posts, and political posts (Vraga, et al., 2016a). Posts were consistently formatted to standard sizes, with two lines of text and blurred picture, user name, and time and date information to prevent these things from influencing respondents. Links consisted of one line of text for the link title, with website information removed to ensure consistency.

For the analyses presented in this paper, only political posts are included—a total of 60 posts. To be political, a post had to mention political personalities or campaigns, usually mentioning prominent political figures (e.g. Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton, John Boehner, and Chris Christie) or political parties (e.g. Republican, and Democrat) by name. Political posts were further subdivided into those favoring Democrats, those favoring Republicans, and those favoring neither side (e.g. neutral). Those favoring each party were then subdivided into those that attacked the opposing party, and those that praised the favored party. Across all of these categories, posts consisted of two stylistic types: statuses or links.

All posts were pre-tested to confirm they were categorized correctly by researchers, both in terms of their topic and political preference (that is, we pre-tested to ensure that what we thought of as favoring Republicans was perceived that way by respondents as well). For more information on the creation and pre-testing of posts, see Vraga et al. (2016a).

Measures

Visual attention. Throughout the eye tracking task, time spent looking at each individual post was recorded in milliseconds. This time per post was then divided by the total time spent on the task to control for individual differences like reading speed to compute a percentage score (this could theoretically vary between 0 if a user spent no time on the post and 100 if a user spent all their time during the task on that single post; *M* = 0.84, *SD* = 0.21).

Political cues. The presence of political cues is what should allow subjects to effectively identify political posts and skip over them if they are uninterested. Political words include references to political parties (Republican, Democrat, Grand Old Party, etc.), references to well-known political figures (Hillary Clinton, John Boehner, Joe Biden, etc.), and references to political ideas (candidate, Congress, bipartisan, etc.). We measure political cues in two ways. First, we identify the location of the first political word that occurs in the post (*word location*, ranges from 0 to 24, *M* = 4.15, *SD* = 4.86). Second, we count the number of political words that occur in the post (*political words*, ranges from 0 to 4, *M* = 1.65, *SD* = 0.88), on the assumption that more cues should serve as a greater heuristic to the political-ness of the post. Finally, we analyze whether a picture present in a link is political in nature (*political picture*, 17 of the 30 pictures included with links). Political pictures were identified by containing known political symbols (donkey, elephant, and Capitol Building) or known political figures (Clinton, Boehner, and Biden). These are our key independent variables.

Links. Because previous work has shown that posts with links receive more compared to other types of posts, we include a dummy variable to control for whether a post was a link or not (Vraga, et al., 2016b).

Total words in post. Looking time is partly a function of the length of a post, so we also control for the total

Table 1. Ordinary least squares regression predicting time spent on posts.

	β	Standard error	Significance
Word location	0.005	0.002	0.05
Political words	–0.008	0.013	0.55
Link	0.203	0.028	0.01
Total words in post	0.010	0.003	0.01

Note: $n = 59$.

Table 2. Ordinary least squares regression predicting time spent on posts (links only).

	β	Standard error	Significance
Word location	0.005	0.003	0.09
Political words	–0.006	0.018	0.72
Political Picture	–0.016	0.033	0.64
Total words in post	0.010	0.004	0.02

Note: $n = 30$.

number of words in a post (ranges from 13 to 37, $M = 22.55$, $SD = 5.14$).

Political interest. Because some of our analyses are split by high and low political interest, we created an item from a measure in the survey respondents completed several days before engaging in the eye tracking task, which asked how interested they were in politics on a seven-point scale, from "not at all interested" to "very interested" ($M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.51$). A median split was used to divide participants into low (1–2; 47.2%) versus high (3–7; 52.8%) political interest.

Praise/attack. Two categories of partisan posts were created: posts that praised one party or posts that criticized an oppositional party. Therefore, posts that praised the Republican Party or attacked the Democratic Party were coded as "pro-Republican," while those that attacked Republicans or praised Democrats were coded as "pro-Democrat." This created four categories of partisan posts, each of which included 10 posts.

Analysis and results

Our analyses begin by considering how long people spend on posts, which we anticipated would depend on how quickly they can identify them as political. First, we estimate an ordinary least squares regression, with time spent on the post as the dependent variable. The key variables are the location of the first political word—which is the first way in which subjects could determine a post was political—and the number of political words. We control for whether the post was a link, as that includes more information (headline and picture), and how many total words the post contained, since longer posts should generate more attention in general.

As can be seen in Table 1, our first hypothesis, which predicted that politically identifying words would result in shorter looking time, is partially supported. The further into a post a political word arrives, the longer people spend looking at it, supporting H1a. In contrast to H1b, however, the number of political words do not seem to matter for attention, suggesting that people are relatively effective at identifying a political post by its first political cue.

The third part of that hypothesis is that political pictures should also serve as a cue to the political-ness of a post. Because political pictures only occur within links, we restrict our analysis to link posts only, and then estimate a similar model to that just described, but also including a dichotomous variable for whether or not the picture included is political (17 of the 30 pictures are identifiably political). Results of this model, shown in Table 2, must be interpreted with caution due to the low sample size ($n = 30$). Still, it does not seem that pictures are offering a meaningful cue above and beyond the political words included in the post, in contrast to H1c.

Our second expectation was that this relationship should vary by political interest. To test this, we split our sample into higher and lower political interest individuals, and then estimated the same model described above. As can be seen in Table 3, it does seem that the only people affected by word location are those lower in political interest. Specifically, the earlier a political word appears in a post, the less time low interest individuals spend on that post—but this relationship is not significant for individuals who report higher levels of political interest.

Finally, we were interested in determining whether people were better able to skip over posts that praised a political party or entity, or attacked it. To examine this, we estimate a separate model predicting time spent on a post, with a variable indicating whether the post was attacking or praising a political entity, and an interaction between that variable and the first political word location (and again controlling for whether the post was a link and how many words it contained). As can be seen in Table 4, people spend more time on posts that attack a political figure or idea, as compared to those that praise, but that does not interact with the first political word location. This suggests that attack posts garner more attention overall, but the location of the first political word does not influence this relationship. This attention to political attack may partially explain the success of fake partisan news on social media, which frequently attack a political candidate (Silverman, 2016).

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study reinforce concerns about the extent to which people consume political content via

Table 3. Ordinary least squares regression predicting time spent on posts by political interest.

	Low political interest			High political interest		
	β	Standard error (*SE*)	Significance	β	*SE*	Significance
Word location	0.006	0.003	0.07	0.003	0.003	0.34
Political words	–0.023	0.019	0.22	–0.028	0.018	0.13
Link	0.197	0.042	0.01	0.236	0.040	0.01
Total words in post	0.005	0.004	0.21	0.005	0.004	0.20

Note: $n = 59$.

Table 4. Ordinary least squares regression predicting time spent on posts that praise versus posts that attack.

	β	Standard error	Significance
Word location	0.001	0.005	0.76
Link	0.186	0.035	0.01
Total words	0.010	0.004	0.03
Praise	–0.102	0.041	0.02
Praise*Political word	0.006	0.008	0.46

Note: $n = 39$.

social media. While people may have relatively centrist media diets in general (Guess, 2016), and regularly be exposed to political content posted by others on social media (Duggan and Smith, 2016), our findings suggest that they are relatively efficient in identifying political content based on the first salient cue, and skipping over it if they are uninterested.

If people are adept at skipping over political content, even incidental exposure to political content (Bode, 2016b; Kim, et al., 2013) is brought into question, since we cannot be sure how much of the content is actually consumed by social media users. It further suggests that measuring the extent to which people are engaging in selective exposure on social media is more complicated than simply asking what types of content they see there. This reveals an area of confusion in the literature, when people often talk about selective exposure but really mean selective attention. As we have shown in previous research (Vraga et al., 2015a), attention is often the preferred concept and operationalization for some of these key questions in mass communication research.

We also show some evidence that people spend more time with attack posts than praise posts – though this does not interact with how quickly they are cued to the politicalness of the post. Recent evidence shows that citizens and researchers do not always agree on what constitutes negativity (Mattes and Redlawsk, 2014), so future research should examine different manifestations of negative content to see if this effect depends on different types of negativity. Both expertise (McClurg, 2006) and incivility (Mutz, 2015), for example, may function differently than simple disagreement with the other side. Due to our sample size, we also cannot consider other factors that might affect attention to content and skipping speed. We encourage future research to examine the role of factors like partisanship and gender in this area.

This also suggests practical implications for those looking to share political information with others. Our results do not discourage the use of political pictures associated with links, which previous research has shown to be particularly engaging (Vraga et al., 2016b), but do suggest that the longer one withholds the first clearly political word in a post, the more of that post will be consumed by otherwise uninterested readers.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that because we limit our analysis to those that had a Facebook account, we are only able to generalize to that population. These processes are likely different for non-users of Facebook, partly by virtue of lack of familiarity with the platform, and partly in terms of a selection bias—for example, those that opt out of the commonly used social media platform are more likely to be male, older, and wealthier (Greenwood et al., 2016). We believe studying those familiar with the platform is an important first step in understanding attention patterns on Facebook, but future research should test the ability to "skip" politics across a range of online and offline spaces.
2. For comparison, the median age of the United States is 37.9, the US is 51.5% female (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016), and the partisan breakdown for 24-year-olds is 46% Democrat, 18% Independent, and 32% Republican (Newport, 2014).

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Supplementary material

The replication files are available at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/TXY7OY.

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