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# *How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach*

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The political messages of newspapers are significantly associated with the substantive political attitudes of a national sample of their readers. Diversity of news perspectives and editorial liberalism show significant relationships to readers' support of interest groups, public policies, and politicians. The relationships vary among self-identified liberals, conservatives, and moderates in accordance with the predictions of information-processing theory. The standard assertion in most recent empirical studies is that "media affect what people think *about*, not what they think." The findings here indicate the media make a significant contribution to what people think—to their political preferences and evaluations—precisely by affecting what they think about.

**T**he belief that long dominated the scholarly community is that news messages have "minimal consequences" (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1960). Many media scholars still endorse something close to this view (cf. McGuire, 1985; Gans, n.d.; Neuman, 1986; also M. Robinson and Sheehan, 1983). The more popular recent view is that media influence is significant, but only in shaping the problems the public considers most important—their agendas (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In some respects, agenda research challenges the minimal consequences view, but both approaches share a core assumption. Both assume audiences enjoy substantial autonomy in developing their political preferences.

Research contradicting the notion that media have minimal consequences or only influence agendas has emerged during the 1980s (see, e.g., the pioneering yet disparate work of such authors as Bartels, 1985; Patterson, 1980; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; and Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; cf. Rob-

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inson and Levy, 1986).<sup>1</sup> But this burgeoning research has not yet generated a theory that explicitly refutes the assumption of audience autonomy and explains more fully the media's impact on public opinion. This article probes the theoretical underpinnings of the autonomy assumption and provides empirical evidence that media messages significantly influence what the public thinks by shaping what they think about.

### THE RESEARCH TRADITION

The audience autonomy assumption provides the foundation for the minimal consequences position. The assumption is that audiences form their political opinions in relative independence from the media. There are two somewhat distinct variants of this position. The first emphasizes that audiences think about communications selectively, screening out information they do not like (Klapper, 1960; cf. McGuire, 1985). The second holds that audiences pay so little attention and understand so little that the news cannot influence them (Neuman, 1986; cf. MacKuen, 1984).<sup>2</sup> In practice, both the selectivity hypothesis and the hypothesis of inattention and incomprehension (hereafter just "inattention") hold that media messages tend only to reinforce existing preferences rather than helping to form new attitudes or change old ones. Thus the media have little net impact on politics.

The central assumption of the more recent agenda setting research has been that media do exert significant influence, but only in a narrow sphere. In this view, the public's autonomy is not complete, but its susceptibility to media influence is limited to agendas. Agenda research almost always includes a sentence like this: "Although a 'minimal effects' model most accurately describes the media's ability to change opinions, recent research has shown that the media can play a much larger role in telling us what to think about, if not what to think" (Lau and Erber, 1985, p. 60; almost identical assertions appear throughout the literature, e.g., McCombs and Shaw, 1972; MacKuen, 1984, pp. 372, 386; and even radical critiques such as Parenti, 1985, p. 23; also see MacKuen and Combs, 1981; Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Miller, Erbring, and Goldenberg, 1979).<sup>3</sup> Agenda scholarship does not provide a comprehensive theory that explains why media influence is confined to agendas, but selec-

<sup>1</sup> DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach's "dependency theory" (1982) describes an important theoretical alternative to the autonomy assumption, but that work predates most of the recent surge in empirical evidence.

<sup>2</sup> Neuman (1986, chap. 6) grounds his argument in the lack of evidence that media can teach specific information or enhance political sophistication. The concern in this paper is with political evaluations and preferences, which do not require much information—often a simple emotional response will do (cf. Abelson et al., 1982). A related argument cites the public's inability to recall specific stories. But the influence of a single news story or show is rarely of interest. The primary concern is the effect of repeated news messages over time (cf. Graber, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> But compare Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, and Protess et al., 1987, for agenda setting research showing that media influence of agendas also shapes, respectively, the mass public's criteria of political judgment and public officials' behavior.

tivity and inattention again seem to be key. In the agenda setting view, the media can overcome these barriers in determining the issues people think about but not in shaping how they evaluate issues or candidates (the most explicit discussion is MacKuen, 1984).

The problem with the agenda setting position is that the distinction between "what to think" and "what to think about" is misleading. Nobody, no force, can ever successfully "tell people what to think." Short of sophisticated physical torture ("brainwashing"), no form of communication can compel anything more than feigned obeisance. The way to control attitudes is to provide a partial selection of information for a person to think about, or process. The only way to influence what people think is precisely to shape what they think about. No matter what the message, whether conveyed through media or in person, control over others' thinking can never be complete. Influence can be exerted through selection of information, but conclusions cannot be dictated. If the media (or anyone) can affect what people think about—the information they process—the media can affect their attitudes.

This perspective yields an assumption of interdependence: public opinion grows out of an interaction between media messages and what audiences make of them. I will call this the "interdependence model." The competing positions, the minimal consequences and the agenda perspectives, both endorse the assumption that audiences form preferences autonomously. I will call this the "autonomy model."

#### INFORMATION PROCESSING AND MEDIA IMPACTS

Combining a recognition of the interdependence of audiences and media with information-processing models developed by cognitive psychologists may offer the best foundation for a new understanding (cf. Graber, 1984; Kraus and Perloff, 1985). There is no consensus among those who study information processing. But a number of generalizations pertinent to the mass media's impacts can be gleaned from their work.

Information-processing research shows that people have cognitive structures, called "schemas,"<sup>4</sup> which organize their thinking. A person's system of schemas stores substantive beliefs, attitudes, values, and preferences (cf. Rokeach, 1973) along with rules for linking different ideas. The schemas "direct attention to relevant information, guide its interpretation and evaluation, provide inferences when information is missing or ambiguous, and facilitate its retention" (Fiske and Kinder, 1981, p. 173).

Schemas are not filters used to select out all unfamiliar or uncomfortable information. As Bennett writes, "[I]nformation processing constructs [i.e. schemas] like party identification and ideological categories should not be re-

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have used many other terms, including "scripts," "inferential sets," "frames," and "prototypes." While there are subtle differences among them, they need not concern us here. The term *schema* is as good as any, and for clarity's sake I use the English plural "schemas" instead of the awkward "schemata."

garded as rigid cognitive frameworks that work in fixed ways to screen out unfamiliar information" (Bennett, 1981, p. 91). Certainly people fail to think about much of the news, but not necessarily because they choose only congruent messages, or because they inevitably misunderstand or deliberately ignore media reports. Selectivity and inattention are stressed by the autonomy model, but that model fails to explain why many citizens do think about a great deal of the new information they encounter. Information-processing theory recognizes and helps explain how attitudes emerge from a dynamic interaction of new information with peoples' existing beliefs. In Bennett's (1981, p. 92) words, political thought is "data-driven" by external information and "conceptually-driven" by internal schemas.

Information-processing theory suggests that whether people ignore or pay attention to new information depends more on its salience, on whether it meshes with their interests, than on whether it conflicts with their existing beliefs (Markus and Zajonc, 1985, pp. 162 and *passim*; Kinder and Sears, 1985, pp. 710–12). While people may resist knowledge that challenges their fundamental values (Axelrod, 1973), most can accommodate new information and even hold a set of specific beliefs that may appear dissonant, contradictory, or illogical to an outsider (cf. Lane, 1962).

The explicit model of thinking that cognitive psychologists have been putting together thus contradicts the implicit model in much of media research. Rather than resisting or ignoring most new or dissonant media reports, as the autonomy model assumes, the information-processing view predicts that people are susceptible to significant media effects. In the information-processing perspective, a person first assesses a media report for salience. If salient, the person processes the news according to routines established in the schema system. Processing may lead the person either to store the information or discard it; if stored, the information may stimulate new beliefs or change old beliefs.

So selectivity and inattention are not the whole story. Often people may screen out information that contradicts their current views; but other times they think about disturbing reports they find relevant. The notion of an audience that actively resists all potentially conflicting information rests upon an assumption of a deeply involved and knowledgeable citizenry, a vision that does not apply to most people (e.g., Converse and Markus, 1979; Kinder and Sears, 1985). Common sense suggests it takes more information and time to change the minds of strong adherents than weak ones, but sometimes even loyalists do change. When the implications are not obvious—for example when the information is contained in the form of a subtle slant to the news (see Entman, 1989, chap. 3)—the probability increases that even activists will store conflicting data without experiencing any immediate dissonance.

And while it may take many repetitions of a media message to pierce the public's indubitable haze of neglect and distraction, this very same political indifference may enhance the likelihood that messages which do penetrate

will have an impact. Just because on most matters Americans have so little knowledge and such weakly-anchored beliefs, information provided by the media can significantly shape their attitudes. Not only do the majority of audience members lack detailed, expert knowledge or strong opinions (cf. Fiske, Kinder, and Larter, 1983); sometimes there are no old attitudes to defend. Many of the most significant political contests are played out over emerging issues or leaders; audiences do not have set attitudes toward them. That clears the path for significant media influence.

#### TESTING MEDIA INFLUENCE

Identification as liberal, moderate, or conservative is a key component of the political schema system that much of the public applies to political information. Ideological leanings affect responses to specific media reports; different identifiers may read the same message differently. This is why the media, in common with all other sources of information, cannot dictate public views and why an interdependence model seems appropriate. The interdependence model predicts that media influence varies according to the way each person processes specific news messages. Instead of treating ideology as a tool people use to screen out reports that conflict with their liberalism or conservatism, the model sees ideology as a schema that influences the use people make of media messages in more complicated ways.

The interaction between the attributes of the message and the schemas of the audience shapes the impact of the news. One element of this interdependence is message salience, which may vary among the ideological groups. Stories that interest liberals may bore conservatives; items that intrigue ideologues on either side may not interest moderates, who have few strong beliefs. Another aspect of interdependence involves whether the message is relevant to peripheral or central attitudes. The centrality of a message may vary for different groups, since liberals and conservatives appear to structure their ideas distinctively. Central to liberalism is attachment to ideals of change and equality; central to conservatism is attraction to capitalism (Conover and Feldman, 1981). The two groups probably process some media messages differently. This decidedly does not mean liberals, for example, screen out all material that challenges liberalism. Consider an editorial praising the ideal of capitalist markets and proposing to make the post office a private enterprise. While the message conflicts with liberal ideology, it does so peripherally, since government ownership of public utilities is not fundamental to American liberalism. The message may not only bolster conservatism among conservatives, but weaken liberals' commitment to liberalism, if only at the margin.

Another point of interdependence involves whether the message comes from an editorial, with its overtly persuasive intent, or from a news story that is ostensibly designed merely to inform. Conservatives may be more likely

to screen out editorial than news items that favor the left, since the slant of news may not be obvious. A final aspect of interdependence lies in how new or unfamiliar the reported topic is. All else being equal, the less familiar the object of the news, the less likely a person will respond by fitting the report into an established category and maintaining a set attitude. Where the subject of the news is unfamiliar to all sets of ideological identifiers, all will be susceptible to media influence.

Four hypotheses emerge from this use of information processing theory to develop an interdependence model of media influence. They are not all the hypotheses that merit exploration, but they are the ones that can be tested with the data available, and they should provide support for the superiority of the interdependence over the autonomy model.

*Hypothesis #1:* Editorials affect ideological identifiers more than moderates. Those identifying as liberals or conservatives are likely to find ideologically-charged editorial messages salient. Those with less-focused commitments, the moderates, may not find ideological editorials relevant.

*Hypothesis #2:* Liberal editorials should exert a leftward push on those attitudes of conservatives not central to their ideology.

*Hypothesis #3:* Editorial content has stronger effects on new subjects of news coverage than on long-familiar ones.

*Hypothesis #4:* News affects beliefs among liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike. People will tend to screen out news messages less than editorials. Shaped by objectivity rules, news stories are designed to appear neutral to audiences (e.g., Schudson, 1978; Tuchman, 1978; Molotch and Boden, 1985). The appearance of neutrality may soften the audience's defenses.

#### DATA

The dataset combines a national survey on Americans' political attitudes from 1974 and 1976 with information on the political content of the newspapers read by respondents. The 1974 Michigan Content Analysis Study provides extensive information on the front page news and editorial page content of ninety-two newspapers throughout the country. The total number of news and editorial items employed here is nearly 18,000.<sup>5</sup> The content information (Institute for Social Research, 1978) is matched to data from a representative national survey, the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies poll of 1974. The sample analyzed consists of those who were surveyed and read

<sup>5</sup> The study included ninety-six newspapers, of which four had incomplete data; readers of those four were excluded from the analysis.

one of the ninety-two newspapers included in the Content Analysis Study, a total weighted sample of 1,292 persons.<sup>6</sup> Excluded were those who did not read a paper (approximately 30% of those surveyed) or who read papers for which no data were collected.<sup>7</sup>

The content data were gathered for ten days during October and November, 1974. Even though the data were obtained over a short time period, a check suggests they accurately reflect the typical stands of the papers. For example, among the ninety-two newspapers, the *Washington Post* scores higher in editorial liberalism than the (defunct) *Washington Star*; the *New York Daily News* scores to the right of the *New York Times*, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> In any case, while far from perfect, the dataset is the most comprehensive collection linking media content to peoples' attitudes.

One measure of newspaper content taps *diversity in news stories*, the other *liberalism in editorials*.<sup>9</sup> I expect both aspects of the newspaper's message to encourage opinions to move toward more sympathy with liberal politicians,

<sup>6</sup> The actual number of people interviewed was 1,575. The answers of some members of the sample were counted three times to make a weighted sample of 2,523. This was done in order to ensure adequate representation in the sample of sparsely populated areas of the country. Thus, the weighted sample is the most representative.

<sup>7</sup> The demographics of the final reader subsample closely parallel those of the 1974 national cross section as a whole. The mean education of the entire original sample, including non-readers ( $n = 2,523$ ), is 11.5 years, the mean of the sample analyzed ( $n = 1,292$ ) is 12.2; the mean income, about \$11,000 versus \$12,000. On other demographic and political characteristics, the two groups are virtually identical.

<sup>8</sup> Further enhancing confidence in the validity of the content measures is their use in such important studies as Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Each editorial item was coded for zero, one, or two assertions favoring or opposing liberal and conservative policy stands. The *editorial liberalism index* is a percentage formed by first counting the number of times a paper endorsed a liberal position or opposed a conservative position, then subtracting assertions favoring conservative or derogating liberal stands. The result was divided by twice the number of editorial items, since each item was coded for up to two liberal or conservative assertions. The higher the score, the more liberal the editorial page. This index uses variables 21 and 28 in the *CPS Media Content Analysis Study 1974*.

A second measure employed data on news (variables 27 and 34 in the CPS study). The *news diversity* measure taps a dimension of news slant that audiences are less likely to screen than editorial liberalism. Like most aspects of news slant, it is a subtle trait of reporting that few audience members would notice. The front page news items were coded for mention of zero, one, or two problems. For each problem mention, coders noted whether two different actors overtly disagreed with each other. Each news item was coded as having zero, one, or two instances of two actors asserting different points of view. The diversity index is the number of times two actors expressed different positions divided by twice the number of stories. The higher the score, the more diversity of news. Examples of the actors coded in this variable include Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, Democratic Party, Republican candidates, and business leaders. Thus, a story might concern inflation and unions, and might contain opposing assertions by Gerald Ford and a Democratic Senate candidate on both the causes of inflation and the value of unions. The story would be coded 2 for one disagreement on each of the two problems. If the two actors agreed (or voiced no opinions) on unions but disagreed on inflation, the code would be 1. If they agreed on both or neither agreed nor disagreed, the code would be 0.



groups, and ideas. The basis for predicting that news diversity moves audiences leftward is that the majority of local newspapers appear to promote a generally Republican and conservative perspective (cf. Bagdikian, 1974; Radolf, 1984). Their editorial and perhaps news inclinations do not favor liberalism. All else being equal, I believe those papers with higher diversity probably provide more information that challenges the conservative editorial baseline. In addition, the mere presence of conflicting views in the news may convey an awareness of the diversity of the country, including its variety of races, economic classes, and viewpoints. Such consciousness may promote tolerance of change, and empathy for positions or groups that challenge the status quo.<sup>10</sup> Diversity may also undermine authority by conveying the impression that a range of ideas is plausible, that the existing distribution of power, wealth, and status is not immutable. As for the other content measure, while many readers no doubt skip editorial pages, Bagdikian (1974) shows that the editorial perspective tends to be mirrored in news slant. The editorial liberalism index may indirectly reflect the political tendency of news coverage.

The survey included "feeling thermometer" questions. Interviewers asked respondents to express their feelings toward several well-known groups and politicians. Respondents chose numbers ranging from "0" for the coldest feelings, through "100" for the warmest, with "50" meaning neutral or mixed feelings. I constructed five attitude indexes using factor analysis.<sup>11</sup> The Liberal Feelings Index combined ratings of Edward Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, liberals, Democrats, and unions. The Radical Feelings Index consisted of thermometer ratings of radical students, black militants, civil rights leaders, and policemen. The Poor Feelings Index tapped thermometers of poor people, blacks, and George Wallace. The Republican Feelings Index was created from ratings of Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and Republicans. Finally, the Conservative Feelings Index rated big business, the military, and conservatives.<sup>12</sup>

The Michigan survey also asked respondents for their stands on government guaranteed jobs; dealing with urban unrest by solving the problems of unemployment and poverty; protecting legal rights of those accused of crimes;

<sup>10</sup> A competing hypothesis might be that diversity challenges initial viewpoints, so that it would promote conservatism among liberals and vice versa. That idea is not borne out by the data. Diversity is consistently associated with more liberal views.

<sup>11</sup> Surveys are described in Institute for Social Research, 1979. All feeling thermometers were classified on their face for relevance to the liberal-conservative continuum. Pertinent items received varimax factor analysis. Five factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Indexes added together scores on all feeling thermometer responses loading above .40 on a factor. In two cases, items loaded more than .40 on two factors; these were included on their highest loaded index. All dependent variable attitude indexes used in this paper have Cronbach Alpha reliability scores greater than .80.

<sup>12</sup> Policemen and Wallace loaded negatively on their respective factors. The feeling thermometer responses to each were subtracted from the sum of the other items in forming the indexes.

busing to achieve racial balance; the Equal Rights Amendment; integration of schools; government aid to minorities; and self-placement on the liberal-conservative spectrum.<sup>13</sup> Using factor analysis again, all but one of the responses (to the ERA) were associated together and became the Policy Preferences Index.

Two final variables come from readers of sampled papers who participated in surveys during both 1974 and 1976. Their responses in 1976 provide an opportunity to check for media impacts on feelings toward a previously unknown presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter (Carter Index), and on presidential vote (Vote76).

### FINDINGS

Testing the four predicted media effects requires probing for impacts of editorial liberalism and news diversity on the seven attitudes and on presidential vote. Regression analysis enables us to see whether, with all else equal, readers of more liberal or diverse papers exhibit more liberal attitudes and voting behavior. Editorial liberalism taps the persuasive element of the newspaper, or, in agenda-setting terms, the aspect of the paper that attempts to "tell people what to think." News diversity taps the putatively informational element that only "tells people what to think about." The interdependence model holds that both editorials and news provide information to think about and thereby influence attitudes, whether intentionally or not. If selectivity or inattention precludes media influence, or if the effect is limited to agendas, the regressions should reveal no significant associations between attitudes and newspaper content.<sup>14</sup>

Table 1 summarizes regression results for the impacts of newspaper content on the beliefs of the entire sample of readers. The feeling thermometers are coded from 0 to 100 so that higher scores are warmer (more favorable). The higher the policy preferences score, the more conservative the responses. Vote76 is 1 for Carter, 0 for Ford, so higher scores indicate voting for Carter. The regressions include the following additional variables to control for forces that might also influence attitudes: urban-rural place of residence; age; years of education; family income; race; region; party identification; and ideological self-identification.<sup>15</sup> The impacts of these non-media variables follow expect-

<sup>13</sup> Variables 2265, 2273, 2281, 2288, 2296, 2302, and 2305 in the 1974 NES Codebook.

<sup>14</sup> Although partisanship and ideology are not truly interval variables, the results of the regressions suggest that it is quite reasonable to treat them as such.

<sup>15</sup> These variables are coded as follows. Age: coded in years; non-South: 1 = North or West, 0 = South; income: coded in thousands; party i.d.: 7-point scale, 0 = strong Democrat, 3 = independent, 6 = strong Republican; urbanized: 1 = urban, suburban, 0 = rural; white race: 1 = white, 0 = nonwhite; education: coded in years; policy preferences index: adding six 7-point scales, so range is 6 = most liberal, 42 = most conservative; and ideology identification: 1 = most liberal, 4 = middle of the road or don't know, 7 = most conservative. On the latter, note

tations, which bolsters confidence in the validity of the attitude measures. (For a full display of coefficients for all independent variables, see Entman, 1987). Multicollinearity among the independent variables is not a problem. Of the forty-five intercorrelations, only three exceed .20. The strongest was between education and income ( $r = .357$ ).

Table 1 shows that the more editorially liberal the paper, the more warmly their readers respond on the Liberal Feelings Index. This relationship suggests that editorial liberalism influences the public's evaluations of key leaders and groups associated with the liberal coalition: in this case, Hubert Humphrey, Edward Kennedy, Democrats, unions, and liberals. Editorial liberalism is also significantly associated with less conservative policy stands<sup>16</sup> among its readers, and with warmth toward<sup>17</sup> and voting for Jimmy Carter.<sup>18</sup> (Below I consider the possibility that liberals choose more liberal papers, rather than liberal papers causing more liberal attitudes.) The findings on Carter accord with hypothesis #3 that editorial persuasion about formerly unknown people or other new topics is most likely to influence public opinion where people do not have established attitudes. The relationship of opinions and news diversity is significant in four cases, and consistently in the liberal direction.<sup>19</sup>

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that of the 1,292 readers of sampled newspapers, about 17% said they hadn't thought much about their placement on the liberal-conservative spectrum, 3.5% said they didn't know, and 1.4% were not ascertained. In order to prevent attrition of respondents while still employing a control for ideology, these subjects were recoded as "moderate, middle of the road." The assumption was that, lacking clear ideological self-conceptions, they would respond like moderates to messages from left or right. Regressions that exclude these 279 respondents (not shown), yielded similar results.

<sup>16</sup> I omit ideological identification from the independent variable list because the policy preferences index contains that same variable (V2305). If ideology is left in, the relationship between editorial liberalism and policy preferences just fails to reach significance ( $p = .07$ ).

<sup>17</sup> Among the 1974–1976 panel respondents, thirty no longer read (when surveyed in late 1976) the same paper they read in 1974. Exactly when they switched is not clear from the data, so it cannot be determined which paper had a greater impact on their opinions. Other complexities include the possibility that the new paper's coverage in 1976 was similar to the old paper's in 1974 or 1976, and that the person's attitudes were in fact more influenced by the 1974-era reporting than the messages conveyed in 1976. Because of these complications, I used a simplifying assumption: the regressions include only respondents who did not change residences between 1974 and 1976. Those in the same communities were likely to read the same paper or at least be exposed indirectly (through family, peer groups, and communications of political elites) to the paper's effects. An additional independent variable, an index of rating of economic performance and prospects in 1976 (variables 3137–3140) is included in the Carter regressions because it is likely to affect evaluations and voting for presidential candidates.

<sup>18</sup> Gillespie (1977) endorses the legitimacy of employing linear regression with dichotomous dependent variables, especially when the sample is split about 50–50 as it was for the close 1976 race.

<sup>19</sup> Another series of regressions included the 1,292 readers of sampled papers plus those who denied reading a paper (weighted  $n = 733$ ), the latter given codes of "0" for the two content variables. With all other independent variables the same as in table 1, results closely resemble those reported in the text (see Entman, 1987, for a display of the coefficients). Giving a score of zero

TABLE 1  
REGRESSIONS OF FEELING THERMOMETER AND ATTITUDE INDEXES  
AND PRESIDENTIAL VOTE FOR ENTIRE SAMPLE

Independent Variables	Liberal <i>b</i>	Radical <i>b</i>	Poor <i>b</i>	Repub. <i>b</i>	Conserv. <i>b</i>	Pol. Pref. <i>b</i>	Carter <i>b</i>	Vote76 <i>b</i>
Age	0.1	-0.6****	0.02	0.1	0.5****	0.1****	-0.1*	-0.00
Non-South	22.3****	10.4**	15.3****	-10.9**	-9.7**	-1.9**	-2.1	-0.09*
Income	-2.1****	-3.2****	-0.2	-0.3	1.2***	0.5***	-0.4	-0.01*
Party I.D.	-16.6****	-2.3**	-1.6**	8.4****	2.1***	0.8****	-3.7****	-0.10****
Urbanized	3.2	9.2**	-3.8	-5.8	-2.5	-2.0****	-0.4	-0.04
White Race	37.4****	-74.0****	-45.1	12.3**	-22.0****	6.1****	-5.7	-0.23****
Ideology I.D.	-11.8****	-13.6****	-8.3****	6.9****	15.9****	#	-1.7*	-0.03*
Education	-2.1**	5.8****	0.9	0.5	-2.2****	-0.5****	-1.4****	-0.01*
Editorial Liberalism	2.1**	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.1	-0.2**	1.3****	0.02****
News Diversity	0.1	0.8**	0.3	-1.2****	-0.7**	-0.1**	-0.2	0.00
Rate Economy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-1.5**	0.05****
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.38	0.41	0.23	0.20	0.32	0.36	0.25	0.43
<i>F</i> test sig.	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001
<i>N</i>	1056	1113	1071	1147	1055	813	785	601

Significance of regression coefficient: \*  $\leq .05$ , \*\*  $\leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $\leq .001$ , \*\*\*\*  $\leq .0001$ .

# Deleted (see note 16).

These significant associations suggest that reading different papers makes a difference to the audience's attitudes. The influence probably comes from the gradual impact of repeated exposure to a particular paper with its habitual level of news diversity and editorial liberalism. It is unclear how much of this influence involves altering existing attitudes, and how much forming new ones. In any case, in the real world flux of politics, it is often difficult to distinguish between developing new and changing old attitudes; the one often begets or merges into the other.

Further evidence of significant media impacts emerges from separate analyses of each group of ideological identifiers. Findings, displayed in summary form in table 2, largely accord with expectations.

*Conservatives.* The impacts on conservatives provide the most persuasive evidence against the assumption that selectivity renders media impacts insignificant. For those on the right, editorial liberalism increases warmth toward liberals, the poor, and Jimmy Carter. It also makes conservatives significantly more likely to vote for Carter rather than Ford. While liberal editorials do not move conservatives on dimensions central to their identification, the Republican and Conservative Feelings Indexes, news diversity does. Diverse news also produces warmer feelings toward those all the way on the other side, the radicals.

No doubt, some conservatives screen out all liberal editorials, and others ignore news diversity. Still, these findings show that reading different newspapers does make a difference among citizens who identify as conservative. With all else equal, if you have two persons calling themselves conservative, the one who reads a paper with more liberal editorial pages or diverse news is likely to have less conservative attitudes and show more willingness to vote Democratic. Liberal editorials appear most influential in moving conservatives against their dispositions on matters not crucial to their identities as conservatives. But while the beliefs susceptible to influence may not be central to conservatives' political self-images, they are not trivial: liberal newspapers seemed to make their conservative readers significantly more likely to vote for Jimmy Carter in 1976.

*Liberals.* For those identifying on the left, reading liberal editorials is associated with more favorable feelings toward radicals and with less conservatism on the Policy Preferences Index. News diversity also strengthens liberalism by diminishing esteem of the opposing side—making liberals cooler on the Republican and Conservative Feelings Indexes. Conservatives tend to

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to those who claim not to read a paper seems to me inaccurate, so the text focuses on readers. A zero score implies nonreaders live in a world without newspapers. Yet most people are probably influenced by the paper's messages indirectly, through friends and politicians. Other strategies for handling nonreaders, such as giving them a newspaper content score equal to the weighted average of all papers, seem to me similarly distorting of the real world process.

TABLE 2  
REGRESSIONS OF FEELING THERMOMETERS, POLICY PREFERENCES,  
AND 1976 VOTE FOR LIBERALS, MODERATES, AND CONSERVATIVES SEPARATELY

Newspaper Content	Liberal	Radical	Poor	Repub.	Conserv.	Pol. Prefs.	Carter	Vote'76
1. Liberals ( <i>n</i> = 291)							( <i>n</i> = 188)	( <i>n</i> = 138)
Editorial Liberalism	0.8	3.4**	-1.4	-1.1	0.1	-0.3*	0.3	0.00
News Diversity	0.1	0.7	0.2	-1.2*	-1.5	-0.03	-0.3	0.03*
2. Moderates ( <i>n</i> = 634)							( <i>n</i> = 447)	( <i>n</i> = 237)
Editorial Liberalism	1.0	-0.8	0.6	0.7	0.1	0.1	1.1**	0.01
News Diversity	1.3*	1.0*	0.6*	-1.0**	-0.3	-0.2****	-0.1	-0.00
3. Conservatives ( <i>n</i> = 367)							( <i>n</i> = 248)	( <i>n</i> = 226)
Editorial Liberalism	4.2***	0.1	1.5*	0.9	0.3	-0.1	2.0****	0.03****
News Diversity	-0.6	0.9*	0.4	-1.3**	-0.8*	.1	-0.4	1.5

Significance: \**p* ≤ .05, \*\**p* ≤ .01, \*\*\**p* ≤ .001, \*\*\*\**p* ≤ .0001.

Notes:

1. All other independent variables in the regressions are the same as in table 1, except for ideological identification.
2. Moderates include the responses of "don't know," "haven't thought much about it," and "not ascertained."
3. Numbers of cases for each regression vary slightly due to missing answers to opinion questions.

dislike liberals more than liberals dislike conservatives (cf. Brady and Sniderman, 1985; Conover and Feldman, 1984), so when the media heighten liberals' animosity toward conservatives, significant political consequences may follow. In the absence of media bolstering, for example, liberals may be more likely to stray toward a vote for conservative Republicans.

This finding suggests that reinforcement by the media is both more complicated and more important than previous researchers acknowledge. Further supporting that point, the regressions show that editorial liberalism does *not* boost warmth on the Liberal, Poor, or Carter Feelings Indexes. The reason that liberal editorials do not intensify liberals' feelings on the Liberal and Poor indexes may be that most people calling themselves liberal already share warm emotions toward major symbols like Ted Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and poor people. Liberals agree less and have less firmly established beliefs about radicals or policy issues;<sup>20</sup> thus opinions toward radicals and policy among self-identified liberals may be more open to media influence. As for warmth toward Carter among liberals, he did not define himself in ideological terms and those already on the left did not judge him by ideological standards (as indicated by Conover and Feldman, 1986, p. 148). Even though some aspects of liberalism were reinforced by left-leaning newspapers, liberal readers may not have applied any revived liberal feelings when judging the ideologically-fuzzy Jimmy Carter.<sup>21</sup> These effects of liberal editorials on liberals suggest an important modification to the dominant autonomy model, with its tendency to dismiss media influence as confined merely to reinforcing peoples' existing preferences. In an epoch of loose political loyalties, reinforcement is not as trivial or simple a media effect as the autonomy model implies. More research is needed on the ways the media bolster as well as form or change public opinion.

*Moderates.* As predicted, editorials do not affect moderates much. Among the three groups, moderates may be the most immune to the influence of overt editorial persuasion. The imperviousness comes not from selectivity but from a failure to find editorial information salient. On the other hand, news diversity does have a consistent influence on moderates. The impact on five of the seven attitudes is significant, all in the predicted leftward direction.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The standard deviations of the "Radical Feelings" and "Policy" indexes exhibit more dispersion than the standard deviations of the "Liberal" and "Poor Feelings" measures among liberals.

<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, news diversity is significantly related to liberals' voting for Carter. The explanation might be that news diversity cooled feelings toward Republicans. By heightening some liberals' antagonism toward the opposite side, news diversity might have stimulated a vote against Ford, an archetypal Republican, without increasing warmth toward Carter.

<sup>22</sup> It may seem surprising that moderates' feelings and votes for Carter are not associated with news diversity. It turns out that news diversity fails to affect feelings or votes for him in every

## IMPLICATIONS

All four hypotheses received some support. The data suggest that editorials, openly designed to persuade, have little impact on moderates, who may find them of scant interest. But editorials do appear to influence those who consider themselves liberals or conservatives, who are more attuned to ideological discourse. Most intriguingly, liberal editorial messages seem to influence some conservatives. The data also suggest that attitudes toward unfamiliar matters are more susceptible to media influence than those toward the familiar. The most important evidence is that opinions toward the previously-unknown former Governor Jimmy Carter were apparently affected by editorials, even among conservatives—and among moderates, who were otherwise immune to the impact of editorials. Finally, news diversity appears to influence people in all three ideological groups. Selectivity and inattention seem to operate less on news than on editorials. Lacking strong selectivity tendencies, moderates were the most susceptible to news slant.

Perhaps we should amend the old phrase to read “The media do not control what people prefer; they influence public opinion by providing much of the information people think about and by shaping how they think about it.” Americans exercise their idiosyncratic dispositions as they ponder the news, but the media’s selection of data makes a significant contribution to the outcome of each person’s thinking.<sup>23</sup>

These conclusions need to be placed in a larger context of social scientific research on attitudes. With the exception of voting for president, we have a great deal to learn about how people develop and change their political beliefs and preferences. Social scientists have developed neither a general theory of the forces that shape political thinking, nor a consensus understanding of cognitive psychology itself. Our store of findings is far too primitive to dismiss the specific role of the media. It is premature to conclude “the media do not tell people what to think” when we know so little about the forces that do determine their thoughts. To advance that understanding will require a deeper grasp of the part the media play in each individual’s processing of political information.

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case but one (liberals’ voting, discussed in note 21). The finding may be traceable to Carter’s blurry ideological image. For moderates, who do not think ideologically anyway, messages stimulating more liberal feelings may not have affected evaluations of this nonideological candidate whose campaign emphasized personal themes like honesty and competence.

<sup>23</sup> This point is bolstered by the findings that television news can “prime” the public as it sets their agendas. For example, when the news emphasizes defense issues, those issues become more important to the public’s judgments of a president. See Iyengar and Kinder, 1987.



## ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION: SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

There are two interpretations of the statistically significant impacts of editorial liberalism and news diversity among moderates and conservatives. The one emphasized here is that reading relatively liberal and diverse newspapers helps to loosen attraction to conservatism or engender more sympathy to liberalism. The other interpretation is a variant of the selectivity hypothesis: selective exposure.

This view holds that people choose the newspaper most likely to conform to their existing opinions. To explain the findings described here, this perspective would assume not that newspapers affect attitudes, but that the more liberal-leaning among self-styled conservatives and moderates simply choose the more liberal newspapers available to them. Certainly some of the statistical association is attributable to readers who selectively choose newspapers based on their editorial stands. But selective exposure cannot be the whole story.

For one thing, research raises doubts about the prevalence of selective exposure (cf. Sears and Freedman, 1967; Kinder and Sears, 1985, p. 710; McGuire, 1985, p. 275; cf. Chaffee and Hochheimer, 1985; Lang and Lang, 1985; Roberts and Maccoby, 1985). While those with deep ideological feelings may seek and know how to find congruent media, most Americans are neither consistent ideologically nor sophisticated politically (cf. Neuman, 1985). Most Americans do not screen out information contrary to their ideological leanings, because they just do not have strong enough inclinations (cf. Kinder and Sears, 1985, pp. 666–70). The low level of citizen interest creates conditions conducive to media influence.

The statistical findings themselves contradict a selective exposure explanation. If selective exposure were the dominant explanation, significant relationships would have arisen among all three ideological groups, as, across the board, liberals chose the most liberal paper and conservatives the most conservative. The variation in media impacts, which largely accord with the four predictions generated by information processing theory and the interdependence model, belie the selective exposure interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

In any case, a selective exposure hypothesis cannot explain the significant impacts upon moderates, who refuse to identify themselves with a consistent left or right orientation. Adherents to the selective exposure position might predict that more liberal-leaning moderates would choose the more liberal of the papers available and conservative-leaning moderates, the more conservative. But judging by the results discussed here, moderates have a tough time being selective. The editorials did not influence them much; they probably have neither good information nor much motivation to select a newspa-

<sup>24</sup> See Entman, 1987, for regressions within party groups; the findings are nearly identical and support the conclusions on selectivity in this paper.

per on the basis of editorials. If moderates selected for editorial policy, their attitudes should have been more significantly associated with the editorial liberalism index.

It is possible though perhaps unlikely, that moderates, possessing a self-image of openness to all sides, selected for news diversity, so that reading diverse newspapers has the effect of uniformly moving them leftward. This would be a combination of selective exposure, on nonideological grounds, and media impact, since the diversity does make a difference to their attitudes.

Extending selective exposure to conservatives multiplies the problems. The hypothesis would have to be that hardline conservatives choose papers farther to the right while less dogmatic conservatives choose more liberal papers. Curiously, then, selective exposure would assert that some conservatives deliberately choose to read the more liberal of two papers on ideological grounds. This becomes even more curious when recalling the selective exposure prediction for moderates, which was that some right-leaning moderates choose conservative papers for ideological reasons. Applying the selective exposure hypothesis therefore requires forecasting that moderates often choose a more conservative paper than conservatives. A prediction that moderates are motivated by ideology to act more conservative than conservatives renders the terms virtually meaningless. It seems more reasonable to hypothesize that conservatives will selectively choose a conservative paper. Yet the findings deny that prediction.

Another explanation would be that people do not have a good sense of their actual beliefs when they apply ideological labels to themselves (cf. Conover and Feldman, 1981), so that many persons who identify as conservatives actually have liberal or moderate beliefs. This view would hold that people do experience cognitive tension when their actual beliefs are challenged by the news. So, unconsciously, they seek out the more comfortable outlet even if it clashes with their professed ideologies. There is clearly some validity in this view. But conducting the analyses reported here with another schema, party identification, produces findings similar to those displayed in tables 1 and 2 (cf. Entman, 1987), and party identification might reflect real preferences better than ideology. If people select on the basis of anything, it ought to be their conscious ideological or party identifications. If selective exposure is *perverse*, with a lot of people who think of themselves as conservative actually holding liberal views and choosing more liberal papers, it becomes a problematic basis for a theory of media effects.

Not only the findings, but the sober facts of the marketplace make selective exposure a difficult hypothesis: most readers do not have a clear choice between newspapers offering distinct and obvious ideological approaches in their editorial or news columns. Most local markets in any case only offer one newspaper publisher. Although some people subscribe to out-of-town newspapers, that option has serious drawbacks: the papers probably have little or

no news of readers' own communities (or in many cases, their states), subscriptions are usually costly, and the papers often arrive days late.

The data allow an empirical test of the selective exposure hypothesis. The sample was split into two groups. One included respondents living in newspaper markets that offer ideological diversity, the other respondents living in markets offering ideologically homogeneous papers, or only one paper.<sup>25</sup> If selective exposure explains the relationships between newspaper content and attitudes, those associations should be stronger for the group of respondents who have a significant ideological choice among papers than for the group that does not. If this were to prove true, it would suggest that the relationships shown in tables 1 and 2 may be attributable largely to selective exposure among those who have an ideological choice among papers. Table 3 displays the unstandardized coefficients for regressions run separately for the two groups. The independent variables are the same as for the regression in table 1, except they include only editorial liberalism as the measure of media content, since it is unlikely respondents would engage in selective exposure based on news diversity.<sup>26</sup>

There is no discernable pattern to the findings in table 3, with two significant coefficients for those in diverse markets and three for those in homogeneous markets. The two strongest effects are in the homogeneous markets. In four other cases, although coefficients are larger in diverse markets, they fail to reach statistical significance. If one accepts the insignificant coefficients as meaningful, they could indicate the simultaneous presence of selectivity effects and newspaper influence. Attempts to untangle the reciprocal relationships statistically were not appropriate with these data.<sup>27</sup> On balance, the

<sup>25</sup> "Diverse markets" are those served by two newspapers that are distinctly different in their editorial stands (scoring above the mean difference in editorial liberalism among pairs of papers in the sample). "Similar markets" are those served by two papers that resemble each other editorially (scoring below the sample mean difference in editorial liberalism) or served by a single paper. The sample was not split into groups by whether the respondent's community was served by monopoly or competitively owned papers because other research (Entman, 1985) showed economic market structure does not significantly shape newspaper content. Moreover, this split of the sample yielded two groups that were more similar on demographic and political factors than a division into respondents served by monopoly or competitive papers.

<sup>26</sup> There is also a logical and methodological problem since different respondents could in theory select papers based on both news diversity and editorial liberalism or on either alone, and papers could offer different packages of the two (editorially liberal but without news diversity, conservative but with diverse news, and so forth). Trying to sort all this out would be beyond the scope of this paper and would add little to the basic argument.

<sup>27</sup> The paper does not attempt to construct a system of structural equations employing two-stage least squares regression analysis. This is not because I doubt the relationship between newspaper content and attitudes is reciprocal (cf. Lindblom, 1977, chaps. 15, 16 on the "circularity" of opinion formation), but because, given the data available, I do not believe that technique would further illuminate the interdependencies. Combined with the limited nature of the data, the simplifying assumptions required by two-stage least squares could distort the complex intertwining of forces that produce public opinion.

TABLE 3  
OPINION IMPACTS OF NEWSPAPERS IN IDEOLOGICALLY  
DIVERSE AND IDEOLOGICALLY SIMILAR MARKETS

	Liberal	Radical	Poor	Repub.	Bus.	Pol. Prefs.	Carter	Vote76
1. Ideologically Diverse	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>
Editorial Liberalism	3.6**	1.9	0.77	-2.1*	-0.42	-0.18	0.56	0.01
2. Ideologically Homogeneous								
Editorial Liberalism	3.0**	-0.26	-0.22	0.46	0.19	-0.06	1.7****	0.03****

\* $p \leq .05$

\*\* $p \leq .01$

\*\*\* $p \leq .001$

\*\*\*\* $p \leq .0001$

findings and analysis suggest that while selective exposure may occur to some degree, it is not the primary reason for the attitude-newspaper content relationship.

As this discussion indicates, even if selective exposure has a longer tradition and falls comfortably within the autonomy model, it enjoys neither more inherent logical justification nor more empirical support than the interdependence model. At least as much data and logic support a conclusion that news-

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Some of the problems are statistical. For example, identification could be achieved in only one of the first stage regressions that estimate values for the instrumental variables of newspaper choice and ideology. For the regression estimating the instrument of ideology, identification would necessitate arbitrary exclusion of an exogenous variable. In addition, because all the exogenous variables would be included as explanatory variables in the structural equations, high multicollinearity could become a problem (as it is not with the ordinary least square reported here). Cf. Berry, 1984, pp. 59-60, 69-71.

Equally serious are difficulties with the underlying theoretical structure that would be assumed by applying the technique. The process of attitude formation and change involves a series of interactions over the life cycle among media content and many other cultural and personal forces that socialize, reinforce, and challenge thinking, including generational events, parents, teachers, and peers. Employing the cross-sectional data available here could give a misleading picture of the influence paths. Thus, for example, the causal path from personal belief system to a newspaper's editorial liberalism might indicate substantial selectivity. But the model could not reveal whether the personal beliefs were formed by a set of influences from parents, teachers, and peers who were all swayed themselves by the newspaper. Such problems in unraveling causality suggest the need for longitudinal research that follows individuals from early adolescence onward. For another view of the need to reconceptualize and complicate the research paradigm, cf. Chaffee and Hochheimer, 1985.

paper content shapes audience attitudes as support the idea that audiences select newspapers they agree with. The small minority of attentive Americans with strong ideological identities probably engage in selective exposure. Some of those who are less attentive and committed probably do too, at least on some issues. But many others do not. At a minimum, the selective exposure hypothesis requires considerably more refinement and testing before it is enshrined as the major reason for correlations between media content and public opinion.

#### AUDIENCE AUTONOMY RECONSIDERED

One might take the finding that conservatives, moderates, and liberals process news messages differently as an endorsement of the audience autonomy model. I believe the findings rather suggest that the very way scholars have conceptualized media influence may need revision. Scholars have usually attempted to find evidence that the media are persuaders, deliberate causers of public thinking. It may be more realistic to think of the media as contributing to—but not controlling—the structure of publicly-available information that shapes the way people can and do think politically. This information includes not only concrete data for cognitive processing but symbols that may engage little-understood emotional needs. Such a picture indicates an interdependent media and public, with neither fully controlling the news or its effects. Two points bolster this revised view of media influence: the media's contribution to the orientations that people use in processing information, and the sometimes-hidden and often-unintentional nature of media impacts.

Members of the audience do not autonomously form and maintain the orientations they use to process information. Their partisan and ideological loyalties arise from socialization in a political culture transmitted, reinforced, and constantly altered by parents, teachers, leaders, friends, and colleagues—most of whom use the media (cf. Chaffee, 1982). Further, much of the nation's political dialogue takes place in the press, where the meaning of terms like "liberal" and "conservative" varies over time. Such ideas as a flat income tax, once "far right," entered the mainstream in the 1980s, as ideas like national health insurance departed for the "far left." Audience autonomy would require that people produce and apply their schema systems completely on their own. Leaders also often use the media to stimulate emotional responses with little cognitive content. Recall, e.g., the scenes when the American medical students landed safely in the U.S. after their Grenada ordeal, or when the bodies of the Marines killed in the Beirut barracks bombing arrived home (both in 1983). If the schemas people employ in processing information are themselves influenced by media and other changing cultural forces, if people can be moved by messages that operate at levels other than rational persuasion, determining ultimate control over "what people think" becomes too

complicated for an assumption of audience autonomy to be accurate. The system is one of interdependency and connection, where the notion of autonomy finally does not make much sense.

Beyond this, much of the denial of media impact rests upon autonomy models developed when deliberate persuasion was the concern of researchers (cf. Chaffee and Hochheimer, 1985). The idea that subtle and inadvertent messages are encoded within news stories whose conscious purpose is merely to inform does not fit very well with the autonomy model. For example, the autonomy model neglects the influence the media exert through their exclusion of inferences. Whether readers accept interpretation "A," which news coverage emphasizes, or keep thinking "B" as they did before, by excluding or barely mentioning some information, the coverage may discourage audiences from thinking at all of an entirely different reading, "C." The media's omission of inferences that audiences might draw from political reality may be as important as encouraging deductions. While mass audiences can ignore any conclusion that bothers them and stick to their existing beliefs, it is harder for them to come up with an interpretation on their own, one for which the media do not make relevant information readily available.

The media's inadvertent reinforcement of existing attitudes through omission is far from the trivial effect that many scholars imply. Holding support under adverse new conditions is a crucial goal in politics, not just winning over new supporters. So one way the media wield influence is by omitting or de-emphasizing information, by excluding data about an altered reality that might otherwise disrupt existing support. But again, the media do not often set out deliberately to exercise control via omission or de-emphasis; they tend not to control the influence their coverage exerts.<sup>28</sup>

These impacts should not be exaggerated. Scholars have much to learn about how and why ordinary and elite Americans develop their basic ideological orientations and their specific political attitudes. The forces that move public opinion remain complicated and mysterious, and the media fill in only part of the puzzle. While I make a strong case for taking the media's role seriously, I do not assert the media are the only important source of information or influence.

Still, the public must and indeed should rely in some measure on the mass media. In fact, if most members of the public did have fixed political convictions, they would possess even less autonomy than I argue. Independent action requires responsiveness to the changing conditions portrayed (however imperfectly) in the news, not rigid maintenance of stable beliefs. If people so resisted media influence that they ignored all negative information about a president or policy they liked, if they refused to take any account of altered

<sup>28</sup> On the media's paradoxical ability to exercise power over public opinion and the political process while lacking autonomy, see Entman, 1989.

conditions or new data conveyed by the media, their ability to participate rationally in the democratic process would be severely handicapped.

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