Media, internet, and politics

Day 4, Session 2

Andy Eggers

Questions and challenges

Questions:

- Do media **shape** our preferences, **reflect** our preferences, **both**?

- Is the rise of internet and social media good for

  - the **functioning** of democracy? (keeping elected officials accountable)

  - the **spread** of democracy? (overcoming repressive regimes)

Challenges:

- Very difficult to distinguish correlation and causation!

- Conflicting theories, conflicting evidence

Evidence of media effects (1): partisanship

Martin and Yurukoglu (2014) demonstrate:

- Americans watch more Fox News (conservative) and MSNBC (liberal) when the network is on a lower channel in their area

- Watching more Fox News (due to channel position) leads to more conservative vote intentions, watching more MSNBC leads to more liberal vote intentions

- This is not due to pre-existing local preferences: no "effect" for satellite news subscribers

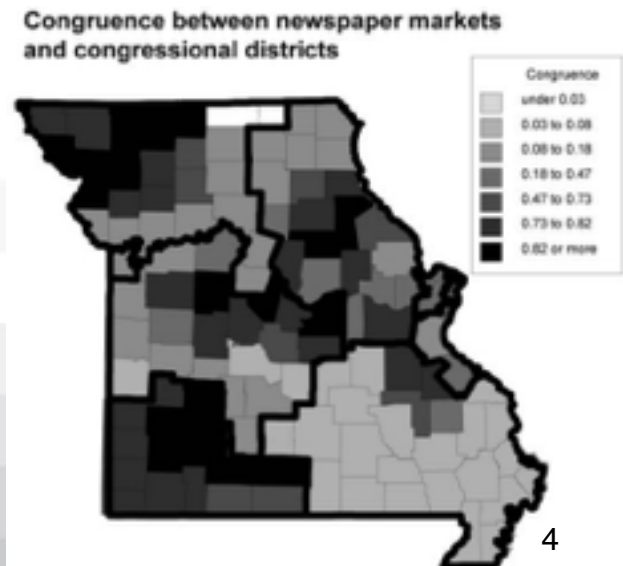Consistent with earlier study (Della Vigna and Kaplan 2007) showing effect of Fox News rollout.
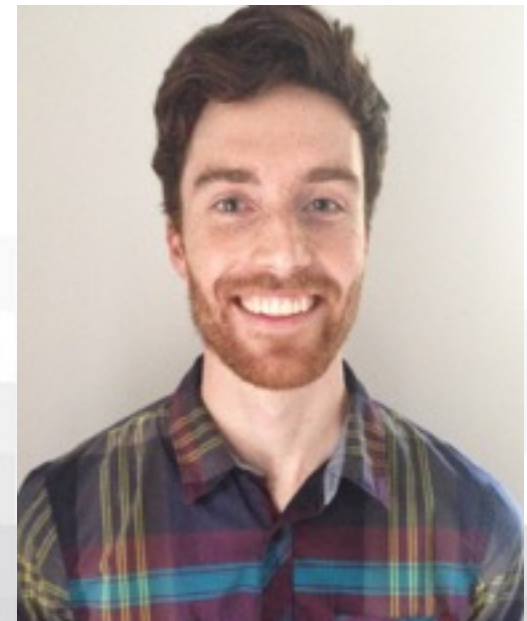
Gregory Martin, Emory University

3

Evidence of media effects (2): accountability

LSE

Politicians should be more responsive to voters who have better information. Consistent with this:

- Besley and Burgess (2002) show that Indian states with higher newspaper circulation have governments that provide better disaster relief

- Stromberg (2004) shows that U.S. counties with higher radio listenership in the 1930s got more New Deal benefits

- Snyder and Stromberg (2010) show that a closer match between U.S. media markets and congressional districts leads to higher citizen knowledge, more effort by representatives, and more federal spending

Congruence between newspaper markets and congressional districts

Congruence
under 0.03
0.03 to 0.08
0.08 to 0.18
0.18 to 0.47
0.47 to 0.73
0.73 to 0.82
0.82 or more

Evidence of media effects (3): distraction?

Hainmueller and Kern (2008): East German citizens who could access West German TV were **more** satisfied with the regime, according to

- anonymous surveys of young people and students conducted for the East German regime

- emigration applications

Figure 1: Signal strength of West German television broadcasts
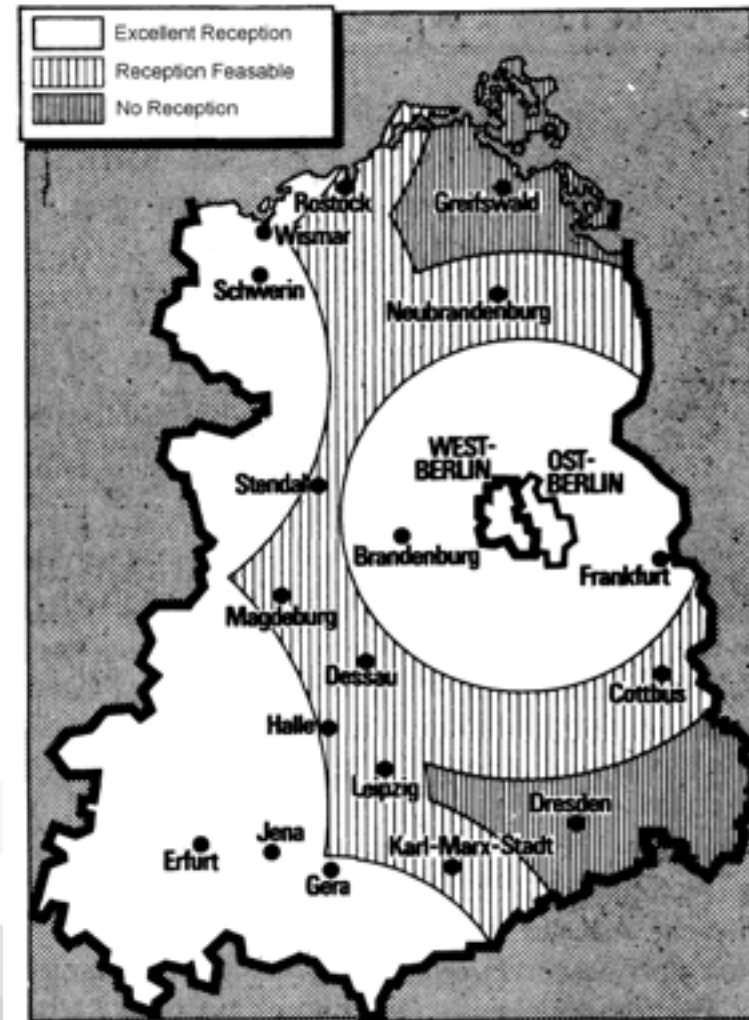
What about the internet?

Briefly consider two questions:

- does the internet polarize opinion?
- does it/will it undermine oppressive regimes?

Internet as "echo chamber"?

Sunstein (2001) critique (cited in Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011):

On the internet, "people restrict themselves to their own points of view — liberals watching and reading mostly or only liberals; moderates, moderates; conservatives, conservatives; Neo-Nazis, Neo-Nazis."

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011): depends on what we compare internet to.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011)

Strategy:

- For various "outlets" (websites, newspapers, television stations, face-to-face interactions), compute **conservative exposure**: percentage of other users who are conservative (vs. liberal)

- Compute average conservative exposure for liberals and conservatives in various outlets (internet, newspapers, face-to-face)

- Compute isolation index for each outlet:

Isolation index	equals	Conservative exposure of conservatives	minus	Conservative exposure of liberals

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2011) (2)

Site	Share of daily visitors	
	Conservative	Liberal
drudgereport.com	.78	.06
foxnews.com	.76	.10
AOL News	.37	.23
usatoday.com	.37	.25
msnbc.com	.34	.26
Yahoo! News	.31	.25
cnn.com	.33	.27
nytimes.com	.30	.45
huffingtonpost.com	.22	.52
BBC News	.16	.57

Proportion of audience that is Conservative and Liberal at

← top 10 websites

top 10 magazines →

	Share of daily readers	
	Conservative	Liberal
Barron's	.43	.19
U.S. News & World Report	.43	.20
BusinessWeek	.42	.21
Forbes	.40	.22
Fortune	.37	.24
TIME	.35	.27
Newsweek	.37	.29
The Economist	.35	.41
The Atlantic	.24	.55
New Yorker	.17	.60

	Conservative exposure of		
	Conservatives	Liberals	Isolation index
Internet	.606	.531	.075
Offline media			
Broadcast news	.677	.660	.018
Cable	.712	.679	.033
Magazines	.587	.540	.047
Local newspapers	.695	.647	.048
National newspapers	.612	.508	.104
Face-to-face interactions			
County	.682	.622	.059
ZIP code	.637	.543	.094
Voluntary associations	.625	.480	.145
Work	.596	.428	.168
Neighborhood	.627	.439	.187
Family	.690	.447	.243
People you trust	.675	.372	.303
Political discussants	.796	.402	.394

Internet as tool of democratization?

Internet as tool of democratization? (2)

Better communication among citizens

- overcomes "preference falsification"; less likely to be in **coordination trap**
- empowers coordinated mass action (amplifying galvanizing events)

Tahrir Square (photo credit: Guardian)

But also:

- easier for state to suppress? co-opt? selectively respond?
- cat videos as opium for the masses?

The Original Grumpy Cat

Real Grumpy Cat

17,226,527

11

Wrapping up/discussion

Evidence:

- broadcast media can affect our political views
- media promote electoral accountability in democracies
- but can also entertain/distract

Do new technologies "take sides" in political conflicts? Will social media accelerate the trend toward democracy worldwide?