SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO MISINFORMATION: EVIDENCE FROM THE CONSUMPTION OF FAKE NEWS DURING THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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Though some warnings about online “echo chambers” have been hyperbolic, tendencies toward selective exposure to politically congenial content are likely to extend to misinformation and to be exacerbated by social media platforms. We test this prediction using data on the factually dubious articles known as “fake news.” Using unique data combining survey responses with individual-level web traffic histories, we estimate that approximately 1 in 4 Americans visited a fake news website from October 7-November 14, 2016. Trump supporters visited the most fake news websites, which were overwhelmingly pro-Trump. However, fake news consumption was heavily concentrated among a small group—almost 6 in 10 visits to fake news websites came from the 10% of people with the most conservative online information diets. We also find that Facebook was a key vector of exposure to fake news and that fact-checks of fake news almost never reached its consumers.

About Brendan Nyhan

Brendan Nyhan is Professor of Public Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy of the University of Michigan. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at Duke University. Before joining the faculty at Michigan, he was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholar in Health Policy Research there and a faculty member in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College. His research primarily focuses on misperceptions about politics and health care. He is a contributor to The Upshot blog at The New York Times and a co-founder of Bright Line Watch, a watchdog group that monitors the status of American democracy. Previously, he was co-editor of Spinsanity, a non-partisan watchdog of political spin that was syndicated in Salon and the Philadelphia Inquirer; co-author of All the President’s Spin, a New York Times bestseller that Amazon.com named one of the ten best political books of 2004; and a media critic for Columbia Journalism Review.