

## Selective exposure: Exposing a Few Selected Theoretical Aspects

Gennadiy Chernov

Correspondence: Gennadiy Chernov, School of Journalism, University of Regina, Canada.

Received: August 29, 2022

Accepted: October 5, 2022

Online Published: October 12, 2022

doi:10.11114/smc.v10i2.5735

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v10i2.5735>

### Abstract

Selective exposure is a phenomenon studied by scholars for decades. Its prominence can be explained by certain potential consequences for democratic societies which include polarization and growing support for extreme views.

The media selective exposure approach generated hundreds of publications, however, this growth in new facts and information does not seem to advance much of a paradigmatic consensus on theoretical foundations and practical utility of this line of research.

This article aims at assessing whether the key concepts and models of selective exposure represent a cohesive body of knowledge empowering researchers. It also encourages them to seek new knowledge, and test new links. Researchers can also evaluate whether there are some controversial or not sufficiently explicated elements requiring reassessment.

This article is a modest effort to assess what is really known and agreed upon in such important pillars of any theory such as definitions and models of selective exposure. This piece also suggests which aspects of selective exposure may need further clarification.

**Keywords:** media selective exposure, media effects, theoretical models

### 1. Introduction

Selective exposure to certain messages based on individual preferences has been studied for years. Its potential to polarize the public leading to extreme views and threatening democracy was pointed at with the proliferation of media sources, especially with the wide expansion of the internet (Sustain, 2001). The importance of selective exposure in communication research is clearly expressed by Stroud (2014):

“If we do not understand when and why people select news and information, we will have an incomplete understanding of communication effects. Understanding selective exposure seems particularly vital in considering the role of communication in a democracy, because it has implications for citizen engagement, for the appreciation of diverse views, and for the creation of communities where citizens can agree on basic facts, to name but a few” (p.542)

Considering this importance, the present article will focus on the following: based on what we know about selective exposure - what do scholars agree upon in regards to selective exposure? Do the differences in describing the key notions in selective exposure reveal mutually enriching interpretations of a theory rich in levels of meaning or do they hide deeper divisions in how the key concepts are treated? After all, a clarity of understanding and knowledge of essential properties of what is studied allows for explanation, prediction and practical applications in social life.

This article aims at assessing whether the key concepts and models of selective exposure represent a cohesive body of knowledge empowering researchers. It also encourages them to seek new knowledge and test new links or whether there are some controversial or not sufficiently explicated elements requiring reassessment.

First, some influential definitions will be discussed in order to see how fully they cover selective exposure and the extent to which they agree on the main properties. The choice of definitions is far from exhaustive, but it relies on the ones from often cited publications by well-known experts in the field. Second, some complex models will be analyzed to evaluate their heuristic value and the place of selective exposure in a more general process of people’s media use.

According to *Meriam-Webster*, definition is a statement expressing the essential nature of something. Terms and definitions describing a theoretical phenomenon become the first step in a conceptual analysis. There has to be a shared understanding of what the terms mean and they have to reflect different aspects of the described phenomenon. They are not expected to be incompatible descriptions and vague interpretations of the phenomenon at hand.

The essential nature of a phenomenon in media effects in general, can be described as follows: certain antecedents like

motivations or external factors trigger specific processes, often of psychological nature, leading to certain outcomes. Different models give representations of these processes including them as dynamic parts connecting antecedents and outcomes. In other words, the purpose of this article lies in assessing at what stage we are in our understanding selective exposure in line with the following: “theories continually increase in complexity without increasing in explanatory power or adding much to generalizable knowledge” (Lang, 2013, p.14). Are we in a state where we get more facts and information, but they do not enhance our understanding of selective exposure?

## 2. Context and Definitions

Selective exposure in communication is more often than not related to media exposure, and this article relates this term to media exposure as well. Although there are different genres to which the term ‘media selective exposure’ may apply ranging from political news to entertainment, the former was studied more intensely due to its importance for democratic processes in society. Here it will also be the main focus of analysis.

According to Barnidge and Peacock (2019), selective exposure studies may be split into three stages: 1) from initial studies (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) to 1960s when mass communication system fully formed in the USA; 2) from 1960s till 2000s when mass media managed to provide a more or less homogenous and uniform diet of news to the public; the third wave has started at the beginning of the 2000s and it is characterized by proliferation of partisan cable news. It is also characterized by proliferation and diversification of multiple partisan sources of information on the internet. Our analysis will be conducted from the position that we deal with at the third stage, and that our fundamental understanding of selective exposure must apply to this partisanship stage.

Another approach splits selective exposure into two stages. “First-level selective exposure describes the attention dedicated to a post while browsing a newsfeed. At this stage, users decide to slow down, or even stop scrolling through their newsfeed, to look more carefully at a specific post, based on message cues that are immediately visible in the newsfeed (e.g., topic, source, headline, picture, or social endorsements). This stage is then followed by clicking on a post and spending time with the linked contents, which we refer to as second-level selective exposure” (Ohme & Mothes, 2020, p.1223).

It is unavoidable to cite profusely different definitions of selective exposure in order to illustrate what a broad range of notions is used. Selection of definitions was based on the variety of notions described, and the works of the experts with multiple citations were chosen.

Stroud (2014) offered one of the most succinct and encompassing definitions of the selective exposure. She called it “... the idea that people purposefully select messages matching their beliefs” (p. 531). This definition underlines a deliberate character of selection and it also refers to beliefs as a guide in navigating through media messages. The term ‘beliefs’ seems to mean pre-existent and crystallized cognitions as in the following: Beliefs are cognitions about the probability that an object or event is associated with a given attribute, according to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975; as cited in Albarracín et al., 2005). These cognitions are not necessarily formed when the audience may purposefully select media outlets about events. Moreover, when selecting messages people have certain strong predispositions and stances on the issues covered by the media. This evaluative aspect of exposure is not captured by Stroud’s definition.

Guess et al. (2018) use “attitudes’ instead of ‘beliefs’ in the following passage:

“Selective exposure refers to “systematic bias in audience composition” (Sears and Freedman 1967) stemming from a tendency for individuals to select information that is congruent with prior attitudes (Klapper 1960) or that comes from like-minded sources (Iyengar and Hahn 2009).” (p.4) More recent explanations of the concept also underline attitudes as the key driver of selective exposure: “Scholarly work shows that news consumers tend to select media content that is in line with their attitudes across print, online media, and broadcast content.” (Camaj, 2019, p.8)

Stroud (2014) further specified that selective exposure is not an only mode of attending media messages, saying that “...selective exposure means exhibiting a preference for like-minded information” (p.538). The definitional issues also relate to not only what the phenomenon is, but also what it is not. Demonstrating what selective exposure is not, Stroud mentions the tendency to couple selective exposure with selective avoidance.

Knobloch-Westerwick (2014) offered another encompassing interpretation: “...the term selective exposure denotes any systematic bias in audience composition for a given medium or message, as well as any systematic bias in selected messages that diverges from the composition of accessible messages” (p.3). The author refers both to how audience is composed, and how messages are selected. Despite this, the notion of accessible messages’ compositions lacks further elaboration. The current media landscape is so densely populated and proverbially diverse that there may be three scenarios reflecting selectivity options:

The composition of messages is accessible and alternative options are known to members of the audience. The composition of messages is accessible, but not all available options are known to members of the audience. Finally, the

composition of accessible messages does not include the options that some members of the audience are interested in, and their selections are proxies for what may resemble what they could want to use, and in a sense such exposure is somewhat forced. We'll return to these options when analyzing what we know and what else we need to know about this phenomenon.

Dalhgren (2019) offered an interesting definition described as a set of assumptions: "Theoretically, selective exposure is primarily based on three assumptions: (1) people prefer information that confirms their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors; (2) people avoid information that contradicts their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors; and (3) people have to have a choice when selecting information" (p.296).

Another definition exhibits an even more commonsensical approach: "What information recipients choose to attend to is of central interest to this investigation. The term selective exposure is used here simply to denote that individuals choose from messages and exhibit preferences in those selections..." (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2020, p.105). Users choose certain media messages over others, based on message cues, situational circumstances, as well as personal characteristics and content preferences (Ohme, & Mothes, 2020), but their subsequent definition is broader: "...the term selective exposure is used here to denote that individuals constantly select information from the media environment and show preferences in this selection." (p.1222). The problem with such encompassing definitions is that at certain parts they may lose precision helping distinguish scientific terms from laypeople's understanding of the phenomenon.

Finding the properties that are shared helps better determine what is defined, and subsequent clarification of what may need more precision. The definitions listed in this section are far from being exhaustive, however, they allow for evaluating the general scope and some particulars of selective exposure.

One such property is biased selection of media messages on behalf of the audience. The clearest case could be when we have a range of media outlets more or less equally distributed along a continuum of two extreme poles of strongly held opinions with a substantive number of the outlets in the middle of such a specter which could be defined as balanced or unbiased. The first theoretical problem with this picture emerges when we try to determine what are the criteria for categorization of media as balanced. How do we decide, for example, that the *New York Times* is balanced? Is it about equal time and space given to dominant views opposing each other? Is it about neutrality of the tone in covering different political views? Is it about roughly equal distribution of positive and negative evaluations of such opposing positions? Or is it the researchers' gut feelings what is balanced? Or is it about history and tradition of assigning the quality of being balanced to certain media?

Another difficulty surfaces with media and message selection when we have overlapping patterns of media use. An ideal selection situation may take place when given the choice exists, certain segments of audience attend to only extreme media outlets while other audience members attend to only balanced ones. This pure distinction will embody the essence of selective exposure. However, those who choose balanced media - do they select them because such media offer all potential stances on the issue? The latter case suggests that audiences form their attitudes on judging the merits of information given by the media from different angles. With extreme partisan media, it seems that the audience have strong predispositions about the issues covered by such outlets. The only effect such media may have is strengthening and reinforcing existing positions. Two other theoretical possibilities include a situation when no balanced outlets exist or when no outlet represents views of a substantial portion of the audience. In such theoretical possibilities, we may treat forced exposure as a selective one.

In general, the notion of audience composition, its activity level, strengthens a media dimension as part of selective exposure.

### 3. Models

If definitions of a phenomenon help in understanding it, models allow for a simplified representation of it as well as capturing what is essential in this phenomenon (Frank, 2013)

The first model to consider is the one proposed by Garrett (2009). Based on such properties as propensity to congruent information and avoidance of incongruent information, the author demonstrated that avoidance is more nuanced and less encompassing than propensity. "Although opinion-challenging information may have a negative emotional valence, it can still be *useful*." (p.680)

It is not only the cognitive dissonance that guides avoidance, but also other factors such as usefulness of information and strengthening of counterarguments to the discrepant information. Garrett (2009) found that "...individuals who get their news online are not avoiding sources with which they disagree, and they are no less familiar with arguments justifying other perspectives." (p.692)

Another model proposing a reciprocal nature of selective exposure, Reinforcing Spirals Model (RSM), belongs to Slater (2015). This model encompasses a broad range of concepts, and it makes media use both a dependent variable affected

by social identity and an independent variable affecting attitudes and behaviors. The model contains 16 variables. If we consider their interaction paths it means that testing the whole model is becoming unrealistic. Adding social identity not only increases the complexity of the model, but also complicates conceptual framework with social identity being both broad and not easy to operationalize. However, the model allows for looking at selective exposure as a dynamic process, and it opens the way to testing some of its aspects over time (Dahlgren, et al., 2019). It also raises an important question about what are the conditions limiting unrestrained polarization of attitudes to which recurrent selective exposure may lead.

Slater states that “The RSM suggests contingencies that may lead to homeostasis or encourage certain individuals or groups to extreme polarization of such attitudes” (p.370). This statement not only cites the often raised concern about pushing segments of public to ideological extremes, but it also proposes some stabilizing factors leading to homeostasis of attitudes.

The RSM argues that social identity is the key for taming the slide to ideological extremes

“When identity threats are diminished, such selectivity can be reduced” (p.374). The key question is what are the factors of diminishing (or increasing, for that matter) identity threats. They may develop over time. They may be evoked by perceived threats, whether real or not. They also may be ignited by real-life indicators which could be strong amplifiers as well as moderators accompanying selective exposure and modifying its effect. Growing unemployment may be a perceived threat by somebody whose profession is not affected by the trend, but may lead to heightened anxiety and consuming media among those who deal with this threat directly. There may be real indicators that the industry in which a certain person is employed is prone to contractions of the workforce, and a perceived threat may be strengthened. However, it is not improbable that some threats may be accepted as unavoidable, and this fact may lead to homeostasis and reduction of selective exposure. To sum up, the RSM adds heuristic value to understanding selective exposure through its positing selective exposure as a dynamic reciprocal phenomenon developing over time.

Arendt, Steindl, and Kämpel (2016) proposed a model, Media-related selection (MRS), which does not limit selective exposure only by audience’s choices, but encompasses three components implicated in it:

“MRS can occur at all stages of the mass communication process. Journalists act as gate keepers and decide, at least partly based on their own attitudes, which events become news. Audience members choose which news items to expose themselves to from the available cornucopia of media messages that have already passed through a series of journalistic gates. SNS users—audience members of traditional “old” mass media as well as gatekeepers in “new” SNSs—then choose which news to share. These decisions can be influenced by attitudes» (p.720).

According to the model, attitudes, both implicit and explicit, express themselves in or become an outcome of automatic process of activation, and more conscious process of validation. These processes may work simultaneously, and they determine what messages the audience will attend to and, potentially, share. One of the implications of this model is that the audience may not have all possible options to choose from in the first place, due to journalistic gatekeeping or a lack of media outlets relaying information some segments of the audience may have. At the same time, the SNS users’ message sharing may amplify the effect of selective exposure through giving new channels to the information for which these users have affinity. These factors may shape both increase and decrease in options for selective exposure and its effects. Exploring the combined work of gatekeeping, audience selective exposure and SNS sharing may go beyond the stated established findings:

“Journalists, audience members, and SNS users partly relied upon explicit attitudes when making their selection decisions regarding the attitude object per se (object-based selection).” (p.734)

The Selective Exposure Self and Affect-Management (SESAM) Model (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015) shares a common feature of the discussed models in this section: it is non-linear and not-unidirectional, and it includes a set of personal and social factors that influence selective exposure processes over time. Motivations to attend to messages are informed by the working self and affect, which allows this model to include and assess situational factors. The next step where exposure takes place will further modify different stages of selective exposure and subsequent attitudinal and behavioral effects. These modifications are guided mostly by Self-Improvement, Self-Enhancement and Self-Consistency, which are different aspects of the self. As with other models that try to include as many factors influencing selective exposure in a cumulative process as possible, the SESAM faces the same problems: excessive complexity (multiple factors working at different phases), lack of clarity on how short-term effects on individual selves are related to cumulative changes, and so on. Some problems will be addressed separately.

The dynamic working self becomes one of the key concepts of the model, and it seems to change from one situation to another. This fluid nature of the self is also exacerbated by its multi-facet character. The SESAM relies on self-concepts highlighted by Markus and Wurf (1987), and they "...involve various matters—traits, demographics, but also cognitions, affect, and motivations" (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015, p. 966). There are too many characteristics to deal with them in testable manner. Moreover, these self-concepts "...represent the self in the past and in the future as well as the here-and-now; and they are of the actual self and of the possible self" (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 307), and their understanding is overly broad. Some concepts' relationships in this model have similar underlying mechanisms and lead to similar effects as the SRM model, only under different labels. For example, the SESAM states "when threats to the self are salient and negative affect is lingering, individuals' media use will be driven by a self-enhancement motive" (p.970), and it resembles the work of social identity threats. The outcomes are called polarization in the RSM and self-bolstering effects in the SESAM, but are similar in the context of selective exposure. The author also pointed at a common ground between the uses-and-gratifications approaches in their view that "... that anticipated media impacts affect selective exposure as well as interpretation of and responses to media messages" (p.970). The model places working self as the situational determinant of selective exposure, and this may contradict a consistency we often notice in what kind of messages people choose. The model adds realism in terms of immediate media selections and posits a reciprocal influence of different factors that are engaged in selective exposure. It helps reflect how selections happen in real life, but makes it difficult to establish causality of the selective exposure process.

#### 4. Types of Selective Exposure and Media Balance

Two broad issues, types of selective exposure and media balance, will be touched here in regards to their place in definitions and models of selective exposure. Alongside selective exposure incidental exposure is also discussed. This exposure is often studied in the realm of news media, which is reflected in the following passage: "incidental exposure is often seen as a byproduct that occurs in an unintentional manner when engaging in other non-news activities online" (Zhu, Weeks, & Kwak, 2021, p.4). The key idea is that such an encounter may challenge the purposeful predisposition to tune in to a particular content, which may lead the audience member to change the pattern of exposure.

The analyzed definitions of selective exposure do not include incidental exposure as a term delineating from the defined phenomenon. The models we discussed also don't deal with it as the intended nature of exposure is emphasized. In other words, we can discard incidental exposure as part of our definition and models analysis.

Feldman, Wojcieszak, Stroud, and Bimber (2018) distinguish between interest-based and partisan selectivity:

"First, people must choose between news about public affairs and entertainment content. Many people generally prefer the latter (Prior, 2007), and this preference can be labelled interest-based selectivity. When people select public affairs news, they face the second level of choice, which involves partisan selectivity, namely whether to see content that supports their viewpoint, challenges it, or is balanced" (p.110)

However, this paper deals with selective exposure mostly to media coverage of news and current affairs, excluding interest-based selectivity from analysis.

Feldman et al. (2018) made a statement which may have important implications for understanding why strong partisans not only shift further from equilibrium as posited by the RSM, but also may never get back to it in the future:

"When people are confident in their knowledge of opposing perspectives, the motivation to see them dissipates" (p.124). So called alternative perspectives are well known to certain segments of the audience and rejected. People may think critically, evaluate suggested versions of events and not accept any of these media versions. Examining views of those who look at the alternatives not because they are attracted to them, but because they do not accept a certain narrative in the first place, may illuminate our understanding of selective exposure.

The normative question of how detrimental is the choice of partisan information instead of a balanced one for democracy is especially important for selective exposure studies. It could be reasonable to expect that balanced, non-partisan news information is properly defined. In addition, the main properties of non-partisan news are discussed, and the main balanced media outlets categorized. However, it is not the case. There is an impression that these three characteristics are assumed to be the common knowledge which is not the case either. Winter et al. (2016), although not dealing directly with these characteristics, suggested what may be one of such criteria: "readers evaluate two-sided messages as more credible than one-sided messages and select them more frequently" (p.672). But is it widely accepted as such? There is no evidence so far.

Dahlgren (2019) contended that "Public service news is characterized by politically impartial reporting" (p.295). Are there any conclusive studies that it is true across the board in multiple countries? If this statement has been valid over

the years, can we say the same at the age of partisan media? Feldman et al. (2018) again refer to what sources are balanced as a common knowledge: “Despite the continued availability of balanced news alongside partisan fare in the contemporary media environment, the selection of balanced news in comparison to pro- and counter-attitudinal news has received little attention in the surge of research on selective exposure” (p.115). Unfortunately, no definition or examples of what news outlets are balanced are given credit or cited. Then, there is a problem with comparative differences among media in different countries. For example, Cardenal, Aguilar-Paredes, Cristancho, & Majó-Vázquez (2019) point at the fact that Spanish mainstream media are more opinionated than the USA mainstream media.

Castro (2021) used experts’ assessments as a criterion of how partisan media outlets are. It could be a valuable addition to ways of measuring partisanship, but potentially, as a supplement measure, not the main tool.

Moreover, there is a term overlap for media partisanship. Dzieciolowski (2017) equates it with media bias: “A simple definition of non-partisan media could mean “not biased or partisan, especially towards any particular political group” (p.12). Media bias as a concept also has different interpretations. Eberl, Boomgaarden, and Wagner (2017) single out issue-based and actor-based media biases suggesting a definition of unbiased media through juxtaposition of the two: “some scholars argue that the opposite of bias is not necessarily objectivity but neutrality or balance (Hopmann et al., 2011b). An unbiased news report is a neutral or balanced report, thus one that is not strongly slanted in favor of or against any political side.” (p. 1127) Based on methods applied, Budak et al. (2016) state that “...media bias can be broadly divided into two approaches: audience-based and content-based methods.” (p.251). These interpretations should lead to a clear typology of the media outlets in regards to their level of partisanship. The studies with a high level of aggregation are available, for example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011), but a typology or classification for the most popular outlets may be extremely helpful. Classification is one of the scientific tools and the agreement on what object belongs to what category is an accepted standard from the time of Aristotle. There is no such agreement in the literature on selective exposure. Let’s take CNN as an example.

Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) squarely place CNN to the balanced group of media outlets: “CNN exist at the core of networks, meaning that their audiences overlap with other outlets in the network more than those with partisan output.” (p.482).

The following author contradicts to this view. This author is not the only one, but one of the earliest to do so. Hollander (2008) argues that “Republicans over time have shifted to such sources as Fox News, generally seen as friendly to their beliefs, and away from news sources often named by conservative critics as unfriendly to their side, such as CNN...Democrats have done the same” (p.34).

Vagueness of criteria determining whether a media outlet is partisan or balanced is coupled with arbitrary nature of similar criteria applied to the media by the audience. Cardenal, et al. (2019) applied the audience’s perceptions to determine partisanship: “We classified an outlet as partisan media if at least 50% of respondents perceive it as right- or left-leaning” (p. 366). However, justifications for such classification were not given.

## 5. Discussion

The field of communication is diverse, and there are still debates to what extent it is a unified paradigm, and whether it is in crisis or not (Lang, 2013). This debate is about 40 years old, comprising nearly the same period of time during which the paradigm of communication appeared as a distinct field before the claims of the crisis. It tells us two stories: 1) the existing paradigm is still in flux, and 2) alternatives did not prove to be better. Selective exposure belongs to the field within a dominant area of media effects and it shares the same achievements and drawbacks. To the extent to which we share the notion of paradigm, Lang argues, we have to address its three key features: “(a) an understanding of the fundamental nature of the thing which he or she is studying; (b) based on that fundamental nature, scientists devise novel, particular, or specific ways of observing the world; and (c) as a result of the first two, those who share the paradigm also share agreement on what are the primary questions that should be asked about the phenomenon” (pp.10-11).

This article is not a review of the selective exposure field as it is far from exhaustive and it is not about summing up the findings and sketching new horizons; it is also not about looking at selective exposure from three paradigmatic perspectives. This review is about the first aspect which is to revisit our understanding of the fundamental nature of what we study. Without it, we may find ourselves in a position where “...the growth of knowledge was not matching the growth in complexity and precision of the science. Increasing amounts of precision and data led, not to an improved match between the paradigm and the world, but rather to an enormous amount of adjusting that had to be done to make the data fit within the conceptions that guided its gathering resulting in a paradigm in crisis” (Lang, 2013, p.11).

The fundamental nature of the phenomenon under study is initially revealed in definitions, and then its essential features are explicated in models which demonstrate how something is supposed to work. We do have antecedents or preceding

elements sketched in a number of definitions of selective exposure. These elements are described as beliefs, attitudes and preferences. Some definitions use all three concepts. The others use only one or two of them. Sometimes, they seem to use them interchangeably. However, they are not interchangeable, and to make a meaningful definition we may need to include all three or to demonstrate that one or two of them are not relevant or redundant. Considering the situational nature of message selection even if it is sustained over time, we may argue that the term 'preference' is more appropriate for selective exposure. This tendency to favor specific media content (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014) has a more direct bearing on choice. Choice could be understood as an act of choosing (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014), but also as availability (Martin, Yu, Martin, & Fazio, 2006). Attitudes are often linked to general behavior. Preference may be closer to the notion of intention. Intentions seem to be stronger predictors of behavior (Ajzen, 2011). In fact, preference is revealed in choice. However, there may be conditions (like social norms) which will not necessarily lead to materializing both preferences and intentions.

The key notions used in nearly all definitions is a selection. This selection is either called or supposed to be purposeful, of the messages, media content or information. This is a cornerstone around which the conceptual framework of selective exposure is built. Some definitions revolve around the outcome of selection, and that is where some effort to achieve conceptual clarity needs to be done. Knobloch-Westerwick (2014) shifted focus from the causes of selective exposure to its outcomes manifested in the bias in audience composition for certain media, and bias in composition of selected messages from accessible messages. The latter needs more clarity. These choices could be made not only purposefully, but also forced or semi-automatic, as some messages could be suggested by peers, experts, media, and so on. Another question is about the pool of accessible media. Accessible in a sense that an audience member is aware of all existing messages? Accessible in a sense that an audience member has all such messages available or expected to make all those accessible messages available? If so, then availability is a more proper term for definitional purposes. Media partisanship is not a part of a selective exposure definition, but it is linked to it as the latter favors the former, and partisanship is a normative concern that boosted the latest interest in selective exposure in the first place. As we demonstrated above, there is no universal agreement on criteria of classifying partisan media as opposed to balanced media. Sometimes, the same media outlet is classified by one source as biased and by another source as balanced. It may be beneficial for the selective exposure approach to explore this classification question in more detail, and some criteria for referring to certain media outlets as partisan or balanced should be more explicit. Three criteria could be combined to determine partisanship with exhaustive entirety: experts' evaluations, audience evaluations, and content analysis of media outlets' messages.

Models are designed to simplify a theory or an approach and represent it in a coherent way to reveal its essential features. Garrett's model is an example of simplicity and clarity in the explanation of selective exposure. Two aspects of the phenomenon, propensity to and avoidance of certain information, are analyzed based on their underlying motivations. They are not equal in strength and impact as propensity is stronger, and avoidance fed by affective motives can be undermined by rational utility considerations. As this model covers some, but not all essential features, other models complement this with other features and concepts. For example, non-linear, reciprocal characteristics of the selective exposure process. One of the most important contributions of such models is making reciprocal influences of the factors involved in selective exposure to be a focal point. Media use, part of which selective exposure is, may be both an independent and dependent variable. Slater (2015) makes it clear that a host of factors with social identity as a main one determines media use which in turn affects social identity, etc.

Knobloch-Westerwick's (2015) SESAM model also offers a dynamic picture of mutual influence between different aspects of self and selective exposure with enhanced or decreased adjustments in the working self that affects further selections. These models are reciprocal and dynamic, and that is what gives them explanatory and heuristic power. However, as it was pointed above, these models are including too many factors to be reliably tested in a single model. The social and motivational factors are often broad as social identity, for example, which is open to multiple interpretations and working self which seems to change with every new development in situation. Both social identity and self-motivation seem to lead to similar effects in selective exposure, being interchangeable in their impact. Factor analysis may be employed as the technique needed to be used consistently in order to better gauge the predictor variables.

At the same time, the RSM hits an important and promising point: the process of selective exposure cannot evolve forever- it either reaches the extreme polarization, or returns to a certain balance. The threats to social identity, which are the main culprits of shifting of the audience to extremes according to the model, may persist increasing selective exposure and subsequent polarization, or decreasing both, making the audience approach more balanced. Two important aspects emerge in regards to this idea. One is the significance of real-life indicators to identity threats. If economic crises, cultural and real wars, and worsening of natural habitat take place, these problems may lead to more extreme views on their causes and solutions on behalf of media and the audience. The impact of real life indicators should be explored in regards to sustained selectivity.

After all, we may argue that selective exposure happens in pure form when political, media and peer pressure becomes more polarized while real life indicators remain stable over time. When real life factors dramatically change, the media and audience follow them. Another area worth investigating is a gradual return to a balance in terms of selectivity. Aside from above discussed vagueness of the classification of which media outlets are balanced, do we say that as soon as we feel that the threats to social identities disappear or diminish, does the audience flock to balanced media and abandon partisan media? One of the most fundamental questions each model should contemplate is whether people become selective because they are not well aware of alternatives? Or are they familiar with them too much, and they know well the opposing views expressed in other media and reject them wholeheartedly?

The MRS model touches upon another important process in media selective exposure: selective choices are made by journalists and content providers in what is called gate-keeping, a decision what messages to report and what to omit. What we usually call selective exposure is about the audience choosing among different media choices, however, these choices are already limited by the content providers. The third step is what the online media users share on the internet, and they may amplify the selective choice done at the second stage. This model gives nearly a complete account of how a message is selected from its inception to its final transformation. However, censorship by government bodies and content providers, self-censorship, especially in the countries with limited freedom of speech, also contribute to this cycle. The censorship issue is not directly related to the question of selective exposure, but it may energize and radicalize the search for alternative sources.

## 6. Conclusion

The selective exposure approach, dealing with preferential selection of media messages and outlets, holds a prominent place in the media effect tradition, and communication research as a whole. Over the decades, hundreds of studies have been exploring the causes of the phenomenon, its conditions and effects. More and more of new studies are generated building on previous knowledge. However, the abundance of studies may not only lead to a gradual accrue of knowledge with subsequent qualitative break-throughs in understanding and scientific predictions, but also it may indicate a lack of agreed understanding on the main tenets and essential processes involved in the phenomenon.

Empirical studies select more new factors for testing. They build on the conceptual foundations that are taken for granted, but those foundations are not always agreed upon in a broader academic community, and are not always clarified and sufficiently tested. More and more new information is accumulated without improving our understanding of what is studied. This article is a modest effort to assess what is really known and agreed upon in such important pillars of any theory such as definitions and models of selective exposure. This piece also suggests what aspects of selective exposure may need further clarification.

## References

- Ajzen, I. (2011). The theory of planned behaviour: Reactions and reflections. *Psychology & Health, 26*(9), 1113-1127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870446.2011.613995>
- Albarracín, D., Johnson, B. T., Zanna, M. P., & Kumkale, G. T. (2005). Attitudes: Introduction and scope. *The handbook of attitudes, 2005*, 3-19.
- Arendt, F., Steindl, N., & Kümpel, A. (2016). Implicit and explicit attitudes as predictors of gatekeeping, selective exposure, and news sharing: Testing a general model of media-related selection. *Journal of Communication, 66*(5), 717-740. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12256>
- Barnidge, M., & Peacock, C. (2019). A third wave of selective exposure research? The challenges posed by hyperpartisan news on social media. *Media and communication, 7*(3), 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i3.2257>
- Budak, C., Goel, S., & Rao, J. M. (2016). Fair and balanced? Quantifying media bias through crowdsourced content analysis. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 80*(S1), 250-271. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw007>
- Camaj, L. (2019). From selective exposure to selective information processing: A motivated reasoning approach. *Media and communication, 7*(3), 8-11. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i3.2289>
- Cardenal, A. S., Aguilar-Paredes, C., Cristancho, C., & Majó-Vázquez, S. (2019). Echo-chambers in online news consumption: Evidence from survey and navigation data in Spain. *European Journal of Communication, 34*(4), 360-376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119844409>
- Castro, L. (2021). Measuring Partisan Media Bias Cross-Nationally. *Swiss Political Science Review, 27*(2), 412-433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12459>
- Dahlgren, P. M. (2019). Selective exposure to public service news over thirty years: The role of ideological leaning, party support, and political interest. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 24*(3), 293-314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219836223>



- Dahlgren, P. M., Shehata, A., & Strömbäck, J. (2019). Reinforcing spirals at work? Mutual influences between selective news exposure and ideological leaning. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(2), 159-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119830056>
- Dzięciołowski, K. (2017). Is There a Chance for Non-Partisan Media in Poland?. *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper*, 20.
- Eberl, J. M., Boomgaarden, H. G., & Wagner, M. (2017). One bias fits all? Three types of media bias and their effects on party preferences. *Communication Research*, 44(8), 1125-1148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215614364>
- Feldman, L., Wojcieszak, M., Stroud, N. J., & Bimber, B. (2018). Explaining media choice: The role of issue-specific engagement in predicting interest-based and partisan selectivity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 62(1), 109-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2017.1375502>
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2017). Are news audiences increasingly fragmented? A cross-national comparative analysis of cross-platform news audience fragmentation and duplication. *Journal of Communication*, 67(4), 476-498. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12315>
- Franck, R. (Ed.). (2013). *The explanatory power of models: bridging the gap between empirical and theoretical research in the social sciences* (Vol. 1). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Garrett, R. K. (2009). Politically motivated reinforcement seeking: Reframing the selective exposure debate. *Journal of communication*, 59(4), 676-699. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01452.x>
- Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2011). Ideological segregation online and offline. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126(4), 1799-1839. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjr044>
- Guess, A., Nyhan, B., Lyons, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Avoiding the echo chamber about echo chambers. *Knight Foundation*, 2, 1-25.
- Hollander, B. A. (2008). Tuning out or tuning elsewhere? Partisanship, polarization, and media migration from 1998 to 2006. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 85(1), 23-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900808500103>
- Hopmann, D. N., Van Aelst, P., & Legnante, G. (2011b). Political balance in the news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13, 240-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427804>
- Iyengar, S., & Kyu, S. H. (2008). Red media, blue media: Evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of communication*, 59(1), 19-39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x>
- Klapper, J. T. (1960). *The effects of mass communication*. Free Press. <https://doi.org/10.1037/006189>
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2014). *Choice and preference in media use: Advances in selective exposure theory and research*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315771359>
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2015). The selective exposure self-and affect-management (SESAM) model: Applications in the realms of race, politics, and health. *Communication Research*, 42(7), 959-985. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650214539173>
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., Mothes, C., & Polavin, N. (2020). Confirmation bias, ingroup bias, and negativity bias in selective exposure to political information. *Communication Research*, 47(1), 104-124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217719596>
- Lang, A. (2013). Discipline in crisis? The shifting paradigm of mass communication research. *Communication Theory*, 23(1), 10-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12000>
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice*. Oxford: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.
- Markus, H., & Wurf, E. (1987). The dynamic self-concept: A social psychological perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 38, 299-337. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.38.020187.001503>
- Martin, T. L., Yu, C. T., Martin, G. L., & Fazio, D. (2006). On choice, preference, and preference for choice. *The Behavior Analyst Today*, 7(2), 234. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0100083>
- Ohme, J., & Mothes, C. (2020). What affects first-and second-level selective exposure to journalistic news? A social media online experiment. *Journalism Studies*, 21(9), 1220-1242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1735490>
- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. Cambridge University Press, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139878425>

- Sears, D. O., & Freedman, J. L. (1967). Selective exposure to information: A critical review. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 31(2), 194-213. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267513>
- Slater, M. D. (2015). Reinforcing spirals model: Conceptualizing the relationship between media content exposure and the development and maintenance of attitudes. *Media Psychology*, 18(3), 370-395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2014.897236>
- Stroud, N. J. (2014). Selective exposure theories. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jameson (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of political communication*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. [https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.009\\_update\\_001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.009_update_001)
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Winter, S., Metzger, M. J., & Flanagin, A. J. (2016). Selective use of news cues: A multiple- motive perspective on information selection in social media environments. *Journal of Communication*, 66(4), 669-693. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12241>
- Zhu, Q., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2021). Implications of online incidental and selective exposure for political emotions: Affective polarization during elections. *New Media & Society*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211061336>

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.