

The Paradox of De Facto Selective Exposure
Without Preferences for Supportive Information

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In this paper the plan is to (A) present the basic hypotheses about selective exposure and review briefly the most recent research evidence on them, (B) consider whether or not this evidence may be trusted, (C) suggest some implications of these outcomes for attitude change and consistency theory, and (D) attempt to reconcile the results of laboratory and field findings on selective exposure.

A. BASIC HYPOTHESES AND RECENT RESEARCH

Four basic propositions have been tested in experimental work on selective exposure. They are these: (1) people seek supportive information; (2) people avoid nonsupportive information; (3) both tendencies occur more frequently with greater cognitive dissonance; and (4) both tendencies occur more frequently when the individual has little confidence in his initial opinion.

Freedman and Sears (1965a) reviewed relevant research published through mid-1965, and concluded that available evidence did not favor any of these four propositions. First let us briefly consider whether or not subsequent research forms a more conclusive picture.

Four studies have tested whether or not people seek supportive information. One by Brock (1965) on smoking and lung cancer indicated they do, as did one of three conducted by Mills (1965a, b) in a market survey situation. The same studies provide evidence on whether or not people avoid nonsupportive information. Mills reports significant avoidance in two experiments (Mills, 1965a) but not in a third (1965b), and Brock (1965) found no evidence for avoidance. So in each case only two of the four relevant studies yielded positive evidence. It might be noted parenthetically that most experiments theoretically designed to test separately

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'seeking' and 'avoiding' tendencies have not successfully done so, due to the absence of an adequate neutral baseline (Rhine, 1967a).

Relative preferences for supportive and nonsupportive information were also tested in three studies by Lowin (1967a, b) and in studies by Lowe and Steiner (1968) and Thayer (1968). In each case no significant preference emerged. In two other studies (Clarke and James, 1967b), the data are potentially relevant to this question (and supportive information appears to have been preferred somewhat) but the necessary significance tests are not given. All in all, the picture seems to remain a mixed one.

Several attempts have been made at manipulating cognitive dissonance. In three studies, Mills attempted to vary the revocability, importance, and difficulty of making a decision (1965a, b). Selectivity increased with greater decision difficulty in one case (1965b), but his other four variations had no effect. Lowe and Steiner (1968) varied the revocability and importance of a decision and found increased importance actually *decreased* selectivity, while revocability had no effect. Rhine (1967b) varied the similarity of candidates' positions in the 1964 campaign to the subjects' perceptions of their positions (though this variation would appear not to be as directly relevant to dissonance arousal, since the subjects' own positions and candidate preferences were not considered). Avoidance of dissonant information increased with greater dissonance, but the seeking of consonant information did not. A surprising finding in this study was that selectivity was actually lower in the Dissonance-Arousal experimental groups than in the No-Dissonance control group. Also, some evidence is produced for a curvilinear relationship between dissonance arousal and selectivity, which Rhine elsewhere (1967a) argues is the more appropriate derivation from dissonance theory. Nevertheless, the data on the effects of dissonance arousal remain essentially ambiguous.

The fourth proposition has received the most attention. It predicts an interaction between confidence in one's initial opinion and selectivity. Highly confident people are supposed to seek nonsupportive information, confident that they can refute it. People with little confidence should avoid nonsupportive information and seek the reassurance conveyed by supportive information. The corollary is that among difficult-to-refute arguments, supportive information should be preferred to nonsupportive information. Among easily refuted arguments, nonsupportive information should be preferred (Lowin, 1967a, b).

The evidence on this fourth notion again is mixed, unfortunately. Canon (1964) and Freedman (1965a) conducted virtually identical studies manipulating confidence; Canon obtained the predicted interaction, but Freedman found no trace of it, though obtaining similar results to Canon's in other respects. Mills (1965a, b) varied the ease of making a choice, and hence presumably the confidence with which it was made. In one case there were no differences, while in the second confidence affected preference for supportive information but not avoidance of nonsupportive information. Lowin (1967a) and Thayer (1968) varied the subject's confidence in his own judgment, but both found that this variation did not affect subsequent selectivity.

The corollary hypothesis, dealing with message refutability or message strength, has met with more success. In one experiment, greater preference for supportive information was obtained under conditions of high com-

municator credibility than under low credibility (Lowin, 1967a). And in a mail survey during the 1964 election campaign, Lowin (1967b) found strong supportive and weak nonsupportive messages preferred to strong nonsupportive and weak supportive messages. In a second mail survey, though, the hypothesis was supported in only one of four comparisons (Lowin, 1967b).

Of the eight relevant studies, therefore, two support the confidence hypothesis, two are mixed, and the remaining four fail to support it. It should be noted, however, that no study has yet obtained the converse; i.e., a *positive* relationship between manipulated confidence and selectivity.

In sum, recent research offers no grounds for modifying the conclusions reached in the earlier review. The evidence does not systematically favor any of the four propositions listed.

B. THE INSENSITIVITY POSSIBILITY

It has been repeatedly noted that people are primarily exposed to supportive information in nature, and that most audiences do in fact overrepresent those who initially agree with the communicator. This state of affairs may be termed 'de facto selectivity.' The problem is to reconcile these observations with the apparent burden of the experimental research reviewed above.

There are two obvious possibilities. First, the experimental work may have been badly done, and simply be insensitive to the true differences that are there. Second, there may in fact be no general preference for supportive information, whether under neutral, high-dissonance, or low-confidence conditions. That is, the experimental work may accurately reflect a true state of no differences. Let us consider these two possibilities in turn. First, what grounds might there be for thinking that the experimental work has overlooked true differences?

1. *Stimulus Situation*

It would be hard to fault the theoretical relevance of stimulus materials that have been used. However, one general problem is insuring that the subject really believes he will be exposed to his choice. Brock (1965) has found greater selectivity with actual exposure choices than with abstract 'interest' ratings. Lowin (1965), on the other hand, obtained approximately the same results from ratings-in-the-abstract and actual requests for information. In previous studies, one or the other procedure has been used, but it is not obvious that one systematically induced more selectivity than the other. Thus the point does not seem to account for the general lack of selectivity in experimental studies. However, it is a useful criticism; exposure choices have often been quite artificial.

2. *Confoundings*

The supportiveness of a particular exposure alternative has often been confounded with other very obvious factors. Perhaps the most common confounding is with practical utility. A given piece of information often is of practical utility when it is supportive, and of little utility when non-supportive. Experiments done in market research settings (cf. Mills, 1965a, b) are particularly prone to this confounding, and may artifactually pro-

duce selectivity. However, it is not clear that selectivity has generally been *blocked* by confoundings.

3. *Self-consciousness*

Most people do not like to think they are unwilling to hear 'the other side of the argument.' Thus to maximize the chance of obtaining selectivity, one should not ask the subject's opinion and then his exposure preference immediately thereafter. The subject is likely to resist claiming too strong a preference for anything bolstering his beliefs. Ideally the two should be measured in separate sessions. This precaution has almost never been taken, however. Lowin (1967b) did, but at the expense of obtaining exposure preferences in mail surveys, thus getting a rather small return. Sears and Freedman (1963) measured opinions privately. The norm has been, however, to take both measures publicly and more or less contiguously—thus probably suppressing some selectivity.

4. *Sampling Distortions*

In the grand tradition of American psychology, the subjects in laboratory exposure experiments have almost invariably been lower division college students drawn from introductory psychology classes. The obvious danger of this selection is that something special may be working against selectivity in this population. And there is good reason to fear such a bias. A major explicit goal of undergraduate education is to train students to view supportive and nonsupportive information alike with a critical but informed eye. It is regarded as cowardice to avoid discrepant information, and as a sign of intellectual maturity the ability to take it in and argue it down. This obviously ought to work against getting selective exposure effects.

However, few researchers have attempted to draw upon other populations, and even these have generally wound up with college-educated and other staunchly middle class groups (Ehrlich *et al.*, 1957; Adams, 1961; Freedman & Sears, 1963). Still, there is some evidence in favor of this interpretation. These latter field studies have been more inclined to report selectivity than have laboratory studies with college student subjects.

As a final note, that old bugaboo of research on dissonance theory, the mystery of the disappearing sample, plagues even research on selective exposure. Brock (1965) found that he had to reject 37 per cent of his subjects, while Lowin (1965), using a mail return technique, lost 76 per cent of his respondents. Normally sample shrinkage is lamented mainly for form; we are so accustomed to using bizarre samples (college sophomores) that the bizarreness of our subsamples hardly seems important, particularly when the selection seems unsystematic across conditions. It may be more important in exposure research, however. Lowin (1965) found strong partisans more selective *and* more likely to return their questionnaires; hence the drop-out rate may determine one's final results.

5. *Conclusion*

In the absence of compelling reasons to the contrary, one would normally conclude that available data provide the best key to some underlying truth. However there might seem to be special reasons in this case for mistrusting available data. Too many of the methodological shortcomings of this re-

search would seem to operate in a single direction: to minimize selective exposure. This might give grounds for feeling that additional research, conducted in a more thorough and careful manner, would present quite a different picture.

This argument, a common one in psychology when intuitively pleasing hypotheses are not supported, raises a more basic question of statistical inference, however. Normally we assume that probability values are based on what would probably happen if a given experiment were replicated many times; i.e., what would happen in the long run. Yet what in fact do we assume if a series of studies obtain no differences, and finally one does support the hypothesis? The norm seems to be to reject the prior series as having been poorly conducted, with inadequate manipulations, impotent designs, poor sampling, etc. This occurs whether the prior series were 'pilots' of our own or others' finished products. The final study is accepted as finally having proven the point, and the others are rejected as not having been fair tests.

Obviously, though, there must come a point when one starts to take negative results seriously. The question comes down to how many well-conducted studies obtaining positive results will be required to balance the numerous less well-conducted studies already completed and obtaining negative results (and journal editors' not unreasonable biases against negative results must be considered in the balancing).

C. IMPLICATIONS: THE TRUE NULL HYPOTHESIS POSSIBILITY

The second general possibility is that in fact little or no preference for supportive information exists, whether under neutral, high-dissonance, or low-confidence conditions. If this were true, what implications would it have for the three most relevant research areas: attitude change, motivation, and mass communications?

1. *Defending Commitments*

In the context of consistency theory, selective exposure is thought of as one of the many ways in which people protect themselves from disagreeable information. It has an especially prominent place in this list of mechanisms because it is clearly the most primitive and least adaptive. Rebellious children place their hands over their ears and flout their angry parents, claiming they can hear not a word of scolding. News photographs of the aftermath of a disaster often portray the relatives of dead persons holding their hands over their eyes as if the tragedy would not be real if unseen. In hysteria the sense organ responsible for offensive stimulation is symptomatically closed off, as in hysterical blindness or anesthesia. These are cases in which persons use extraordinarily primitive defenses.

There are other defenses that block veridical reception of information. The most commonly noted are selective perception, selective learning, and selective retention. It is interesting that the same empirical problems arise with these mechanisms as with selective exposure. For example, there is currently some doubt that the early selective learning findings are replicable. In six recent experiments, Waly and Cook (1966) and Greenwald and Sakumura (1967) failed to find any tendency for subjects to learn sup-

portive arguments more easily than nonsupportive arguments. And it has not been difficult at all to find conditions under which nonsupportive material is learned more readily than supportive material. Jones and Aneshansel (1956) found this to occur when subjects expected to be required to produce counterarguments or debate an opponent. Later, Canon (1964) and Freedman (1965c) found exposure to dissonant arguments preferred when the subject expected to be required to counter an unknown set of dissonant arguments. Similarly, Jones and Kohler (1958) anticipated Lowin's (1967a, b) exposure findings by showing that implausible discrepant arguments were learned more readily than implausible supportive arguments (though Waly and Cook, 1966, have failed to replicate this finding).

Efforts to demonstrate that perceptual distortions operate in the service of affective preferences have also met with relatively little success throughout psychology. Methodological artifacts have been difficult to surmount (cf. Solomon & Howes, 1951). In communications research, distortion effects have been obtained, and often in the predicted direction. However, they usually have been of discouragingly minor magnitude (Hovland, Harvey, & Sherif, 1957; Manis, 1961a), and have not been responsive to such straightforward variations as the discrepancy (Harvey, Kelley, & Shapiro, 1957) or ambiguity (Manis, 1961b) of the informational input.

So the empirical data on all these 'avoidance' defenses appear to share a common set of problems: counterexamples are easily found, methodological problems abound, and the magnitude of effect often seems minor. This might lead to a tentative conclusion that the 'avoidance' defenses are relatively unpopular mechanisms for defending beliefs and behavioral commitments. Presumably they are commonly used to defend the organism against severe forms of psychological stress, such as the threat of death, bodily violation, or the loss of a love object (Janis, 1958; Greenstein, 1965). The indicated empirical question has not been posed: When will threat produce the avoidance of veridical information processing, and when will it induce mechanisms involving cognitive or affective change? That is, what distinguishes between the conditions for selective learning, perception, and exposure, and the conditions for opinion change, source derogation, etc?

If the tentative conclusion is accepted, that in everyday life people do not generally utilize information-avoidance techniques as a way of softening the impact of unpleasant information, then two additional directions for further research are indicated. One is added attention to the dynamics of influence resistance. If people resist influence by confronting information and rejecting it, the important questions have to do with the process by which that happens.

Brock and Balloun's (1967) ingenious experiments on attention to persuasive communications seem to represent a productive approach in this respect. Another is increased attention to nondefensive information seeking. Research on exposure has been excessively sterile because of a preoccupation with selectivity in the service of partisan preferences. Thus little is known about what actually contributes to information seeking. The major exposure problem faced by public affairs communicators is not in reaching their enemies, but in reaching anyone at all. Low absolute rates of exposure, rather than widespread selectivity, are the primary obstacles to influence. And little is known about the determinants of variations in absolute rates of exposure.

2. Homeostatic Hedonism

In common with numerous other psychological theories, the consistency theories seem to rest on an assumption that tension-reduction or minimization of stimulation is a major aim of the human organism. Thus the organism is supposed to avoid stimulating or tension-inducing kinds of information, and seek information that reduces tension. In studies on exposure this simple-minded view clearly does not hold; there seem to be just as many instances in which the stimulation-increasing information is preferred.

It may well be that the wrong question is being asked. Implicitly the question of a general preference for supportive information pits man's defensiveness against his curiosity. Which one has won out in his nature is of little interest, because both are obviously strong (see Chapter 16). This conclusion seems likely not to be altered no matter how many subsequent studies are done. The more important question is what determines which tendency will be dominant under any given set of conditions. Similarly, to ask whether or not the organism will respond defensively when threatened, as has been done in varying dissonance arousal, simply misses the point. It would be astonishing if the organism did not respond to threat. The challenge is to try to predict what *kind* of defense will be stimulated.

One qualification should be imposed on this general criticism, however. There may be some cultural value in knowing what specific kinds of choices people generally make, just as it is of some interest to know whether Americans prefer Bonanza to Shakespeare. It tells us something about our culture. This may be especially relevant for our thinking about a democratic political system, since we are accustomed to assuming that the voter prepares to exercise his franchise by informing himself about each alternative.

3. De Facto Selectivity

In nature, the pattern appears to be, in general, one of people being exposed primarily to positions with which they already agree. The usual explanation is that people actively seek supportive information and avoid nonsupportive information. If this hypothesis is rejected as inconsistent with experimental data, what explanations for de facto selectivity remain?

a. De facto selectivity doesn't exist either. One possibility is that de facto selectivity has also been oversold as a general characteristic of communication situations. Sears and Freedman (1967) have critically examined some of the most widely cited data on this point, and indeed it turns out not to be as overwhelming an effect as often suggested. The effect often occurs for one set of partisans but not the other, to be based upon rather small differences, or to be explicable by invoking other variables known to be strongly correlated with exposure (e.g., education). Nevertheless, it appears that de facto selectivity occurs often enough that it deserves additional attention (see Chapter 79).

b. Public economic control. A more sophisticated version of the original selective exposure hypothesis might hold that people use their economic power, whether consciously or unconsciously, to reward their friends and punish their enemies. For example, a community may impose its political beliefs on its newspapers by failing to subscribe to or patronize the advertisers of deviationist newspapers. The trouble with this idea is that it takes too simple-minded a view of the economics of mass communica-

tion. The 'loser' in economic competition usually merges with a paper of virtually identical editorial policy. What is eliminated most easily is redundancy rather than diversity. In any event this hypothesis depends upon the psychological hypothesis we have rejected, so no more need be said about it here.

c. Sycophantic communicators. A related idea, ingeniously tested by Zimmerman and Bauer (1956), is that communicators choose only to tell their audiences what the audience wishes to hear. No doubt this principle accounts for the variations in communications addressed by a given communicator to several audiences. The trouble is that such variations are too small to account for de facto selectivity. The President may emphasize one aspect of a policy before one audience and another before a second, but he supports the same policy alternative in both cases. Billy Graham does not suddenly turn agnostic when he addresses a sophisticated college student audience. Fluctuations from audience to audience are simply not gross enough to account for de facto selectivity. So this explanation is inadequate.

d. Asymmetric availabilities. Perhaps people are always selecting information from a skewed set of alternatives. That is, the typical informative choice may be from a set of many supportive and a few nonsupportive communications. Even random sampling from such a skewed set of alternatives would produce de facto selectivity. Why might supportive generally be much more readily available than nonsupportive information? Two reasons seem especially salient.

The first reason involves the *ubiquity of consensus*. As Hennessey has pointed out, "... most people agree with most other people about most things" (1965, p. 154). This in itself makes it more difficult to find nonsupportive than supportive communications. This general consensus holds in a broad sense for mankind in general on a great many issues; e.g., regarding the assertion that the world is round. On more controversial issues, consensus is no less impressive, though it tends to be limited to our immediate social and informational environment. It would be much harder for most of us to find pro-Soviet information, or information on the opposite side of the race issue from our own, than supportive views on these issues. Each of us lives in what is largely a supportive environment, even on the most divisive and controversial of issues. Hence we are rarely given a 'fair chance' to select nonsupportive information.

The main reason for this is that we get most of our opinions from our immediate environments. Hence they are bound to reflect the biases of our environments (Greenwald & Sakumura, 1967; Zajonc, 1965). A person growing up in Alabama is likely to form a favorable opinion of Governor Wallace, while the same person, if raised in Massachusetts, would be likely not to. Since the environment was biased in favor of one position prior to opinion formation, the best guess is that it will be biased in the same way afterwards. And the information alternatives from which the individual samples should be skewed in the same way, producing almost by necessity greater availability of supportive than nonsupportive alternatives.

Diabolical manipulators also maximize de facto selectivity. Some especially powerful communicators can deliberately structure the individual's information alternatives such that his opportunity to choose nonsupportive information is slight indeed. Examples of this kind come to mind easily. The most extreme are totalitarian regimes: the Mainland Chinese regime

has severely restricted deviationist literature throughout its period in office; the Roman Catholic Church has made various sporadic efforts over the years to prevent its parishioners from coming into contact with non-Catholic or anti-Catholic ideas (cf. the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*); even the not altogether totalitarian United States government often restricts public exposure to embarrassing information.

People with considerably less power over communication channels also may effect some restrictions. Conservative merchants attempt to place their newspaper advertising in the place that will both do the most for sales and strengthen the hand of conservative communicators; liberally oriented intellectuals tend to restrict the exposure of college students to nonliberal ideas, and so forth. Apparently much more benign censors are the timid parents who prevent sadistic, cynical, or erotic literature from falling into the hands of small children. Small children in America therefore are rather naive (Easton & Dennis, 1965) about the realities of social existence, given this continuing diet of supportive information. Each of these examples, then, represents a group of communicators who are able to control the exposure alternatives of particular individuals, specifically restricting them to a choice among numerous supportive alternatives mixed with only occasional nonsupportive possibilities.

e. Confounding supportiveness with other attractions. Many information alternatives are overchosen because of attractive features which are irrelevant to, but systematically associated with, their supportiveness. These other attractions are of course many; the following are a few examples of the more important ones.

First, the *perceived truth value* of supportive communications is greater than that of nonsupportive material. Presumably one of the major reasons why people seek information is to find out what is true. The more likely a communication is to indicate the truth, the more attractive it should be. On controversial issues there are two ideal guides. One is a source who is invariably on the side of the good, and the other is a source who invariably chooses the more iniquitous alternative. For example, John F. Kennedy and Robert Welch served these two functions for Democratic subjects in 1963 (Sears, 1965a). If both kinds of sources were equally common, then supportive and nonsupportive communicators would be equally valuable as guides to truth.

As it happens, however, there seem to be more positive guides than negative guides. Numerous Democratic politicians were regarded by Democratic subjects in 1963 as reliable indicators of the correct side of issues, whereas only an occasional Republican politician was regarded as an equally infallible guide to the *incorrect* side. The bulk of Republican leaders (and the Republican Party as a whole) were regarded as sometimes right and sometimes wrong, and therefore as uninformative about the correct side of an issue in most specific instances (Sears, 1965b). Many supportive communicators (Democrats) were useful guides, but only a few nonsupportive communicators (Republicans) were useful. And as a general rule, therefore, the individual who is seeking truth or a correct position is better off sampling sources of information who are generally supportive than sampling sources who are generally nonsupportive.

Another obvious feature is *practical utility*. A mother offered a choice between a speech on how environment affects children's personalities (a

position with which she agrees) and one arguing the importance of heredity (with which she disagrees) will certainly choose the former (Adams, 1961). Why? Because information about the environment's impact may be of some practical help to her. Similarly, a choice between information about a product one owns and a product one does not own surely will result in preference for the former (Mills, 1965a, b). The more one knows about a new possession the better, from a practical standpoint. This apparently holds even before the choice: one wants to read about a product one soon will choose, and thus possess, more than about a product one soon will reject, and thus not possess (Mills, 1965c). And when expecting to debate, discuss one's views with others, or transmit one's views to others, supportive information is likely to be sought more than when expecting to read privately about the issue or receive someone else's views (Clarke & James, 1967; Brock & Fromkin, in press). The reason is that one wants to gather information that will help in the task of the moment, not that one needs to shore up a shaky position. These are likely not to be isolated exceptions; rather, examples of a general correlation in nature between utility and supportiveness.

The ways in which propagandistic appeals are distributed in society cause people with certain general kinds of *taste* to be exposed to certain kinds of political views, willy-nilly. An ex-Texan who listens to hillbilly music in Los Angeles is likely to be exposed to right-wing propaganda; the college professor who listens to classical music on FM is going to hear more liberal appeals. Upper middle-class business and professional people subscribe to the New York *Times* rather than the *Daily News*, or the Los Angeles *Times* rather than the *Herald-Examiner*, for obvious social and informational reasons. However, it is doubtful that these decisions rest much on editorial policy. Rather, they rest on long-term habits of taste and preference, normally irrelevant to (but empirically correlated with) political and social opinions.

Finally, the *practical details of self-exposure* are usually less complicated for supportive information. One is more likely to be informed of supportive mass meetings, transportation and companionship are usually easier to arrange, and so on. Just in the normal course of the day's events, without departing from the normal routine, it is easier to be advised of when supportive meetings or TV programs are available, where meetings are, and so on.

Numerous other variables could be mentioned. These seem to be among the most important reasons, however, why supportive information is particularly attractive, quite aside from its ability to reassure or bolster beliefs.

D. CONCLUSIONS

1. There is considerable evidence indicating that in nature, exposure is generally somewhat greater to supportive than to nonsupportive information.
2. There is no empirical evidence indicating a general preference for supportive information over nonsupportive information, regardless of whether the test is conducted under neutral, high-dissonance, or low-confidence conditions.

3. Attempts to explain the ineffectiveness of mass communications in field settings should concentrate upon low absolute rates of exposure and upon resistance to communications the individual processes more or less accurately, and deemphasizes barriers to accurate reception based upon active avoidance of disagreeable information.

4. The most probable explanations for de facto selectivity have to do with the unusual availability of supportive information, and with the likelihood that supportiveness is, in nature, correlated with other attractive features of information; e.g., truthfulness, usefulness, and so on.