THREATPIE

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Being selectively informed—Selective exposure as a threat to democracy in today's digital world?

Executive Summary

In the current high–choice political information environment, citizens can increasingly opt for information that aligns with their existing beliefs. THREATPIE has delved into this phenomenon known as selective exposure and studied its prevalence, causes, and consequences:

Key findings:

- Citizens showed moderate levels of both using only news in line with their political views and discussing topics only with individuals who shared their views.
- Selective exposure was recognized as a moderate threat to democratic societies. Yet, citizens, educators, politicians, and journalists acknowledged potential challenges that may arise.
- Reasons for selective exposure include individual characteristics and features of the political information environment, notably algorithmic information curation on social media.
- Selective news consumption was empirically not related to misbeliefs. Yet, participants associated selective exposure with the development of echo chambers and polarization between societal groups.

Being selectively informed—the problem of selective exposure

With the change from a low–choice to a high–choice political information environment, the number of outlets and platforms citizens can choose from increased ad infinitum. Given this development, citizens can now ever more select only information, which is in line with their prior interests, attitudes, or political views—a phenomenon called selective exposure. A dreaded consequence of selective exposure is that citizens might be only selectively informed about societal and political events which could hinder political decision–making that builds on a broad knowledge base. In that sense, being selectively informed is different from being uninformed defined as citizens lacking knowledge and being misinformed understood as possessing knowledge that is based on falsehoods.

Long–term consequences of selectively using news and political information include reinforcing pre–existing beliefs and attitudes, leading to individuals accepting only confirming information while ignoring conflicting evidence. This can hinder understanding and empathy for al-

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Background: Threats to democracy in today's digital world

A healthy, functioning society requires citizens to be well–informed about current societal and political events. Recent changes in the "political information environment" (PIE) jeopardize this prerequisite. With the proliferation of media channels and platforms, citizens can now not only choose from an abundance of news and information; it has also become more likely to encounter false or misleading information. Three potential threats to democracy arise from this development:

- Citizens might be *selectively informed* when they only choose news in line with their political views.
- Citizens might be *uninformed* about what is happening in the societal and political world when they decide to avoid news completely.
- Citizens might be *misinformed* when they build their beliefs about the societal and political world on false information.

The consequences of these developments can be significant: citizens who are selectively informed, uninformed, and/or misinformed tend to be less trusting in the news media and political institutions; they also tend to be less civilly engaged. Moreover, social cohesion tends to decrease while polarization between different groups in society increases. THREATPIE investigated the causes, consequences, and remedies to these threats.

ternative perspectives, contributing to increased polarization and hostility between different groups.

To better understand the phenomenon of selective exposure to news and political information, THREATPIE studies examined the following main questions: 1) How common is it that citizens select political information in line with their views? 2) Which concerns do citizens associate with selective exposure? 3) Which causes of selective exposure are mentioned? And 4) What are the perceived and observed consequences of it?
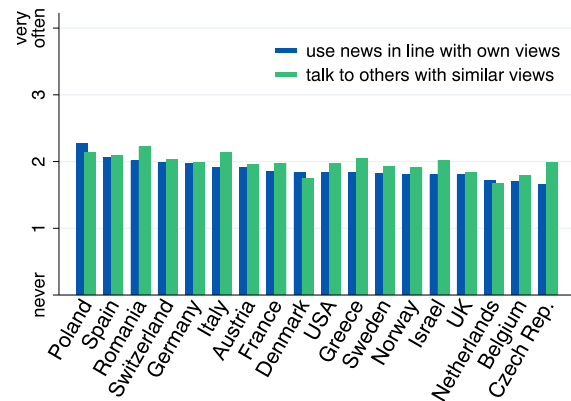
RESULTS

How common is selective exposure?

As the first step, THREATPIE used a survey of citizens in 18 countries to gain insight into how prevalent the selective use of political information is—both in terms of selecting news in line with one's views and talking to others with similar opinions. The data reveal nuanced patterns of news consumption and social interaction: While overall selective exposure to political news and discussion was on a moderate level, some differences between the analyzed countries could be observed.

For example, citizens in Poland were most inclined to select news based on their political views. In contrast, citizens in the Czech Republic were the least inclined. In the context of like-minded discussions, Romanian participants reported the highest degree of preferring discussion partners with similar political opinions, while citizens from the Netherlands were the least inclined (see Figure 1). That citizens showed only a moderate level of selective news use was also confirmed when zooming into five countries (Germany, France, Spain, the UK, and the US). Here, THREATPIE researchers compared

Figure 1: Selective news use and discussions

Note: "How often a) do you follow political news in line with your own view and b) prefer talking about political issues with family and friends with similar views?" (0 "never" to 4 "very often").
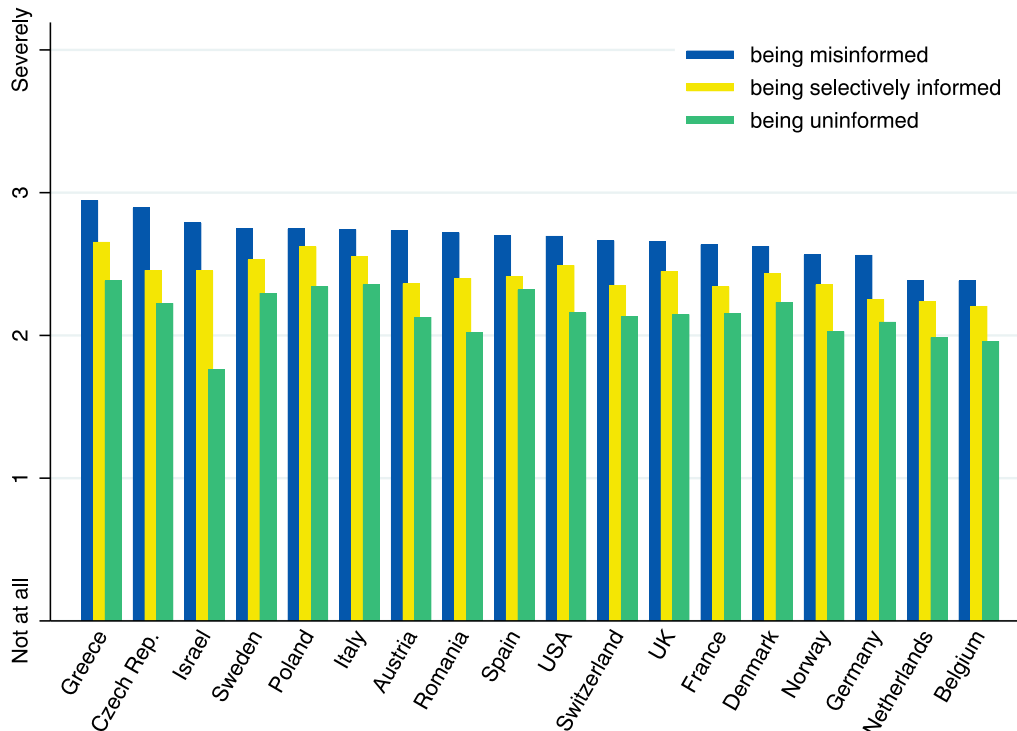
citizens' news consumption to the political leaning of the used outlets. The analysis confirmed that most citizens had balanced media diets—because they consumed mainstream and centrist outlets or because they frequently crossed ideological lines when consuming media with clear left–leaning or right–leaning.

Is selective exposure a threat?

Given the moderate prevalence of selective news use, it comes as no surprise that THREATPIE participants stated to be moderately concerned about the phenomenon of selective exposure. Comparing selective exposure to the other threats in the focus of the project—being uninformed and being misinformed—being selectively informed fell in the middle of the three concerns (see Figure 2).

This finding was also mirrored in what citizens discussed in focus groups and educators, politicians, as well as journalists, confirmed in individual interviews. While some participants argued that individuals had always consumed information from preferred outlets, there was a recognition that contemporary technologies might exacerbate this problem. The use of social

Note: "When it comes to political information, to what extent is our democracy threatened by 1) people being exposed to information that is false; 2) people avoiding news content that is not in line with their views; 3) people avoiding news content in general (0 "not at all threatened" to 4 "severely threatened").

media and algorithmically curated feeds on these platforms were associated with the fear of filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Among the interviewed groups within the THREATPIE studies, politicians, specifically, acknowledged potential threats due to selective exposure. Associating selective news use with ideological biases, they feared that citizens could stick to news that would increasingly reinforced opinions and political views.

> " Social media platforms pick information for us. That is the threat. We are in information bubbles. That way, we cannot hear what the other side is saying. [1] "

What are the reasons for selective exposure?

Various reasons were put forward for selective exposure to political information and news. On the one hand, individual characteristics were mentioned. One example of these characteristics was age: younger citizens (18–25 years old) noted that selective exposure was mostly a phenomenon they observed among older generations (above 55 years old).

Another example of an individual reason to use the news selectively was the wish to avoid views that one was opposed to or not comfortable with. This reason was mentioned by citizens across generations and countries. On the other hand, also characteristics of the political information environments were discussed as potential drivers for selective exposure by the

THREATPIE participants. As for threats associated with selective exposure, algorithms employed by social media platforms were again mentioned as potential causes for the phenom-

> " You're not necessarily wanting to take it from the other side, because that doesn't fit in with your narrative and you don't necessarily want to know that.[2] "

enon. These algorithms could select information for users based on interests and preferences, so the expressed concerns.

Interestingly, older participants in the THREATPIE studies, especially from Poland, Romania, and the UK, shed a more positive light on using the news in line with one's views. These citizens stated that selectivity in news consumption was essential for consuming the news in a healthy, beneficial way, and by doing so, avoiding harmful news. At the same time, selective exposure was seen as a common human behavior that was not caused by recent changes in the political information environment but that had always been part of news consumption.

What are the consequences of selective exposure?

Even if selective exposure was only described as a moderate threat to democracies, THREATPIE participants addressed several negative consequences arising from this phenomenon. Two main concerns intensively were discussed: echo chambers and polarization. On the one hand, the participants noted that selective exposure could lead to the emergence of echo chambers where individuals would only be exposed to

views that align with their pre–existing beliefs. As a result, public dialogue across political divides could become more challenging. Social media, so the fear among the THREATPIE participants, could intensify this phenomenon.

On the other hand, polarization between different societal groups was mentioned frequently— by citizens, journalists, and politicians alike: As selective exposure is associated with ideologically driven consumption of news, individuals might stick to news that reinforces their opinions. This, in turn, could deepen polarization in society with people trusting only their "own" sources and distrusting "others".

Next to get detailed insight into citizens', educators', journalists', and politicians' views on and fears about the selective use of political information, THREATPIE focused on two additional concerns—online incivility and misbeliefs. In the context of incivility, one study found that political online discussions were perceived as more uncivil compared to political discussions outside the Internet in the vast majority of the studied countries.

This finding was more pronounced in online information environments with political views opposing one's own and in societies in which citizens relied heavily on social media. This study suggests that mere exposure to online users with opposing views on social media might not be a solution for polarization. The nature of political discourse seems to matter: the benefits of being exposed to opposing views might be greater in offline contexts since face–to–face communication comes with greater empathy and diminished aggressiveness compared to the online environment.

Consuming predominately news that is in line with one's political views is feared to increase

the belief in false and misleading beliefs. However, findings from a THREATPIE analysis that combined survey data with digital trace data indicated that, in general, selective exposure did not influence misbeliefs in the studied countries (Germany, Spain, France, UK, and US). Yet one exception to this pattern was found: in the context of the US, individuals, who identified as conservatives, selective use of the news increased beliefs in falsehoods.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT SELECTIVE EXPOSURE?

To foster a more informed citizenry and to promote a healthier democratic discourse, the problem of selective exposure can be addressed from various angles:

Promoting civil discourse:

Online exposure to opinions opposing one's view is often perceived as hostile and toxic. Hence, more offline discussions could help to be exposed to a broad range of opinions—without perceptions of being in an uncivil environment. Specifically, politicians could help to achieve this goal by engaging in active dialogue with citizens. Social media networks could encourage more civil discourse and dialogue between individuals with differing perspectives on their platforms—or penalize uncivil online behavior.

Empowering citizens as competent media users:

Another key to combating selective news consumption is the news users themselves. Threat perceptions of selective news consumption were associated with algorithmically curated feeds on social media. Citizens should, thus, be made aware of the role of algorithms in their political information environment to empower them to critically evaluate the information they encounter.

Fostering individual responsibility:

At the same time, citizens can also individually contribute to a healthy media diet. Acknowledging the importance of personal efforts, citizens can and should access information from outside their preferred political information environments. Especially for younger generations, teachers could here serve as role models who guide students and teach them how to critically evaluate different sources of information.

Selected references

- Hopmann, D. N., et al. (forthcoming). A qualitative examination of (political) media diets across age cohorts in five countries. *Communications*.
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For other references, further details on data sources, and other output from the project, please visit the project's website www.threatpie.eu.

THERATPIE stands for "The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment". The project studied how current changes in political information environments influenced the conditions required for healthy democracies. Over 30 researchers addressed this question through a mix of innovatively designed studies. This included in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with citizens, educators, journalists, and politicians, web–tracking of online news use, panel surveys, as well as experiments.

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