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Manufacturing Polarization: The Role of the Internet in Corporate Media and Opinion
Formation

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PSC 491

Ali Ahmida

Brian Duff

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Introduction

The primary concern of this thesis is tracing and articulating the political consequences of the Internet as applied to the formation of public opinion. This thesis will present a critical interpretation of a larger theoretical problem while concentrating on two related empirical cases. The broad question that this thesis will ultimately address is this: how, and to what extent has the Internet provided a new platform for the continued ideological hegemony of the American elite? Can an empiric relation be drawn between the rise of Internet-based technologies and contemporary political polarization in public opinion? How has the digital market for media affected the content as well as the production of the news? By reevaluating two lead accounts of news media production and opinion formation, this thesis will argue that the market forces of the digital environment have pushed the American people to the political extremes, which has provided the elite with an unexpected opportunity to further solidify their philosophy as the dominant American ideology. In addressing this argument, this thesis will also explore an unexpected commonality between two different political scientists, Noam Chomsky and John Zaller, in which their two different models actually work to complement one another's broader conclusions.

In 1988, Noam Chomsky coauthored a book with Edward Herman titled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, in which they detailed the ideological domination of the media by the American corporate elite. Four years later in 1992, John Zaller wrote his seminal work *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* in which he develops a theory to explain how people convert political messages into political opinions. Though some may doubt that Zaller, a mainstream empirical political scientist,

and Chomsky, a public intellectual, have much in common, I will argue that their two books come together in working to explain the entire picture of American mass media, from elite production down to mass consumption. The union of the two works is their similar conclusions regarding elite domination of public opinion. While Chomsky explicitly investigates this domination, Zaller takes a much subtler approach to the question. But what about the broader implication of the models, to what extent has the Internet exacerbated the way in which news is produced or consumed?

To investigate the conclusions drawn from the authors, this essay will evaluate the two book's methods, one for the production of mass media and the other focusing on the consumption of that same media. On the side of production, this thesis will be using the Chomsky/Herman Propaganda Model to understand the nature of corporate media. On the side of consumption, Zaller's RAS (Receive-Accept-Sample) Model will be used to understand and interpret public opinion. Although the nature of these models is seemingly dichotomous, the two are not mutually exclusive. Chomsky/Herman's Propaganda Model uses five distinct filters to explain the "self-censorship" of corporate media while Zaller's RAS Model uses a quantitative analysis to explain the mechanism behind how a person constructs the political 'opinions' that they report to pollsters, including their own layer of personal censorship based on partisan predispositions. Despite that Chomsky and Herman originally wrote that mainstream media was under the thumb of the elites; they remained optimistic that future technological developments would promote the growth of an independent media. On the other hand, Zaller, who found that political opinions are strongly dependent on exposure to elite communications, came to the pessimistic conclusion that people's opinions tend to be unstable and susceptible to manipulation.

Surprisingly, both works confirmed the ubiquity of elite domination in mass media yet they differed significantly in their assessment of the implications of this domination. While Chomsky thinks that elite domination is the root of America's problems, Zaller disagrees in that he believes that elite domination is natural and, more or less, unavoidable. But to what extent are the authors' arguments affected by the technological developments that have characterized the last two decades? Are their conclusions still valid?

To address this question, this essay will first look to discuss some important developments that have taken place in the twenty years since the models' original publication. This thesis will first look to address the extent to which American's use the Internet to consume news media. Second, this thesis will look to understand how the news industry has adapted to a digital marketplace. Other developments that are significant to my arguments are the processes by which people choose which news to consume, the paradigm of partisan press outlets, and finally, the polarized environment that has now come to characterize American politics.

The last two sections of the paper will be dedicated to examining the models through a contemporary lens. The first of these sections will apply Zaller's model to today's digital environment and will then develop a theory to explain the recent trend of political polarization using contemporary political scholarship. The latter section will look into the applicability of Chomsky/Herman's model to online corporate media, address their optimistic predictions about technology and ultimately explain where the authors went wrong in their original analysis of the future.

The primary purpose of this paper is to apply the Propaganda Model and the RAS Model to this new, "cyber" America. The analysis will focus extensively on evaluating

which model better predicted, and better explains, the political environment of today. By using Zaller's model, this thesis argues that technology is the driving force behind contemporary political polarization. Using Chomsky's model, this thesis will also argue that it is the elite-driven market forces that turned the Internet into this force behind polarization. Together, these two models provide the critical framework for understanding how the Internet has become the newest platform by which elites can manufacture our news, opinions, ideologies, identities and more.

The Production of Media: A Propaganda Model

An interesting similarity between both Zaller and Chomsky's approach to their questions is that both recognize the top-down nature of the issue. Chomsky's model, which deals with the production of mass media, helps us to understand the role of the "top." While Zaller, who deals with consumption, helps us to understand the "bottom" half of the relationship between media and public opinion. This section will summarize Herman and Chomsky's methods and conclusions regarding the top-down production of corporate news.

First published in 1988, Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* had the opportunity of investigating corporate media at a particularly interesting moment in American history. The Vietnam War had ended, the American public had adopted the Civil Rights Movement and Ronald Reagan's presidency was coming to a close. Most importantly however, advances in technology had allowed majority of Americans to own television sets and thus furthered the trend of Americans choosing televised news over traditional print. Noam Chomsky, professor Emeritus of linguistics and co-author professor of finance Edward Herman wrote their book in response to what they saw as a

covert subversion of “free” press. The book’s central argument is that corporate media serves “to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity, and that their choices, emphases, and omissions can often be understood best . . . by analyzing them in such terms” (p. liv).

To account for the innate complexities of corporate mass media, Chomsky and Herman developed a multi-dimensional model that categorizes and explains the processes behind which factual events get translated into the script of the news anchor. The first filter of understanding the nature of the press is to understand who actually owns the media companies themselves. In the late 1980s, the authors found that 29 companies were accountable for close to half of all media output, translating to roughly 13,000 media entities in all (p. 4). However, since the original publication of their work, the authors (2002) have updated the figures such that “two dozen firms control nearly the entirety of media experienced by most U.S. citizens,” and this statement factors into account many Internet media-outlets as well. Moreover, they argue that of the nine largest companies “that now dominate the media universe, all but General Electric have extensively conglomerated within the media, and are important in both producing content and distributing it” (p. xiii). When the majority of the population’s news source is produced by a handful of companies, the inherent dangers should be clear.

The second filter of the Propaganda Model addresses the source of profits for press outlets, namely income brought in by selling advertisement spots. The idea is that because press outlets rely on their funding from selling ad space, they must do all they can to attract the attention of companies looking to advertise. To accomplish this, outlets must “help advertisers optimize the effectiveness of their network” by planning their programs such

that it attracts as many viewers as possible (p. 16). Unfortunately, it is no longer the quality of journalism or news coverage which determines the success of a media outlet but rather it is the “advertisers’ choices [that] influence media prosperity and survival” (p. 14). This particular filter played a significant part in their overall analysis of the production of mass media, and as this paper will later address, its role has only grown stronger since the Propaganda Model was first conceived.

The third filter of Chomsky/Herman’s model is titled the “Sourcing of Mass-Media News,” and implies just what its title suggests. Before an explanation of the filter is given, it should be noted that of all filters, it is precisely this one that draws corporate media “into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest” (p. 18). Despite media’s deep entwinement with big business (recall the second filter), it is this filter that makes the media apparatus fully dependent upon powerful American institutions. The idea is that corporate media outlets cannot afford to send journalists all over the world fact checking, so instead, they rely on government and corporate sources for the information that they then deliver to the public. This filter holds a significant position in the production of mass media in that it diminishes the role of press from truth-seeking, whistle-blowers to that of the middlemen who simply report what they are told. Economically, it makes sense for press outlets to rely on “informative” reports because “taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investigative expense” (p. 19). As well as affecting the production of news, this filter also figures into the equation of the public’s consumption of that news. As the next section explores, this filter is of particular significance to Zaller’s analysis in that it gives elites an easy route to manipulate opinions. Because people tend to believe at least some of what

they hear (or read), those who produce the raw data (i.e. government reports) have a disproportionate effect on people's opinion because their findings tend to be reported as the "objective" truth by the press.

The fourth filter of the model is corporate media's aversion to flak, where flak refers to "negative responses to a media statement or program" (p. 36). Economically, flak can be a serious financial consequence to press outlets in that parts of their audience may boycott their programming in response to something they find offensive. Moreover, if a company or foundation takes offense to a particular story or program, that organization will likely not choose that particular outlet to advertise on. Regardless of pulling their business from these outlets, the real danger is that an offended organization may file a lawsuit against that press outlet, as was the case with Westmoreland and CBS in 1977 (p. 27). The flak apparatus wields a disproportionate amount of authority in the production of mass media, by "regularly assailing, threatening, and 'correcting' the media" this apparatus is able to consistently deter press outlets from reporting contrarian stories (p. 28).

The final filter of the Propaganda Model was originally titled "Anticommunism As A Control Mechanism," and is the only filter to speak directly to the ideology of the elite. In America, it is the role of corporate media to "identify, create, and push into the limelight" the dominant American ideology, which during the late 1980s was anticommunism (p. 31). To be seen as a respectable source of news, press outlets must be obedient to this dominant ideology and report stories that promote, not discourage, the many messages inherent in the ideology of the elite. And as this thesis will later show with Zaller's model, more often than not, this is the ideology that gets inculcated into the American public.

Taken together, these five filters provide an interesting perspective on how to interpret the daily news. Regardless of how effective the model was at explaining the production of news in the late 1980s, the real question is the predictive power of the model, and whether or not Chomsky and Herman's predictions about the future of mass media were validated or not. But what exactly were the conclusions and predictions that the authors drew from their models?

In their book's conclusion, Chomsky and Herman reinforced their argument that corporate media serves to "inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the stage" (p. 298). Despite this grim prognosis of American media, the end of their concluding chapter takes an optimistic note as the authors begin to describe the "counterforces at work with a potential for broader access." They go on to explain how the increased availability of cable and satellite communications "has weakened the power of the network oligopoly" and detail a growing number of locally produced programs. The authors go on to encourage "grass-roots and public-interest organizations" to make use of this new technology (p. 307). Although it is not explicitly written (the widespread use of the Internet had not quite occurred), it can be assumed that the authors would have also encouraged these organizations to make use of the Internet in order to avoid the corporate monopoly of network television. At this point in our history, both Chomsky and Herman had hope that the production of mass media was on the verge of dramatic change. Emergent technology was allowing for more independent news startups and people were beginning to understand the extent to which their nightly news reports were "manufactured." Even after a multi-million public-relations campaign on behalf of the US government, "elite

domination of the media [had] not succeeded in overcoming the Vietnam syndrome and public hostility to direct U.S. involvement in the destabilization . . . of foreign governments” (p. 306). The corporate media apparatus was strong, but not unbeatable. Chomsky and Herman remained hopeful that by exposing how processed mainstream media was, the American people would begin to demand a more democratized and independent press. Finally, it is interesting to note that though Noam Chomsky is regarded as an advocate of the common man, his analysis of elite domination largely overlooks the effects of mass media on the people themselves. On the other hand, Zaller’s book, which is described as analysis of the institution of public opinion, is much more concerned with the effects of communications on a personal level while largely ignoring the broader implications. Ironically it is Chomsky who has faith in the people yet doubts the elites and Zaller who doubts the people yet trusts the elites. But why, and to what extent, does Zaller not put his faith in the common man?

Consumption of Mass Media: The RAS Model

As discussed in the introduction, the study of mass media and public opinion is an interdisciplinary field that requires dynamic approaches from all sides. So far, this essay has outlined Chomsky and Herman’s approach to understanding the *production* of mass media, but now this thesis will begin to examine the *consumption* of manufactured media and the ways it is transformed into public opinion. Although there have been many notable works that examine how mass media affects public opinion (V.O. Key’s *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Philip Converse’s *The American Voter*), this study will focus on an ambitious, modern book written by professor John Zaller. In his book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Zaller develops a unique model to interpret how people consume

political messages and come up with the opinions they express to pollsters. Written in 1992, Zaller's work had the advantage of being written at a time when there were many decades worth of survey datasets that he could base his research from¹. Conveniently, by reviewing Zaller's analysis twenty years after its original publication, this thesis is in a position to address the model's applicability to American public opinion today.

Echoing Chomsky and Herman's work, Zaller prefaces his model by holding that "the information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments in the world" and that public opinion data must be understood in light of this fact (p. 7). Zaller openly admits that media is manufactured in the top down manner earlier suggested by Chomsky and Herman yet chooses to only focus his analysis on the lower half of the mass media puzzle. The model Zaller developed to understand how people react to abridged news is titled the 'RAS Model' where RAS is an acronym for receive, accept and sample. The model seeks to understand how the public consumes mass media and how this consumption of media then gets translated into "opinions" that are later reported to political pollsters. It needs to be noted that the independent variables of the model are the amount of coverage devoted to an issue by the press (topic saturation) and the individual's level of political awareness.

The best way to understand the nature and applications of the model is to understand the model's tenets. The first of four axioms of the RAS Model is the "Reception Axiom" which holds that "the greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to . . . political messages concerning that message" (p. 42). In practicality this axiom holds that people who watch, read or hear

¹ Zaller primarily relies on data from the Center for Political Studies and National Election Studies at the University of Michigan (Zaller 1992: xiii).

more news receive more political messages and thus tend to be more politically aware. The second part of the model is the “Resistance Axiom” which says that “people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions” but only to the extent that they are politically aware enough to do so (p. 44). Here it needs to be noted that it is with great care that Zaller chooses the word “predispositions” opposed to ‘beliefs’ or ‘opinions.’ As he writes in the beginning of his book, “people do not have fixed attitudes on every issue” (p.3). Zaller, and his model, refute the idea that people have a static political philosophy that leads to fixed political opinions, what they do have is a partisan predisposition likely inherited from their upbringing. It is precisely these first two axioms that will later be applied to the case of digital news consumption.

The first two parts of his model are concerned with the reception of messages, but the latter two parts are dedicated to understanding the transition between receiving and processing those political messages. The third axiom is the “Accessibility Axiom” which states, “the more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration . . . and bring [it] to the top of the head for use” (p. 48). Zaller’s notion with this axiom is that information that a person recently received is much more salient to them than similar information they received in the past. The final component of the model is the “Response Axiom,” which states “individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them” (p. 49). It is chiefly this axiom that speaks directly to the mechanism behind how people answer political pollsters and express their political opinions. Now that the basic structure of the model has been identified, it is time that the use, significance and practicality of the model be explained.

In essence, the model can be understood like this: people are constantly exposed to political messages through a variety of mediums (headlines, conversations, social media, classrooms etc.), they then either accept those messages or refute them according to their previous political predispositions. This means that people's political "opinions" are nothing more than the sum of all these messages that they have received (where newer messages hold more influence over these "opinions"). The significance of the RAS Model is that it provides a mechanistic understanding of the 'trends' in public opinion that are so often referred to by political pundits.

An important consequence of the model is that politically aware people "are substantially more stable in their attitude reports" than less aware people and that these same politically aware people tend to have more extreme opinions (Zaller 1992: 43, 85). What these deductions lead to is arguably the most important implication of Zaller's analysis, which is that there is a direct correlation between political polarization and political awareness in situations where there are competing partisan messages (i.e. gun control), and that this relationship is amplified by topic-saturation by the press. It is interesting to note that where Zaller approaches the question of message-consumption by delineating between the two mainstream competing messages (Democratic or Republican), Chomsky treats the issue differently. To Chomsky and Herman, it is arbitrary to define the message as "liberal" or "conservative" because despite the content of the message, it is going to fundamentally reflect the ideology of the elite. Both Zaller's deductions, and Chomsky's critical approach, will be of considerable significance when later evaluating how digital technologies have affected the basic empirical structure of Zaller's model and Chomsky's interpretation of digital news production.

By describing how media produced messages can polarize the American public and the role that the press plays in shaping public opinion, Zaller is able to explain the underlying mechanism behind the consumption of mass media. But some of Zaller's assumptions seem untenable due to changes of the last twenty years. In the development of his model, Zaller (1992) points out that:

Most people, this research maintains, are simply not so rigid in their information-seeking behavior that they will expose themselves only to ideas that they find congenial. To the extent selective exposure occurs at all, it appears to do so under special conditions that do not typically arise in situations of mass persuasion. (p. 139)

As this thesis will explore, although this idea may have been true in the early 1990s, it does not apply today. People do not simply turn on the nightly news, but rather they turn on *their* nightly news. But what about Zaller's predictions, to what extent have they been confirmed or disproved by technological developments?

Unlike Chomsky and Herman who predicted that new technologies in the field of communication would enable the growth of independent press, Zaller's conclusions were much less optimistic. Regarding his model, Zaller did not offer any predictions on how the Internet was going to change how people processed political messages. On the other hand, he did offer predictions on the larger picture of public opinion. In his conclusion, Zaller (1992) writes that, "the argument of this book is . . . scarcely encouraging with respect to domination of mass opinion by elites" and that even highly aware citizens tend to "respond to new issues mainly on the basis of the partisanship and ideology of the elite sources of their messages" (p. 311). He finds that in cases of elite consensus, there is little press coverage on the topic eliciting little to no public opinion on the subject. But when there does exist disagreements among the elites and their experts, "the result will be a polarization of the general public along lines that mirror the elite ideological conflict" (p.

327). Although he could not have known the extent that this idea would be played out in years to come, this may have been the RAS Model's most applicable prediction for American public opinion.

Unfortunately, even during the time-period in which the book was originally written, the RAS Model's overarching finding is that majority of people are easily influenced by elite messages, thus making their political opinions highly accessible for the media to manipulate. Without intending to do so, Zaller completed what Chomsky and Herman began. Chomsky explained the oligarchic production of media, and Zaller showed that it is precisely this media that shapes the public's political opinion. But both these models were designed to address questions related to them two decades ago, can either model be considered relevant to today's world? I argue yes; applying Zaller's model to the digital environment of today allows one to understand how digital news consumption led to political polarization.

The Polarization Effect

One of the dominant goals of this thesis is to apply the central ideas of the RAS Model to the new media environment in hopes to better understand political polarization. To understand this connection, one must first understand how Zaller himself addressed the topic of polarization and how his model is designed to process partisanship. His fundamental finding was that "increases in political awareness are associated with more polarized" opinions in the presence of competing ideological messages (Zaller 1992: 110). By quantitatively exploring what he called the "polarization effect," Zaller was able to provide numerical evidence that as people's political awareness increased, so too did the partisanship of their responses to political surveys. To explain this trend, Zaller writes that

“Democrats and Republicans tend to reject messages from the opposing party, and liberals and conservatives reject persuasive communications that are inconsistent with their ideologies” (p. 267). The idea is that the more politically aware a person is, the more messages they encounter; but also the more suited they are to discern between “liberal” or “conservative” messages and reject them accordingly². And although few people are certain of all the beliefs that delineate a “liberal” from a “conservative,” most are able to “stake out roughly comparable positions on a series of seemingly unrelated left-right value dimensions” which allows them to create the “ideology” by which they identify themselves (p. 27). After describing the above trends, Zaller does not explore any implications that the “polarization effect” may have on American public opinion. Instead he chooses instead to frame the “polarization effect” in terms of elite domination, a theme that will be developed in later sections.

In an early effort to explain the mechanics behind how the “polarization effect” shapes public opinion, Zaller set up a basic table to explain the RAS tenets³:

	<i>Level of Awareness</i>		
	Low	Middle	High
Probability of Reception	.10	.50	.90
Probability of Acceptance Reception	.90	.50	.10

² By “liberal” and “conservative” messages, it is meant to refer to the political philosophies defined by the commonly held notions assigned to the “right” and “left” by the political elite (government officials, journalists, lobbyists, experts etc).

³ Exact table replicated from Zaller (1992): 125

Probability of Change in Opinion	.09	.25	.09
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Table 1, attitude change in response to a hypothetical unpartisan message

The effect of this table is that it numerically shows the way in which political awareness affects political attitude. The first row, "Probability of Reception," refers to the probability that someone actually reads, hears, or sees the message. The second row, "probability of acceptance-given-reception," refers to the chances that someone accepts/internalizes that message, given that they received it. The third row, "Probability of Change in Opinion," calculates the overall probability that a person will change their attitude in relation to the message. From this hypothetical table one can see how it is more likely for more aware people to receive political messages (row 1) while also being less likely to accept those messages that they have received (row 2). People who are less aware receive fewer messages but they are much more likely to accept the messages that they do receive (row 2). Finally, one can observe that highly aware and lesser-aware people are the least likely to change their attitudes (row 3), but for different reasons. To explain the role of partisanship, Zaller went on to stratify the population by ideology. The following is his table constructed to measure the theoretical response to an arbitrary "liberal" message⁴:

	<i>Level of Awareness</i>					
	<u>Among Liberals</u>			<u>Among Conservatives</u>		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Medium	High
Probability of Reception	.10	.50	.90	.10	.50	.90
Prob (Acceptance Reception)	.90	.85	.80	.90	.46	.02

⁴ Table leaves out data for moderates, for exact table refer to Zaller (1992): 127

Probability of Change in Opinion	.09	.425	.72	.09	.23	.018
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Table 2, attitude change in response to a liberal message

This table shows the dynamic relationship between political philosophy, political awareness and attitude formation. The idea is that highly aware liberals are more likely to conform to the “liberal” doctrine while highly aware conservatives are more likely to reject “liberal” messages. Without loss of generality, the trends would be the same if the arbitrary message were a conservative one instead. The key variables addressed here are the likelihood that people receive political messages and their probability of rejecting those received messages based on their predispositions’.

Zaller based these tables on the fact that it was largely the role of people’s predispositions that regulated their resistance to certain political communications. This paper will demonstrate that it is these same political predispositions that not only lead people to resist political communications, but also prevent certain political communications from ever being received. Zaller argued that awareness precipitated *resistance* towards contrary messages. Today, awareness precipitates *prevention* of reception of contrary messages.

From table 2 it is clear that for polarization to occur, the probability that a liberal accepts a “liberal” message must increase while that same probability for a conservative must decrease. For this to happen, the probability of reception and message-acceptance of that “liberal” communication must increase for liberals while decreasing for conservatives. Let’s first deal with the case of reception.

Consumption of Media: From Bad to Worse

This section will demonstrate how the way in which the American public consumes news digitally can explain contemporary political polarization. Using Zaller's model to understand the relationship between political awareness and predispositions, I will show how the "niche news' paradigm" and the "echo chamber effect" (both explained below) can both be used to explain the partisan-driven politics of America today.

As mentioned above, Zaller (1992) held that people are "not so rigid in their information-seeking behavior that they will expose themselves only to ideas that they find congenial," in the early 1990s people watched *the* news not *their* news (p. 139). But as this section will argue, this claim of Zaller's has been outdated and remains inapplicable in today's political world. In their 2009 publication *Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use*, professors Iyengar and Hahn found that although American's historically got their daily news from "one of three network newscasts" that all offered a "homogeneous and generic 'point-counterpoint' perspective on the news," the settings of media consumption has changed (p. 20). Anymore, "consumers can access—with minimal effort—newspapers, radio, and television stations the world over" which increasingly leads people to choose their media in accordance with their "partisan considerations" (p. 20). By testing the effect that news sourcing/labeling (Fox, CNN, NPR) had on people's selectivity towards news stories, the authors were able to conclude, "the divide in news selection between liberals and conservatives is considerable" (p. 29). Surprisingly, this trend of press outlet selectivity held for non-political topics such as sports, travel or local crime as well (p. 19).

In a similar study published in *Communications Research*, Dr. Silvia Knoblock-Westerwick found that the participants in her study tended to choose to read articles that

they felt would support their predispositions. Because people have so many media outlets to choose from, they tend to “choose messages that converge with preexisting views” (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2009: 445). Despite that technology easily allows access to contrary discourse, this research found that most people simply choose not to access it. By being able to limit oneself to preferable media outlets, “technology has facilitated citizens’ ability to seek out information sources they find agree- able and tune out others that prove dissonant” (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012: 28). To summarize, it is has been found that there is ample evidence that suggests that people are selective when choosing their source for news. Moreover, this selectivity is amplified by technology in that people can instantly choose the news they prefer and limit exposure to outlets of which they disapprove. These studies confirm that people are more selective when choosing where to get their news, but are the political communications of these outlets really so different? Let’s now examine the case of polarization among the press outlets themselves.

Although the association between Republicans with Fox or Democrats with MSNBC seems obvious, this clear distinction between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ news has not always been so apparent. With the growth of cable networks and the introduction of the Internet, news media has experienced “a more fragmented information environment in which . . . news outlets compete for attention” (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 20). And it is precisely because of this “crowded national market” that media outlets are experiencing “weaker economic incentives to aim for a politically moderate” audience (Prior 2013: 6). Concomitantly, there is now a “strong economic incentive for news organizations to cater to their viewers’ political preference” which helps to explain the “niche news’ paradigm” of today’s media (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 21). In multiple studies, it is commonly found that Fox news

tends to sympathize with conservative elites and viewpoints, while companies such as MSNBC and the *New York Times* tend to take more liberal stances (Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Prior 2013; Starr 2010). The significance of this trend is that it threatens the validity of Zaller’s original conclusions because he accounted for the effect of partisan *messages*, but not the effect of a partisan *press*.

In a 2010 article ran in the *Atlantic*, Princeton’s Paul Starr describes the new dynamic created by the “intensification of ideological journalism.” He writes that although America has historically had partisan press outlets, “partisan media are now firmly part of our national conversation.” Despite the seemingly daunting reality of institutionalized polarization, Starr remains optimistic and argues that “democracy needs passion, and partisanship provides it.” Although it has been documented that certain “talk radio shows, cable news channels, and websites do offer more ideological extreme packages of news and opinions” some remain skeptical as to whether or not this is an inherently dangerous development in American politics (Prior 2013: 7).

I argue that a partisan press *is* a dangerous development and when paired with a partisan audience, the two factors lead to a more polarized America. Consider table 3, which is similar to table 2, but with updated numbers for the probability of reception (row 1):

	<u>Level of Awareness</u>					
	<u>Among Liberals</u>			<u>Among Conservatives</u>		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Medium	High
Probability of Reception	.20	.65	.98	.05	.35	.50
Prob (Acceptance Reception)	.90	.85	.80	.90	.46	.02

Probability of Change in Opinion	.18	.553	.784	.045	.161	.01
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Table 3, reflects updated hypothetical probability of reception to a liberal message

The original numbers have been replaced by new hypothetical figures that better reflect the partisanship of press outlets and the partisanship-driven selectivity of press outlets on behalf of the consumers. The updated numbers reflect the fact that “liberals” watch liberal news thus they are exposed to more liberal messages, leading to a higher chance of reception. On the other side, “conservatives” watch conservative news thus lowering their chances of being exposed to “liberal” messages. The hypothetical numbers are constructed in such a way to reflect the findings of Iyengar and Hahn⁵ (2009) and Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009)⁶ and Prior (2013).

From simply updating the first row, Table 3 produces some interesting results. On the side of the liberals, across the three categories we see over a 28% increase in the chance that any liberal (low-high awareness) will change their opinion to match that of the message, with the largest increase being among those liberals who are moderately aware. On the side of the conservatives we see over a 19% decrease in the chance that any given conservative from the three populations adopts the “liberal” message as opinion. Just from updating the probabilities of reception to match contemporary American politics, the table demonstrates how public opinion can polarize.

Now that the effect of a polarized press and partisan-driven selectivity have on public opinion has been suggested, the updated probabilities for message-acceptance-

⁵ Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that Republicans chose “liberal” outlets (CNN/NPR) around 10% of the time (p. 28).

⁶ Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009) found that the more aware a person was, the longer they spent reading “attitude consistent messages” (p.442). Moreover, they found that people spent 36% more time reading opinion-confirming stories as opposed to contrary stories (p. 443).

given-reception need to be considered. The following table updates the final probabilities of the RAS Model in accordance with the “niche news paradigm.” The idea is that self-identified “liberals” consistently choose to consume liberal media because it speaks to their predispositions. Concomitantly, they *identify* with these political communications because they come from a “liberal” source. This is known as the “echo chamber effect” which helps to explain why “liberals viewing MSNBC or reading left-of-center blogs may well end up embracing liberal talking points even more firmly” (Sunstein 2012). People accept the opinions of those they trust, and they trust those who speak to their dispositions. This trend is confirmed by Iyengar and Hahn (2009), where the authors comment on the trend of partisans labeling contrary arguments as “erroneous” and ignoring the message altogether.

	<u>Level of Awareness</u>					
	<u>Among Liberals</u>			<u>Among Conservatives</u>		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Medium	High
Probability of Reception	.20	.65	.98	.05	.35	.50
Prob (Acceptance Reception)	.95	.95	.90	.80	.35	.02
Probability of Change in Opinion	.19	.6175	.882	.04	.1225	.01

Table 4, reflects updated hypothetical probabilities of both reception and message acceptance of a liberal message

Table 4 is similar to table 3 but has an updated second row to reflect the discussed “echo chamber effect.” From the table, it is easy to see that an updated second row will alter the final probability that a person will accept the message (third row). Comparing to Table 2, there is now over a 45% increase in the chance that any given liberal across the three populations will adopt the “liberal” communication as opinion. On the other wing, there is

now a 24% total decrease in the chances that any given conservative changes their opinion to that of the “liberal” message.

So what are the consequences of this updated news consumption paradigm?

According to the theoretical updates of Zaller’s original data, a more polarized American public. But is America actually politically polarized, if so, to what extent? The next section will aggregate many different pieces of evidence, from measurements of congressional voting to American’s evaluation of out-party presidential incumbents, showing the existence of a divided America.

A Polarized America

The section will briefly review the literature suggesting that America is in fact politically polarized. In the top-down fashion that previous sections approached production and consumption of media, the first evidence of political polarization analyzed will be that of political elites. In their recent book detailing the polarization of American politics, professors Poole, McCarty and Rosenthal are able to provide “systematic evidence” that the “behavior of members of Congress in fact has become highly polarized along a liberal-conservative ideological dimension” (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006: 16). By analyzing the roll call votes of members of Congress and looking into the ideological ratings⁷ of members of Congress, the authors are able to deduce that since the mid 1970s, Senators and Representatives of the House tend to vote along party lines, and tend to be much more ideologically polarized themselves. Moreover, the authors argue that the dwindling number of moderates in Congress further shows this trend of polarization (note

⁷ These ratings tend to be compiled by interest groups such as the Americans for Democratic Action, League of Conservation Voters or the Chamber of Commerce. The technicalities and validity of these indices are discussed in their book *Polarized America*, pages 16-20.

the recent departure of Maine's own Olympia Snowe) (p. 15). Reflective of the polarization among political elites, it should be of no surprise that there has also been a polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties political platforms (Alesina and Rosenthal 2000). More than the polarization of the institutionalized political elite, it is also important to look at political players who are out of the public eye. According to political scientists Layman and Carsey (2002), two professors' who have written extensively on the subject, there is "considerable evidence that the parties' convention delegates and grassroots-level activists have grown more polarized on social welfare, racial, and cultural issues" (p. 786). The significance of looking at the role played by party activists is that "the policy positions of electoral elites and the political perspectives of the mass electorate are shaped heavily by the ideological orientations of the parties' activists" which as previously noted, "have become increasingly polarized among multiple ideological dimensions" (Layman and Carsey 2000: 25). But what about the American public, are they too split by partisan lines?

The drift towards the political poles of the American public is evidenced by a reduction in the number of battleground states and recent Congressional elections that have been characterized as "the least competitive in history," due in part to the lack of moderates or true swing voters in the American public (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006: 75). But to what extent are the voters themselves actually polarized? Some critics would be quick to dismiss polarization as an "illusion stemming from the tendency of the media to treat conflict as more newsworthy than consensus" (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 19). But evidence suggests otherwise. In a recent study looking at trends of self-reported political philosophy, it was found that the "relationship between ideology and party identification has increased dramatically" which in turn "has contributed to higher

levels of party loyalty in presidential and congressional elections” (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006: 175). Meaning that liberals are highly likely to vote Democratic consistently and conservatives are likely to vote Republican consistently. The study went on to find that between 1972 and 2004, the “average difference in ideological self-placements of non-activists Democrats and Republicans more than doubled” (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 20). Accompanied with this partisanship self-assessment, there has been an increasingly partisan trend in the way in which people evaluate presidential incumbents. It has been found that “negative evaluations of a president of the other party have steadily intensified” and that there exists “a widening partisan chasm between Democrats and Republicans” accompanied with an unmistakable increase in those who report at the extreme (strongly disapprove/approve) regarding the president’s performance (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 20). Along with simply drifting towards partisan labels, there is also evidence that suggests that political polarization may in fact be indicative of a cognitive phenomenon as well as a political one.

In an interesting new take on political polarization, political scientists Iyengar, Sood and Lelke (2012) have argued that political polarization is best to be understood in terms of *affect* rather than ideology. They believe that by investigating the way in which “partisans view each other as a disliked out group,” one could better explain polarization on a broader, social level (p. 2). By finding that partisanship is a now stronger social divide than either race or religion, they are able to quantitatively and qualitatively show how Democrats and Republicans are beginning to loathe one another (p. 11). Although they dispute the claim that it is “true ideology” that divides us (most are not clear on what exactly a “liberal” or “conservative” believes), their findings are nonetheless significant to

this thesis in that they offer evidence of the growing political polarization among the American public.

In a final effort to chart the depth of American political polarity, I will now turn to some interesting results found from the General Social Survey (GSS). In 1991, when asked whether or not they believe a woman should be allowed to have an abortion for any reason (an inherently political question), 59.3% respondents who labeled themselves as a “strong liberal” agreed while 44.4% of those whom labeled themselves as a “strong conservative” thought likewise⁸. Interestingly, when the exact question was asked in 2004, 75% of strong liberals agreed while only 28.2% of strong conservatives did. This works out to be a 15.7% increase in “strong liberals” who answer “liberally” and a 16.2% increase in “strong conservative” who answered “conservatively” (according to common definitions of liberal/conservative). Although these numbers are not meant to rigorously “prove” the existence of a polarized America, they are provided to help substantiate this essay’s claim that America is notably more polarized than it was two decades ago; a trend that neither Chomsky/Herman or Zaller could have predicted.

So far this thesis has demonstrated that a partisan press, paired with the fact that people prefer partisan news, has led to political polarization. Figure 1 reflects the arguments so far:

⁸ Actual question reads: “Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she wants it for any reason?” Results based off of 557 and 514 responses respectively, no weights or filters applied. Mnemonic code: ABANY.

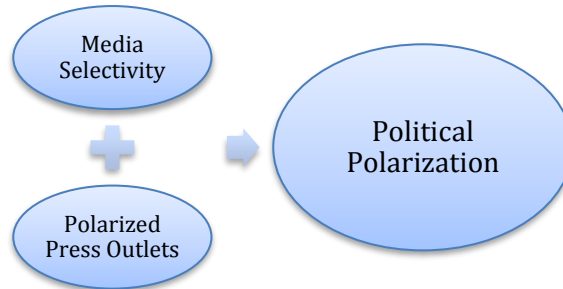


Figure 1, sources of political polarization

Now this essay will evaluate how technology plays a role in mass political polarization. To preface this argument, I will first explain some of the technological developments that have happened between the America of when Zaller and Chomsky constructed their models and the America of today.

Digital America: Technological Developments since 1990

There is no event, or year, that clearly separates ‘contemporary’ America from the America during which Zaller and Chomsky/Herman wrote their books. However there are a couple of unique characteristics that this essay will use to distinguish between the two. The following sections of this thesis will argue and demonstrate that there has been a clear increase in the following since the early 1990s: Internet use, use of the Internet to access news media and the capitalization of online news media. It is clear that the digital media environment in America has changed since 1990, and this section will help translate simple observations into investigative implications.

The following data will provide evidence of the Internet “boom” of the early 1990s and explain it’s consequential effects on the political economy of American mass media. I argue that the digital consumption of news has exasperated both the “echo chamber effect” and the “niche news paradigm” and that the competitive market for online news has adversely affected the content of the news.

In 1995, six years after the original publication of *Manufacturing Consent* and during a time when the Internet was still relatively “new,” there were an estimated 16 million users⁹. By June of 2012, that number had jumped to 2,405 million users. To put that into perspective, the number of Internet users jumped from 0.4% of the world’s population in 1995 to 34.3% in 2012. In conjunction, in the year 1998 (Google’s first year) there were 3,600,000 searches done on Google. By the year 2011, this number had climbed to almost two trillion, a number several thousand times larger than before (Statistics Brain 2012). More than just usage, the content of the Internet has grown exponentially as well. According to the website-management firm Pingdom, in June of 1993, two years after the creation of the first website, there had only been 130 website total. But by 2008, there existed over 260 million websites, an almost incomprehensible increase (Pingdom 2008). Finally, this trend is matched by results from the GSS where in 2000, only 74.7% of all respondents reported using the Internet for activities other than email while in 2004, this number jumped to 94.6%¹⁰. These figures should make it clear that there has been a drastic increase in Internet use since the early 1990s.

Concomitant with this rise of Internet use is the increase of the American public preferring to read their news online. Accompanied with this change is a decrease in readership of traditional print publications. According to a 2012 study done by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, only 23% of people polled reported reading a print newspaper, down from 47% in 2000 (Mitchell and Rosentiel 2012: 1). Although less substantial than the loss suffered by print media, television news consumption among

⁹ According to a report by Miniwatts Marketing group.

¹⁰ Actual question reads: “Other than for e-mail, do you ever use the Internet or World Wide Web?” Percents based off of 1,339 and 723 responses respectively, no weights or filters applied. Mnemonic code: WWWUSE.

those thirty and younger dropped from 49% in 2006 to 34% in 2012 suggesting that even televised news may be beginning to lose its place in the media market (p. 2). Although viewership remains stable among older Americans, the previous data suggests that the landscape of news consumption is changing. In 2004, only 24% of respondents reported getting their news online compared to 39% in June of 2012. Interestingly, the previous number does not include those who use tablets, Smartphones or other non-computer devices to read online news. Accounting for these, the same study finds the percent of people who read news online using *any* medium jumps from 39% to 50%, which seriously rivals the number of those who get their news from television, currently at 55% (p. 9). Looking at the figures for television, radio and print newspapers shows that 71% of people still get their news from at least one of these sources, while only 50% get their news from online platforms (websites, email, Twitter, Facebook, podcasts) (p. 10). But a closer look at this data reveals that the true disparities in the data are age related. Looking at those aged 18-24, 60% report using an online medium for news while only 43% report using traditional platforms. On the other hand, 86% of Americans aged 65 years or older reported using traditional sources of news while only 28% reported using digital platforms (p. 10). Finally, it is important to note that the number of people who *regularly* get their news from television has dropped from just below 80% in 1992 down to 48% in 2012. For those who regularly read a daily newspaper this number has dropped from just below 60% in 1996 down to 38% in 2012 while those who regularly (defined as three or more days a week) got news online jumped from near 1% in 1996 to 46% in 2012 (p. 14).

The above data helps confirm the suspicion that consumption of news media has changed. This data makes it clear that in recent years there has been a drastic increase in

the number of Americans who use digital platforms to access and consume the news. Second, we can expect this trend to continue as the population begins to shift towards the more digital friendly age groups. It is precisely these technological developments that are integral to understanding how to adapt the RAS Model to modern parameters.

Technology, Polarization, and the RAS Model

When most scholars investigate political polarization, they tend to discuss whether it's the fault of the political elite, the corporate media or whether or not it all derives from the American public. Although the study done by Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng (2009) did not speak to the origins of polarized press selectivity, their investigation did lead them to conclude, "observed selective intake may indeed play a large role for increased polarization in the electorate" (p. 445). Separately, a polarized press and partisan-based selectivity both lead to political polarization; together, these circumstances lead to an even more politically divided society.

Or consider a recent *New York Times* (2012) article in which Harvard's Cass Sunstein discusses "biased assimilation," the idea that people process media communications "in a selective fashion." Similar to what Zaller wrote twenty years prior; Sunstein believes that people treat different communications differently. The problem is that "balanced presentations can fuel unbalanced views," when people receive communications that "undermines their initial beliefs, they tend to dismiss it." Surprisingly, Sunstein does not recommend neutral news (people will simply pick and choose which arguments to believe), but rather he argues that the solution can be found among the political elite. If elites were more centrist, the media would adjust their reporting and the ideological centrism would trickle down to American the public.

Ironically, this ability of the elites to shape public opinion simply by adjusting their own “opinions” is exactly what worried Chomsky and Herman. But for Sunstein and Zaller, elite-produced ideology does not present a significant problem.

What this essay argues is that the origins of political polarization can be found in the Internet boom of the 1990s. Most research goes no further than looking at the relationship in figure 1. This essay maintains that it is technology that led to the two factors that yielded political polarization:

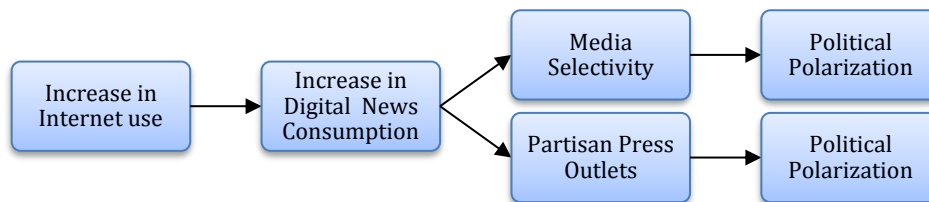


Figure 2, Technology’s effect on the mass media paradigm

Because it is difficult for news-media companies to financially profit in the digital marketplace, news companies have resorted to partisan reporting in hopes to appeal to at least part of the American public. Moreover, because the Internet offers consumers so many choices, people have the ability to only consume news that they find politically agreeable. Finally, because people consume news that reinforces their opinions, they grow more partisan in their beliefs and will be even more devoted to their partisan press outlet, which in turn encourages ideological bias on part of the news companies themselves thus completing the “echo chamber” effect. Reevaluating the RAS Model based on the technological developments of the last two decades allows for a clearer understanding of the nature and origins of political polarization.

It is interesting and perhaps ironic that Zaller solved the riddle of public opinion at the moment it was about to change dramatically. But if Zaller’s model could deduce

political polarization, why did he not consider it significant? For one thing, Zaller could not have known the extent to which people would become selective in their outlet preferences, nor could he have known the magnitude to which the digital realm would grow. But on a more fundamental level Zaller knew the big picture was not about political polarization, it was about elite domination.

A New Dynamic: Understanding Digital News Media

To place political polarization in the context of the new digital media environment, this paper must first describe how exactly this “new” environment differs from the old “traditional” news environment. My argument is that the dynamic costs of advertising and the lack of a revenue generating mechanism have created a difficult market for online news media, one which prioritizes profit over content. The idea of this section and the next is that by applying Chomsky’s model, it can be understood how the new mode of production for digital media produces just as much “manufactured” news as traditional methods. Before discussing how the new media environment figures into Chomsky and Herman’s analysis, it is important to discuss these developments in the context of the “new” America. The changing dynamic of news media is stated in the Pew Research Center’s 2011 *The State of the News Media*:

The old news economic model was fairly simple. Broadcast television depended on advertising. Newspapers on circulation revenue and a few basic advertising categories. Cable was split half from advertising and half from cable subscription fees. Online, most believe there will be many different kinds of revenue. This is because no one revenue source looks large enough and because money is divided among so many players. (Rosentiel and Mitchell 2011)

The current problem facing news media is fundamentally economic. Americans have made the switch to online news consumption yet they are less likely to pay the user fees that have been traditionally associated with news media i.e. paying for cable or for a newspaper

subscription. In that same report it was found that although many different newspapers “have moved to some kind of paid content on their websites” only about 1% of users chose to pay for that content. In fact, the only press outlets that have been successful in charging for their content are those that sell “financial information to elite audiences” such as the *Financial Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. In an environment where news media can no longer profit from user fees, companies must begin to heavily rely on the one alternate source of revenue: advertising.

To understand what role modern advertising plays in digital news media, one must further distinguish between the two primary methods of online advertising. First there are banner ads, where companies pay to have their banners, logos or links displayed on other company’s websites, giving consumers immediate access to the advertiser’s website. The other type of advertising is referred to as ‘search’ advertising where companies pay search engines such as Google or Bing for the rights to certain keywords. When a consumer searches for those purchased words, that company’s website comes up on the search results page. In example, type “news” in Google and the first link may be for the *Wall Street Journal* or CNN. The problem for news media is that they have to pay high prices for their own ‘search’ advertising while relying on diminishing revenues from selling banner ad spots to other companies.

Regarding the high price that press outlets have to pay for their own search advertising, it is best to actually look at the prices themselves. According to a recent article ran in the *New York Times*, it costs roughly \$1.25 cents to “buy” a couple of key words on Google. What this means is that every time someone searches for those words, the purchaser’s website pops up as a search result and if that someone clicks on that website’s

link then that company must pay Google \$1.25 (Dahl 2012). Though \$1.25 may not seem large, it can easily add up to ten thousand dollars a month or more, which “can bleed many a small business dry,” including local news outlets looking to expand digitally (Dahl 2012).

Because reporting news has never been an inherently profitable business, press outlets are forced to rely on selling banner ad space to offset the high costs of adaptation their business model to the digital market. The problem is that banner ads only make up about 23% of the online advertising market, and of that market over half is dominated by five large companies (i.e. Facebook) (Rosentiel and Mitchell 2011, 2012). What this means is that of all those companies who want to advertise online, only 12-13% will even consider advertising through an online press outlet. Unfortunately, “the news industry, late to adapt and culturally more tied to content creation than engineering, finds itself more a follower than a leader shaping its business” (Rosentiel and Mitchell 2011). By relying on Internet “aggregators” (such as Google or Facebook) to bring press outlets their audience, then further relying on software developers (like Apple or Google) to deliver their content to consumers, there is not much profit to be gained from digital news coverage (Rosentiel and Mitchell 2011). Struggling to survive without a sustainable stream of revenue, many worry that these complex difficulties will lead to a general devaluation of the field of journalism as media outlets scramble to recover from their losses by stretching their journalists thinner and offering less original news coverage.

The news media is having a difficult time with the transition from traditional mediums to digital-based consumption. From the corporate level down to local newspapers, press outlets are struggling to reinvent their revenue model as they are continually faced with soaring advertising costs and lack of sustainable income through

established methods. But what exactly are the implications of the described trends above? The significance in defining the “new” America in terms of a new corporate model is that it allows us to reevaluate Chomsky and Herman’s original approach and predictions based on the technological and social developments of the last two decades.

Manufacturing Content: From Staged News to Sensational News

The purpose of this section is to apply the Propaganda Model to the conditions of the digital media environment. I argue that Chomsky/Herman’s model is fully adaptable to the digital news market and can be used to explain how exactly news is manufactured today. In its original form, *Manufacturing Consent* provided countless examples evidencing the clear existence of a manipulated media apparatus that denied the American public balanced, representative news. But to what extent have digital technologies affected the validity of Propaganda Model as applied to the America of today? Has the changing news-media industry fixed the problems that Chomsky and Herman described or has the new business model only exasperated the problems? This section will demonstrate how the five filters can still be used to address modern informational hegemony. Moreover, this section will go on to critique the authors’ original predictions while explaining how the authors’ themselves have updated their previous predictions.

To demonstrate that the Propaganda Model is adaptable to the dimensions of today’s digital world, I will address each filter individually. Recall that their first filter is in regards to the size and elite ownership of the corporate media. Their idea was concentrated ownership of news media by elite corporations would inherently put the owners’ vested interests above content. In their original 1988 analysis, Chomsky and Herman found that 29 companies controlled near half of all media outlets. But in 2012,

Ashley Lutz of the Business Insider found that about six companies now effectively control 90% of the media in America. The six corporations collectively own and operate 70% of cable channels while the remaining 30% is divided among the other 3,762 media companies. It is estimated that around 178 million unique users consume news produced by Time Warner (which owns CNN, TIME, Huffington Post) monthly. Clearly, the elite group of news producers in America has grown even more exclusive since the original writings of Chomsky and Herman.

But how exactly has the development of the Internet itself affected this filter? In an article appropriately titled "Has the Internet Changed the Propaganda Model?" journalist/editor Sheldon Rampton argues that low startup costs for websites has encouraged the development of the type of independent news companies that Chomsky was hopeful for. Rampton (2007) goes on to write, "the price of entry into internet publishing is dramatically lower than the price of entry into traditional media such as newspapers and television." For examples, Rampton explains how successful companies like Wikipedia and Craigslist started off as single-employee ventures. The flaw in Rampton's reasoning is that he treats all web-startups alike. As the Pew Research Center's 2011 and 2012 edition of *The State of the News Media* continually suggested, digital news media is not profitable. The price of attracting customers is higher while there is diminishing marginal returns on selling banner advertisements to third parties. The Internet provides a way for anyone to successfully create and manage a website, but in this digital environment, it is harder than ever to stand out. Engaged citizens can easily create a source for balanced, independent news; but it is unlikely that they will be able to attract much support given that even the largest companies are having a difficult time financing

their digital branches. Or as Chomsky and Herman (2002) put it in their updated introduction, “the Internet is not an instrument of mass communication for those lacking brand names, an already existing large audience, and/or large resources” (p. xvi). Digital technologies have created a difficult dynamic for news-media outlets, big or small. But Chomsky and Herman’s first filter is still applicable considering that six media giants produce close to the entirety of the communications that the American people watch, hear and read on the Internet.

Now consider the model’s second filter, advertising. Originally, the authors argued that because press outlets heavily rely on revenue from advertising, it is the advertisers’, not the consumers, which ultimately decide which outlets will be successful. But how has this filter been changed by the introduction of the Internet and other digital technologies? Rampton (2007) argues that the Internet has partially liberated news media from the constraints of catering to the advertisers’. He writes that although “advertising-heavy websites may attract more revenue than ad-free sites . . . they hardly provide a *quality* advantage.” Once again he goes on to cite the cases of Wikipedia and Craigslist suggesting that these two websites (both free from *paid* advertisements) are proof that companies do not always have to rely on ad-revenue. Unfortunately, Rampton’s arguments simply do not apply to the digital news-media environment of today. Recall the Pew Research Center’s *The State of the News Media*, which clearly outlined how only 1% of people choose to pay for online content (2011) while less than 10% of people choose to buy an app for their news (2012). People are not willing to pay for their news through traditional methods anymore. The future and success of the digital press will be reserved for those outlets “who can target content and advertising to snugly fit the interests of each user” (Rosentiel

and Mitchell 2011). The problem is that “new community media sites are beginning to put as much energy into securing new revenue streams . . . as creating content” and even “larger national online-only news organizations focused more on aggregation than original reporting” than in years prior. Chomsky and Herman share this belief that the Internet has not loosened the advertisers’ grip over press content as well. In response to the new market dynamic presented by digital technologies “large media entrants into the Internet have gravitated to making familiar compromises—more attention to selling goods, cutting back on news, and providing features immediately attractive to audiences and advertisers . . . the boundaries between editorial and advertising departments have weakened further” (Chomsky and Herman 2002: xvi-xvii).

Related to the financial difficulties associated with online advertising is the model’s third filter, information-sourcing. The idea is that the news that people consume is often just reporters repeating what they found out from government officials or public relations departments. When it comes to the relationship between this filter and the Internet, there are two disparate schools of thought. The first of these beliefs is what has loosely been termed “citizen journalism” or “participatory journalism” which is the idea that the Internet has become the new medium for which all citizens can play “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman and Willis 2003: 9). The Internet has provided many different approaches (i.e. blogs) for people to get their voice out there and circumvent more traditional styles of reporting. People argue that this in turn leads to a more diverse informational environment where consumers can truly get their news from the grassroots level and avoid relying on the “official” sources that Chomsky/Herman previously derided.

The opposing school of thought is not quite so optimistic. The idea is that genuine reporting done by professional journalists is fading into history¹¹ because of the difficult market environment for press outlets. Because of “lower pay, more demands for speed, less training, and more volunteer work, there is a general devaluing” of the entire journalist profession. As one commenter pointed out, “some vitally important stories are less likely to be covered . . . It’s very frightening to think of those gaps and all the more insidious because you don’t know what you don’t know” (Rosentiel and Mitchell 2011). News companies, small to large, have to make financial sacrifices to stay afloat in the digital age; unfortunately, there are diminishing resources to go towards critiquing sources, cross-referencing stories or true investigative endeavors.

But which approach is better able to describe the political economy behind the news media today? Although the Internet provides an environment suited for “participatory journalism,” I would argue that it is unlikely that those looking for updates on foreign wars or domestic reforms will fully trust or believe what is written on blogs. People have become increasingly distrustful of what they read on the Internet. Take Wikipedia for example, majority of its articles are written and studiously edited by professionals yet it is still often discredited as an unreliable source. If people do not trust a site like Wikipedia, are they really going trust some no-name website? In regards to the critical approach to contemporary media’s “sourcing,” I am strongly inclined to agree with Chomsky and Herman’s updated take on the impact of digital technologies on the presses reliance on “official” sources. The Internet and the diminishing funds devoted to genuine journalism “have made the media more dependent than ever on the primary definers who both make

¹¹ Though some believe in this idyllic past of journalism, others, such as Chomsky, are reluctant to believe that such a time as this actually ever existed.

the news and subsidize the media by providing accessible and cheap copy” (Chomsky and Herman 2002: xvii). It does not matter that anyone can blog or write an op-ed piece; the public still chooses to get their news from mainstream sources. The problem is that the sources relied upon by mainstream journalists are being chosen from an ever-dwindling number of elites.

The idea of consumers being skeptical of what they read online gives rise to the model’s next filter, flak. Chomsky and Herman’s original argument was that mainstream press outlets avoid covering certain stories to deter possible retaliatory measures from various interest groups or organizations. But to what extent has the Internet affected the validity of this filter? On a more optimistic note, some believe that the Internet has lessened the fear of flak because “lawsuits are difficult to mount and even more difficult to win” in the digital environment (Rampton 2007). Moreover, there is a new degree of anonymity that can be reached on the Internet that allows individuals or grassroots organizations to report the “truth” without the backlash that usually accompanies such reporting.

On the less optimistic side, there is Chomsky and Herman’s (2002) belief that digital technologies have only strengthened the filter of flak as a mechanism of “elite influence” (p. xvii). They argued this point based on the fact that because corporate press has fewer resources to devote to journalism, the media must do their best to not offend those companies and institutions that pay their bills. In 2013, this is still clearly the case. News media is in a financial crisis and must confront a market where advertisers’ are the ones in demand. Because advertisers’ have so many choices and platforms to advertise their

product, it is likely that they would not hesitate to pull their ad-spots from an “offensive” news company.

Another interesting new perspective on flak in the digital age is that of ‘grassroots flak.’ The idea is that because many website offer “user comment” sections where any reader is able to post her or his thoughts, media outlets have to also worry about how *consumers*, as well as advertisers’, will react to their content. Recent research details how negative user comments at the bottom of an online article seriously effects how unbiased consumers react to that news story given that they have read the comments (Brossard and Scheufele 2013). The press must now work to avoid traditional flak as well as flak on lesser levels. Ironically, it was the press outlets themselves who brought on the second type of flak through enabling “user comments.”

The final, and perhaps most interesting, filter to Chomsky and Herman’s Propaganda Model is the argument that mainstream media must adhere to the then-elite ideology of anticommunism. Unsurprisingly, this filter no longer speaks to communism. But the filter was never meant to be limited to anticommunist rhetoric. The filter was meant to encompass the process by which the corporate media must align their communications with the dominant elite ideology, whatever that ideology may be at the time. In 2002, Chomsky and Herman suggested that the filter be changed from “anticommunism” to the “market ideology” where the “triumph of capitalism” is always respected and never questioned (p. xvii). Alternatively, this filter could easily be adapted to fit with the current “anti-terrorist” or “anti-Islam” ideology, or as Rampton (2007) puts it, the “anti-anti-Americanism” ideology. A perfect example of this can be seen in last fall’s CNN 2012 Tea

Party Presidential Debate. When asked about the roots of 9/11, the moderate Republican Ron Paul responded that:

We're under great threat because we occupy so many countries . . . we're there occupying their land, and if we think we can do that without retaliation, we're kidding ourselves . . . what would we do if another country, say China, did to us what we did to all those countries . . . this whole idea that the whole Muslim world is responsible for this and attacking us because we're free and prosperous, that is just not true. (CNN 2011)

Throughout this explanation of the historical roots of 9/11 Ron Paul was booed by the crowd and plainly scolded by his fellow Republican candidates. What he said was not in line with the elite ideology and he was reprimanded accordingly. Conversely,

Pennsylvania's right-wing senator Rick Santorum had this to say about the roots of 9/11: "they (the Jihadists) want to kill us because of who we are and what we stand for. And we stand for American exceptionalism, we stand for freedom and opportunity for everybody around the world and I am not ashamed to do that" (CNN 2011). Unsurprisingly, the audience cheered Santorum as he confirmed the elite, "anti-Islam" doctrine.

Chomsky's predictions: From 1988-2008

With the rise of the Internet, many may be quick to dismiss the Propaganda Model as an antiquated relic of pre-Internet corporate mass media. The above section demonstrated how the Internet has affected the filters in different ways. But the real challenge is not updating Chomsky's model for him, but rather investigating how his own optimistic predictions have changed since the books first publication in 1988. Originally, both Chomsky and Herman were excited that breakthroughs in technology would allow smaller, less-financed groups to begin broadcasting their own news communications. They hoped that because technology was getting both cheaper and more efficient, people who were traditionally shunned from the field of reporting/journalism due to lack of finances could find solace in new technologies and open up their own press outlet; an outlet that

would be free from the five constraints that continually poisoned corporate media. They assumed that by fixing the media at the “top” (by providing alternative news), the people at the “bottom” would react accordingly. They believed that the American people would welcome and support this “alternative” type of news if only given a chance.

But in 2002, roughly a decade after the introduction of the Internet to the American public, the authors’ were compelled to readdress their optimistic predictions made the decade prior. Apart from updating the filters themselves, the authors’ also addressed the overall role that the Internet plays in American society. They wrote that although “the Internet has increased the efficiency and scope of individual and group networking” and has been “a valuable addition to the communications arsenal of dissidents and protesters,” the Internet “has limitations as a critical tool” (p. xv-xvi). By 2002, the authors’ admitted that new technologies had not quite had the liberating effect that they had hoped. Regardless, they still saw great potential in the Internet as a tool for those who choose not to consume mainstream news.

In 1988 the authors’ were optimistic that people would rise to the occasion of new technology, fourteen years later they conceded that “those whose information needs are most acute are not well served by the Internet,” but what about more recently (p. xvi)? To what extent has the Internet further obfuscated Chomsky and Herman’s original predictions twenty years after publication?

In 2008, Chomsky gave a lecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts addressing the Internet’s role in the updated Propaganda Model. During the lecture, he never deviated far from his central argument that the Internet’s effect is not one-dimensional. He admits, “there are serious problems with Internet, but it’s done a lot of great things” (Chomsky

2008). On the one hand, the advantages of the Internet are that it allows worldwide connectivity and promotes the dissemination of information and knowledge. This is the advantage of technology that Chomsky and Herman originally thought would enlighten and empower the uninformed public. But giving the people access to the world's largest bank of knowledge is not without problems. In his lecture, Chomsky described the difficulty:

If you're flooded with massive information and you sort of try to wade through it, you're totally paralyzed. You have to know what to look for, you have to have a framework of understanding . . . if you don't have it, you're just flooded with meaningless information. (Chomsky 2008)

More than the issue of informational-overload, Chomsky argues that the real problem is that when people do use a "framework" to interpret what they read or hear, that framework "comes from indoctrination that they've been subjected too."

One likely reason that people habitually approach the Internet with this problematic framework is because of 'dissident skepticism,' where discourses that deviate from the norm or take a critical approach to mainstream news are labeled as conspiracy theories. Or take for example the prevalence of "flogs" (fake blogs) and fake reviews. Peoples' fears about small, independent media outlets are only exasperated by this new trend of for-profit blogs. Look at the recent case where Wal-Mart employees were the real creators of two supposed "grassroots" blogs that promoted shopping at Wal-Mart while simultaneously deriding the many critics of the company. Because of the inherent anonymity of the Internet, companies and institutions are able to easily create "front groups" to push their products or messages by way of posing as objective, third party bloggers (Rampton 2007).

But more than just diminishing people's trust in what they see online, these fake blogs have went one step further to create their very own market for their services! As "online retailers increasingly depend on reviews as a sales tool, an industry of fibbers and

promoters has sprung up to buy and sell raves for a pittance” wrote David Streitfeld (2011) of the *New York Times*. For an average of five to ten dollars, a company can buy a five-star review from a professional reviewer. Unfortunately, what started out as a small trick to boost ratings has turned into an online “arms race” where every company is buying more and more top reviews in fear of being left behind by the competition. Initially, consumers thought that online reviews would give them an opportunity to have their experiences heard. But now, more and more are beginning to realize that online reviews are just another avenue of profit-motivated deceit.

But how does virtual deception relate to Chomsky’s evaluation of effect of the Internet on the production of media? With mainstream media there has to exist at least some degree of reputability that people can trust. Whereas with small, unknown press outlets, people are likely to label them unreliable or bias despite the actual quality of their content. The Internet is the best avenue for finding real, unbiased news; but very few know how to actually find this news, and even fewer would care to do so. Ironically, this has led to a greater reliance on the “trusted” elite.

Chomsky and Zaller Intersect: Conclusions of Elite Domination

The real congruity between these two models is not that Zaller explains the “bottom” while Chomsky explains the “top” of corporate media, but rather that both models converge in their conclusions. Although Zaller certainly did not set out to explain the production of media, the implications of the RAS Model make it near impossible to ignore the brooding topic of elite control. On the other hand, whereas Chomsky/Herman were

primarily concerned with the nature of the self-censorship of the press, they too could not ignore the broader implications of their findings. Neither book deliberately sets out to evaluate the question of elite domination; yet both authors are compelled to speak to this facet of American politics. Interestingly, they take very different approaches.

In his book's epilogue, Zaller includes a subsection called *The Parable of Purple Land* where he describes a fictitious society meant to mirror America. The parable stresses the population's general lack of interest in politics and their tendency to form their opinions based on "the menu of elite-supported options" (p. 314). Interestingly, Zaller admits that public opinion can be tailored to fit the elite ideology yet he does not necessarily frame this as a problem. To defend his argument, Zaller analyzes American citizens in a fashion strikingly similar to French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. In his book *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes, "since life is too short for such a course and human faculties are too limited, man has to accept as certain a whole heap of facts and opinions which he has neither leisure nor power to examine and verify himself, things which cleverer men than he have discovered and which the crowd accepts" (Tocqueville [1835] 2006: 434). Americans trust the arguments of those more knowledgeable than themselves simply because they lack the time and means to disagree. Regardless of the merit of this theory, it is interesting to see that Zaller agrees with Tocqueville's ideas. Zaller writes, "citizens could still be confident that, the more closely they looked into a subject, the more likely they would be to reach the same conclusions reached by the expert subcommunity sharing their own values" (Zaller 1992: 314). In essence, because Americans tend to be preoccupied and lack the resources to intelligibly critique the powers that be, Zaller believes that elite domination cannot be avoided. Elites provide the framework that people

need to approach today's world of mass-disinformation. The public simply does not care enough about politics to challenge the political hegemony in America. Moreover, the ways in which people consume and process news makes it notably uncomplicated for elite powers to push their agenda via the press.

On the other hand, Chomsky and Herman are very concerned about the near omnipotent power of the American political elite. The obvious consequence of elite domination is that dissent of the elite ideology is ignored. The problem, however rare, is the case when the American public favors the dissenting message over the elite message. For an example, the authors (2002) look to the case of NAFTA, the regional trade agreement that would effectively drive labor wages down. The majority of the American public did not favor NAFTA nor did they want it passed despite that the political elite (both Democrats and Republicans) supported the treaty. Even "liberal" press outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* derided the dissidents by suggesting that the "public was uninformed and didn't recognize it's own true interests" (Chomsky and Herman 2002: xvii). In this case, the public had no avenue of elite representation. Despite that public opinion opposed elite ideology, our "representative" politicians easily passed a bill that the people did not want. But the broader issue here is not about specific policies, but rather that dissent is entirely excluded from the discourse.

On this topic, both Zaller and Chomsky agree: there is no equitable avenue of discussion for dissenting messages. Zaller, who does not frame this issue as a problem, writes that when elites/specialists agree on one particular policy, all journalists will "say roughly the same thing" and the media will frame the policy as a fact rather than something to debate or question (Zaller 1992: 327). Zaller further confirms this idea through his RAS

Model where he finds that “in cases of elite consensus, political awareness leads to increased support for the mainstream policy,” when people are not given an option, they tend to simply support the policy that all the elites support (p. 113). In line with their book’s theme, Chomsky and Herman (2002) argue that mainstream media limits the “debate to the terms defined by the two parties” and excludes “deliberation and expression” of alternate policy initiatives (p. xli). But what about the Internet, to what extent have digital technologies promoted the dissemination of contrarian ideas?

At first glance, I believe that many would assume that the Internet is the much-awaited miracle for dissidents worldwide. But taking a more critical approach, I argue that the Internet has reinforced the American public’s acceptance of mainstream policies. Because of the vast amount of information on the Internet, most people simply are not of the right framework to discern fact from fiction. As Chomsky (2008) puts it, when majority of people access their news online, “they might as well be reading some tabloid.” The Internet has exacerbated this dichotomy of “sound science” versus “junk science,” where every piece published online is accompanied by a counter argument. Every elite-supported initiative is based on “sound science” while all alternative approaches or critiques are based on “junk science” (Chomsky and Herman 2002: xlvii). The problem is not that there are critical retorts, but rather that there are so many arguments that it is impossible to separate the truth from myth. The Internet has created a hypercritical environment where constant argument leads people into a state of apathetical disinterest.

This paper has sought to explain the interesting way in which the Internet, and associated technologies, has affected the political economy of American mass media, from elite production to public consumption. Using Zaller’s RAS Model this thesis has

demonstrated how contemporary political polarization can best be understood as a consequence of digital technologies. Moreover, this paper has shown how the new market forces of the Internet have driven press outlets to the fringes of partisanship while creating a skeptical audience that has no choice but to trust the brand-names of mainstream media.

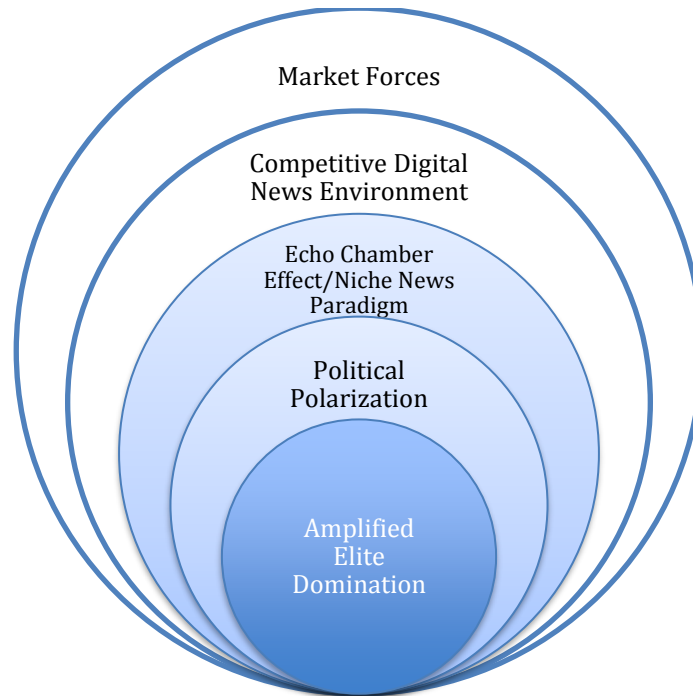


Figure 3, implication diagram of my arguments

Regarding figure 3, it is important to understand that Chomsky/Herman's model was used to explain the role of the outer two rings in figure 3, Zaller's model was used to explain the inner two rings and the juxtaposition of both models was used to suggest the bottom core of the diagram.

Finally, this thesis has disproven Chomsky and Herman's original predictions of technology-as-savior and instead argued that their Propaganda Model still is able to perfectly describe the modern process by which news is manufactured. But what can be

concluded about elite domination? Having reviewed the literature and updated the models, I am inclined to believe that Chomsky's view of the press as the elite's tool, opposed to Zaller's view of the press as merely a buffer, is a more accurate descriptor of America today. The invention of the Internet gave the world a chance to democratize the hegemony of information. Instead the Internet has simply served as the newest platform of capitalistic forces to further enhance the ideological stratification between "right" and "left." As the "Net Critic" Rob Lucas (2012) writes, "it is hardly surprising that the technology of a hyper-flexibilized, insecure, turbulent world offers little security to the purposefully structured, meditative mind" (p. 69). In many ways, this analysis has highlighted the worst of both models; Chomsky was right about the elites while Zaller was right about the people. But what broader conclusions can we draw about the interesting relationship between Chomsky, Zaller, and technology?

Reflections and Further Questions

In a recent publication discussing political scientists' general lack of interest in studying the Internet, professor Henry Farrell (2012) writes, "many social scientists, especially senior ones, still find it difficult to believe that the Internet is a matter for serious scholarly investigation." He goes on to note, "the political science literature on the Internet does not cumulate in a very satisfying way. Hence, it is poorly suited to answering the larger and more interesting questions" (p. 35). When sociologists and psychologists study the effects of the Internet on the social well being of Americans, they study the advantages as well as the disadvantages. They study how heightened connectivity affects sociability, relationships, adaptability, personal efficacy etc. Interestingly, this trend of studying both the benefits and the consequences of the Internet does not hold true for most political

scientists. In political discourse, the Internet tends to be treated as an affordable medium for connectivity, by citing the technology-driven mobilization of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements as evidence of the Internet's role as a political tool for the oppressed, many political scientists simply conclude that the Internet is a good development for grassroots politics. Unfortunately, many political scientists go no further in their approach to understanding the role of digital technologies in the modern world. The goal of this paper has been to highlight and explain some of the under-studied political consequences of America's digital dependence.

High-speed Internet has conditioned people to expect instant gratification. The Internet has pushed parts of American society to the fringes of efficiency: we optimize our routes every time we get in the car, we join websites to meet our statistically best-suited partners, we purchase our merchandise online without ever having to leave the couch. But real politics are slow, boring and unsatisfactory, something that digital-Americans are simply not willing to tolerate. But are there quantifiable or theoretical consequences to a politically shallow, web-surfing population?

To help clarify my arguments, consider the following metaphor between obesity and political polarization. Obesity is a national epidemic that seems to be the theme of most dietary books, articles, shows, programs etc. Interestingly, despite that so many scientists study the subject, no one is yet in a position to definitively declare the driving cause of obesity. Scientists know that diet, exercise, genetics, bacteria and mental-health all correlate with incidences of obesity but they are not quite sure which factor is the *best* at explaining the problem. Despite this, there are two factors that, although maybe not the most important factors, figure into the obesity equation nonetheless: Americans eat a lot

and Americans eat unhealthy food. Many think that if American's simply did not eat so much then the effects that bad foods have on the body would be marginalized. Conversely, others think that if American's only ate healthier food, the quantity consumed would not matter as much. The problem is that Americans tend to eat a lot of bad food so the negative effects of both factors are combined, leading to higher incidences of obesity. With this case in mind, consider my arguments about political polarization. Many academics study the factors that drive political polarization; polarized elites, a polarized population, income-gaps etc. Yet the jury is still out on the real cause that is pushing us to the extremes. This paper has posited two factors that no doubt figure into the equation of polarization: the way in which people consume news is "unhealthy" and the news that is consumed is heavily processed. Just like obesity, I am inclined to believe one factor without the other would not precipitate the polarized state we are now in. Using Zaller's models, I argue that if people simply consumed less news, the quality of that news would matter less because people would not have as many chances to absorb the manufactured messages. Conversely, if the news itself was better, it would not matter how often people surfed headlines because at least they would be constantly exposed to true, unbiased news. But this is not the case, people constantly surf the headlines and stop only at the sensational articles that speak to their partisanship. Because of this, news companies are encouraged to produce more sensational articles in hopes to garner what little attention the American consumer has left. And just like bad foods must increasingly become "tastier" (i.e. Taco Bell's Doritos infused tacos) to remain in the competitive market, so too must news become increasingly contrived to keep its audience¹². But how is the Internet behind this? I argue

¹² Micheal Moss's (2013) book *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* details how food corporations

that both these factors (bad news and bad consumption habits) are directly born from the evolution and dissemination of high-speed Internet-based technologies. But what are the real, broad implications of my findings? I would argue that more than anything; the Internet has provided elites with a new avenue for dividing the American public.

The history of America is the history of two choices. It began as loyalist or patriot, then northern or southern, then frontiersman or easterner, then industry or agriculture, then black or white, welfare or austerity. And now, we are “red” or “blue.” By dividing us by so-called “ideology” elites are only expected to provide two options, a red option and a blue option. Some people may ask for a third option,¹³ however they rarely work hard to find the “Third Way” in American politics. When politics are framed in an arbitrary “us or them” context, the population splits and oligarchs are allowed to dominate by obfuscating any alternative options. Take the case of Barack Obama. By most measures, he is a moderate conservative; he has taken a weak “market-approach” to climate change, quietly advocated for gay-rights, taken a traditionalist stance on Cuba, passed a moderate- if not ineffective- health care “overhaul,” authorized executions without trials of American citizens etc. Despite these and many more examples, the “blues” are happy with Obama because at least he is not a “red.” Liberals do not demand, or even suggest liberal policy initiatives. Instead, they simply support the “blue” policy that Obama suggests.

This paper has sought to explain how the above paradox can continue unquestioned in American politics. The messages we receive, and the process by which we consume those messages, allow for a quasi-state of disinformation to permanently exist in

increasingly rely on the science of taste to sell more products.

¹³ According to the Federal Election Commission’s report of 2012, Jill Stein (the leading third party candidate) received 469,501 votes (0.36% of the popular vote) in the 2012 presidential election.

contemporary politics. But I believe that it was never the original intent of the elite to turn the Internet into the latest Tocquevillian yoke of the American people¹⁴. Instead, I am quite confident that it was the deep, capitalistic forces of America that transformed the Internet from a platform for global solidarity into an invisible chain that politically paralyzes the American public and further forces us into unquestioned, polarized obedience. Alas, as Lucas (2012) concludes his own review of the role of the Internet, “the Web, we might say, is the pre-eminent technological construct of an increasingly sickly neoliberal capitalism” (p. 69).

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¹⁴ In various places Tocqueville describes the repressing effect of religion, politics, habit and family in terms of the “yoke” (Tocqueville [1835] 2006: 299, 429).

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