The Internet, Authoritarianism, and Political Intolerance

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Abstract

The present study examines to what extent the link between authoritarian dispositions and political intolerance is conditioned by selective exposure to the rising tide of easy to access, ideologically slanted news and views available on the Internet. Contrary to much extant research, I find that individuals with an authoritarian disposition who consume news about non-conformist groups become more politically intolerant, even in the absence of a prior situational threat. When a unique situational threat is present authoritarians cope with this anxiety by increasing their consumption of non-political news and, consequently, dilute the effects of political messages. By contrast, non-authoritarians who react to a situational threat with intolerance can be reassured when they elect to consume pro-tolerance viewpoints.
A growing number of Americans consume news and political commentary online. The Internet provides many new opportunities to selectively consume messages that reinforce our existing predispositions as well as many non-political news options. Scholars have raised concerns about the potential effects of such selective exposure on political attitudes (e.g., Sunstein, 2007). Seeking out and consuming congenial viewpoints is problematic when it promotes biased judgement, hyper-partisanship, and reduces the legitimacy of holding an alternative viewpoint.

While selective exposure may be common, it is not ubiquitous (see Prior, 2013 for a review). Information seeking behavior stems from a variety of motivations that are not equally distributed in society, including partisanship, political interest, anxiety, or the desire to gratify less visible psychological needs. Recently, scholars have examined the dispositional concept of authoritarianism in promoting selective exposure (Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber, 2002; Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). Given that authoritarianism is often associated with closed-mindedness, it is not surprising that authoritarians would avoid messages that challenge their convictions (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). To the extent that authoritarians seek out and react strongly to messages of threat, the consequences of selective exposure may include growing political intolerance.

Nonetheless, it remains unclear if or when authoritarian traits must be primed before they can shape information exposure and message processing. For instance, the original psychoanalytic formulation (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), as well as Altemeyer’s right-wing authoritarianism (1981, 1988), posits that authoritarianism is a
chronically accessible feature of personality and, hence, differences between authoritarians and non-authoritarians should be evident across contexts. Recent work by Hetherington and Suhay (2011; see also Hetherington & Weiler, 2009) also suggests that authoritarians are more intolerant than non-authoritarians in “normal” times. By contrast, Stenner (2005) argues that those who possess an authoritarian predisposition become intolerant only when faced with a threat to the normative order. In the absence of such a situational threat, the authoritarian disposition lies dormant. Research on public reactions to terrorism (e.g., Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009) also points to how episodic threats can give rise to authoritarian reactions.

The aim of the present study is to examine how selective exposure to online information conditions the relationship of authoritarianism to political intolerance. I argue that individuals with an authoritarian predisposition who consume messages about the risks of a disliked out-group have the opportunity to become chronically politically intolerant, even in the absence of a prior situational threat. When a unique situational threat is present – such as a terror attack or other event that prompts consideration of one’s own mortality – authoritarians will cope with this anxiety by avoiding non-congenial information (i.e., civil libertarian views), as well as by increasing their consumption of non-political news. Importantly, to the extent they avoid political information altogether, authoritarians will be less likely to exhibit attitude change than non-authoritarians.

In the next section, I further develop my theoretical expectations by examining recent research on the authoritarian dynamic as well as scholarship in the field of political communications. I then test these claims with data from the first experimental study to combine the least-liked approach to measuring intolerance (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982) with a between-subjects, selective exposure design (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011) that allows for
comparisons between situationally threatened and unthreatened authoritarians. I also report the
results of a second study that replicates my initial findings using a less restrictive selective
exposure design and a third study that used a non-student sample.

Models of the Authoritarian Dynamic

Scholarly conceptions of authoritarianism – as a property of the individual rather than a
feature of social groups – have evolved significantly over time. Early theorizing conceived of
authoritarianism as a trait resulting from childhood experiences, largely understood within a
psychoanalytic framework (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Later work
drew on a social learning perspective, defining authoritarianism as a worldview acquired through
varied socialization experiences, rather than a deeply rooted psychological trait (Altemeyer,
1981, 1988). Some scholars maintain that authoritarianism is more fundamental than a set of
attitudes, as it is tied to core social identities (e.g, Duckitt, 1989). Most recently, Feldman and
Stenner (1997 and also Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005), have made a powerful case that
authoritarianism is best understood as a key value dimension defined by preferences for social
conformity versus individual autonomy.

Attitudinal and behavioral differences between authoritarians and non-authoritarians
result from the authoritarian’s “hypersensitivity” (Stenner, 2005, p. 69) to threat in the
surrounding environment. Authoritarians react strongly to symbols that convey risks to the
individual, such as “cancer, snake, mugger, plague, crime…” (Lavine et al., 2002, p. 349).
Additionally, a range of social and political contexts can provoke a sense of threat, including
inter-group conflict (Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993), ideological distance between self and
major political parties (Feldman & Stenner, 1997), and economic malaise (Duckitt & Fisher
Terror attacks (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009) and other unusual situations that present a risk to the public, and thereby provoke the consideration of one’s own mortality, also affect authoritarians’ attitudes (Greenburg et al. 1990; Lavine et al., 2005). Each of these scenarios shares a potential to unsettle the authoritarian’s deeply rooted need for social order and, in turn, to provoke support for societal arrangements that can serve as an “anxiety buffer” (Greenburg et al. 1990) between themselves and the surrounding environment.

Despite the clear importance of threat, scholars continue to disagree about the dynamics of authoritarianism in society. Early work suggested that threat directly fostered an authoritarian orientation that, in turn, fostered intolerance (e.g., Friend 1973; Altemeyer 1981; but see also Duckitt & Fisher, 2003). More recently, Feldman and Stenner have made a strong case for an activation model of authoritarianism (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005). The activation model posits that the combination of an authoritarian disposition and the presence of a threat to the social order can result in a range of intolerant attitudes (Stenner 2005). The key to this model is that exposure to a situational threat activates the authoritarian’s need for “oneness and sameness” in society (p.17) that would otherwise lie dormant. When a normative threat is absent, authoritarians and non-authoritarians are not expected to differ in their attitudes. As the activation of the authoritarian disposition is an episodic, rather than a persistent, feature of society, authoritarian intolerance is expected to rise and fall with changing levels of threat to social cohesion.

Hetherington and Weiler (2009) posit an alternative dynamic to the activation model. While acknowledging the importance of threat to the authoritarian worldview, they argue that authoritarians persistently feel threatened. In their words,
In fact, one could argue that given the dynamism and uncertainty of an ever-more rapidly changing world (all the more so in post-9/11 America), it is plausible to assume that there is always some measure of threat to social cohesion and that an increasingly acrimonious political climate would only exacerbate such perceptions. Moreover, it is plausible to assume that authoritarians’ innate wariness about social order and threats to it would be activated as soon as they are prompted to think about politics…” (2009, p. 41).

Hence, on issues relevant to their worldview (e.g., gay rights, domestic responses to terrorism), authoritarians are chronically prone to intolerance. Moreover, and in direct contrast to Stenner (2005), Hetherington and his co-author argue it is the non-authoritarians that become more like authoritarians under conditions of high threat (2009, p. 113). In this view, authoritarian intolerance is relatively static, while a rising tide of intolerance in society results from a new threat perceived by non-authoritarians.

**Authoritarianism and Selective Exposure**

Research on media fragmentation and public opinion suggests that authoritarians have many new opportunities to activate their intolerance. New media technologies have made consuming political information easier, while also tracking an increase in opinionated news on cable television and the internet (see Prior, 2013 for a review). Such a degree of choice also raises the possibility that selective exposure to information, or seeking out and consuming messages that fit our relevant dispositions, is on the rise (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Garrett, 2009; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008, 2011; Valentino et al., 2009). In this new information environment, authoritarians may be moving towards chronic intolerance because they can readily consume messages about disliked groups and their normative violations.

Although media fragmentation also increases the availability of pro-tolerance messages, authoritarians are unlikely to find them persuasive. Theories of motivated reasoning (e.g., Taber
& Lodge, 2006) posit that, given sufficient motivation, individuals generally find reasons to reject claims that do not fit their predispositions. Further, in the process of rehearsing reasons to reject disagreeable messages, biased information processing can also lead to taking a more extreme position on the given issue. Hence, by virtue of their need for clear and enforceable social norms, arguments in favor of tolerance for nonconformist groups may not only prove unpersuasive to authoritarians, but even increase their levels of intolerance.

Additionally, the introduction of a situational threat, such as a terror attack or natural disaster, may only serve to further increase authoritarians’ propensity for selective exposure. In the most direct evidence on this issue, researchers at SUNY Stony Brook have shown that a situational threat can provoke authoritarians to protect their existing beliefs about the death penalty by seeking out and attending to attitude congruent messages (Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber, 2002; Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). In one such study, Lavine and his colleagues (2005) randomly assigned half of their subjects to a situational threat in the form of a mortality salience (MS) manipulation. After considering their own mortality, authoritarians were more likely than all other subjects to select news editorials that fit their prior opinions. Interestingly, threatened authoritarians also became less interested in reading editorials that contained a counter-attitudinal or a balanced set of views. When individuals seek out confirming evidence (i.e., display confirmation bias), and also actively screen out counter-attitudinal information, their behavior can be characterized as “defensive avoidance” (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013).

However, the selective exposure and terror management theory (TMT) literatures also indicate that a situational threat may prompt authoritarians to avoid all political messages. An increasingly fragmented information environment offers more opportunities to “tune out” by
consuming non-political or entertainment news (Arceneaux, Johnson, & Cryderman, 2013; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, 2010; Prior, 2007). Indeed, recent evidence shows that the viewership of ideologically slanted news has declined as non-political options have become increasingly available (Prior, 2007). It is therefore plausible that authoritarians, as a means of coping with a situational mortality threat (Houston & Holmes, 1974; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002), will avoid political messages when given the choice. Moreover, it raises the possibility that authoritarians who choose to consume political messages will be affected differently than those who tune out (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011). Among the most sophisticated of the selective exposure studies (see Prior, 2013 for a review) concluded that consuming ideologically biased cable news does not necessarily harden opinions among viewers (Arceneaux et al., 2013).

Thus far I have argued that an ideologically fragmented information environment can serve to provoke authoritarian intolerance in absence of a prior, situational threat. In a sense, the availability of threatening messages about non-conformist groups can serve to transform the baseline tendencies of authoritarians from one of episodic intolerance toward regularly occurring, or chronic, intolerance that is broadly consistent with the claims of Hetherington and Weiler (2009)\textsuperscript{ii}. Further, this result will only hold to the extent authoritarians consume, and react to, intolerant messages, rather than avoiding political information. It should be noted, though, Hetherington and his co-author agree with the basic premise of the activation model (2009, p. 41), so finding that a situational threat provokes defensive avoidance is also consistent with their understanding of the authoritarian dynamic.

What should we expect of non-authoritarians? In this instance, the research literature provides conflicting predictions. The baseline for many Americans is selective exposure to congenial information, rather than defensive avoidance (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013). A
preference for uniformly pro-tolerance messages seems consistent with Stenner’s (2005) claim that non-authoritarians (or “libertarians”) place a high value on individual autonomy over social conformity. On the other hand, non-authoritarians may have a stronger motivation to form accurate beliefs than others (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, p. 44), which suggests they will be especially likely to consume balanced information and, perhaps, also show little interest in irrelevant, non-political news. Although they did not provide a non-political news option, such behavior would also fit with the findings of Lavine and his colleagues (2005), in which non-authoritarians mostly consumed balanced information in both the low and high threat conditions (Lavine et al., 2005, p. 235). In any case, the preference of non-authoritarians for pro-tolerance views (balanced or not) may vary little with the level of situational threat; and this should distinguish their news consumption from authoritarians, who will defensively avoid pro-tolerance messages.

Due to the non-authoritarian’s relative insensitivity to normative threats (Feldman et al., 2010), non-authoritarians are unlikely to change their views when given the choice of information about non-conformist groups. Moreover, in line with Hetherington and his co-author (2009), after the introduction of a situation that is potentially threatening to both authoritarians and non-authoritarians, we should see greater attitude change among non-authoritarians. In other words, this increase in intolerance from their baseline (i.e., a direct effect of situational threat) should occur even without consuming political information. Presumably, however, this effect will be reversed to the extent non-authoritarians subsequently consume, and are affected by, pro-tolerance messages.

**Model and Hypotheses**
In sum, I have used alternative models of the authoritarian dynamic to develop a set of theoretical expectations about how a fragmented informational environment will shape the relationship between dispositional authoritarianism and political intolerance. In the three studies that follow, I seek to test the following theoretical possibilities:

1. In the absence of a situational threat, choosing to consume a message about the risks of a non-conformist group will increase political intolerance among authoritarians (but not non-authoritarians).

2. Given exposure to a situational threat, authoritarians (but not non-authoritarians) will opt to reduce anxiety by doing one or both of the following:

   2a. Increasing consumption of non-political information, thereby diluting the effects of political messages on tolerance attitudes

   2b. Increasing consumption of messages emphasizing the risks of tolerating non-conformists, thereby increasing the effects of political messages on tolerance attitudes

3. Given exposure to a situational threat, non-authoritarians who consume a free speech message will become less intolerant.

**Study 1**

*Method*

*Participants.* Undergraduates enrolled in a large public university in the Northeastern United States participated in the fall of 2013 for extra credit. The participants (N=270) varied in
terms of age, with a range from 18 to 38 with a mean of 19.8 years, race (74% White, 9%
African-American, 10% Latino, and 7% from other groups), and gender (52% female).

Procedure. Participants were told that the computerized “survey” concerned their
preferences for and opinions about news and other information that can be found online. Each
group of 15 students started by completing a computerized questionnaire that included
Feldman’s (2003) Social Conformity-Autonomy Beliefs Scale (SCA Beliefs) and the selection of
a least-liked group (Sullivan et al., 1982). Half of the participants were then exposed to an
experimental threat manipulation in the form of a mortality salience (MS) protocol. Next,
participants were assigned to one of three conditions: the forced exposure condition, a control
group, or a choice condition. In the forced exposure group, participants were assigned to read
one of three editorials that contained a message about the risks of tolerating their least-liked
group, or a pro-tolerance message, or a balanced (pro and con) viewpoint. The control group read
a non-political news story. In the choice group, participants could select to read one of the
editorial comments or the control article. Finally, all participants rated their support for the civil
liberties of their least-liked group.

Situational threat induction. A situational threat was experimentally induced using the
mortality salience (MS) manipulation used in terror management theory (TMT) research (e.g.,
Greenberg et al. 1990) and, since that time, by those studying activated authoritarianism (Lavine,
Lodge, & Freitas 2005; Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, & Taber 2002). Half of the participants were
assigned to the MS condition and were given the following prompt: “The news media often
report on terrible events such as murders, natural disasters and terrorist attacks. Sometimes these
stories can make us worry about our own safety, or even fear for our own lives. In the box below,
please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.”
Participants were then asked to type their response in a text box with a limit of 250 characters. The other half of the participants did not receive the MS manipulation. Instead, they were asked to list the types of news stories that they enjoy reading.

*Authoritarianism.* The Social Conformity-Autonomy Beliefs Scale (SCA Beliefs) was used to measure the extent to which social conformity was valued over autonomy (Feldman, 2003). The 17 items each presented participants with pairs of statements designed to represent a trade-off between a desire for personal autonomy (e.g., “People should be encouraged to express themselves in unique and possibly unusual ways”) versus social cohesion (e.g., “It’s best for everyone if people try to fit in instead of acting in unusual ways”). A principal components analysis of responses to the SCA Beliefs items yielded a first factor with an eigenvalue of 3.5, which explained 20 percent of the common variance, and that formed a reasonably reliable scale (α = .73). As in prior studies, participants scoring above the median were coded as authoritarian.

*Information exposure.* The online news commentaries were initially identified by their titles, which referred to a hypothetical group called the “United Front.” (See Appendix A for the full wording.) The United Front was described as a local organization with the same composition (e.g., neo-Nazis, illegal immigrants, etc.) as their least-liked group. The editorial that promoted intolerance was titled, “Local United Front Group: Consider the Risks for Our Community.” The pro-tolerance editorial was called, “United Front Group in Our Community: They Deserve Free Speech Rights, Too.” The balanced editorial was titled, “Local United Front Group: Weighing the Pros and Cons for Our Community.” The title of the control article was, “Deep-sea Internet to Detect Tsunamis and Spy on Smugglers.” The content of the editorials contained either an intolerant message (such extremist groups present a risk to the community’s safety), or a pro-tolerance message (failure to respect the free speech rights of controversial groups will
compromise the liberties of all), or a blend of both. The four articles were each about 165 words in length. The participants spent between 2 and 84 seconds reading the article, with a mean of 29 seconds (SD=17.1).

Dependent variable. As Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) have clarified, tolerance means “putting up with” those groups or ideas with which one disagrees. Crucial to this understanding is the need to isolate the group or groups each individual dislikes and, after, to assess to the degree to which he or she would extend that group basic democratic rights. Empirical research also suggests that the least-liked strategy, as opposed to other available strategies, do not measure the same underlying attitude (Gibson, 2013). While the use of other measurement strategies does not invalidate the findings of prior authoritarianism research, it does make cross-pollination between the two literatures problematic.

In order to increase the possibility of future cross-pollination between the two areas of research, the questionnaire included the least-liked approach to measuring intolerance (Sullivan et al. 1982). At the start, participants were asked to rate nine controversial group on an 11-point scale that ran from, “1=you dislike the group very much,” to “11=you like the group very much.” The list of potential disliked groups was created on the basis of national sample surveys and also pre-tested within the same student population. The groups, presented in random order to the participants, were: radical Muslims (in the USA), illegal immigrants, neo-Nazis, gay rights activists, anti-abortion activists, abortion rights activists, ultra conservatives, and socialist liberals. Following information exposure, participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements on a 5-point scale: “The United Front should be banned from holding meetings in my community,” “Members of the United Front should be able to make public speeches in my community,” and “The United Front should be allowed to
hold rallies and demonstrations in my community.” The responses to these three items were summed to create an index of intolerance that runs from 3 (tolerant) to 15 (intolerant) with a mean of 8.7 and a standard deviation of 2.6.

**Results**

*_Information exposure preferences.* The selections made by participants in the choice condition are reported in Table 1. Among the 142 participants in the choice condition, the non-political news article was the most commonly selected (33.8%), as opposed to 21.8% selecting the risk focused editorial, 26% the free speech editorial, and 18.3% the balanced editorial. This overall preference for non-political news, especially over a balanced viewpoint, is a departure from previous findings (e.g., Lavine et al., 2005, p. 231) and reinforces the importance of creating selective exposure designs with a non-political information option when estimating media effects (see Feldman, Stroud, Bimber & Wojcieszak, 2013, for a discussion of design choices).

[Table 1 about here]

The results also support Expectation 2a but not 2b – situationally threatened authoritarians increasingly “tune out” political messages but do not increase their consumption of risk-focused messages. More authoritarians selected the non-political news when situational threat was high (37.5%) than when it was low (17.4%). Authoritarians were also less likely to select the free speech message in the high situational threat (8.3%) than in the low threat condition (21.7%). Moreover, authoritarians did not increase their consumption of the risk-focused message as threat moved from low (34.8%) to high (33.3%). A chi-squared test of association confirmed that the association between authoritarianism and overall selection was
statistically significant in the high threat condition, $\chi^2(3) = 7.4$, $p<.05$, but not in the low threat group, $\chi^2(3) = 6.2$, n.s. The specific contrast between selecting to read the non-political news or the free speech editorial, as opposed to the other articles, was also significant in the presence of a situational threat ($\chi^2(2) = 6.7$, $p<.05$).

*Effects of message exposure on political intolerance.* The results of regressing the political intolerance scale on the various experimental conditions and support for democratic values is reported in Table 2. These results are also illustrated in Figure 1. Given the different theoretical expectations for authoritarians and non-authoritarians, the models were estimated separately for each group. Moreover, I follow past practice in estimating effects by comparing participants who were forced to read one of the online news commentaries, and also the choice group, against the forced control group (Arceneaux et al., 2013; Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011). This approach has the advantage of measuring the effects of reading an editorial on those in the *forced* treatment group and also among those in the *choice* condition, while holding baseline traits constant across all three groups through random assignment (Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011). The models include interaction terms to capture the different effects of information exposure in the high and low threat conditions. I also include a measure of support for democratic values in each model

[Table 2 about here]

Among authoritarians in the forced exposure condition, in which “tuning-out” is not an option, the effects of the political messages on intolerance varied with the level of situational threat. When threat was low, authoritarians who read the free speech editorial were more intolerant than authoritarians in the control group ($b=3.7$, $p<.01$). In the high threat condition,
authoritarians who read the free speech editorial were less intolerant than the relevant control group (b=-3.8, p<.05). By contrast, neither of the other two editorials produced an effect. Thus far, the results suggest that, in times of a situational mortality threat, intolerance can be reduced among authoritarians if only they could be induced to consume pro-tolerance messages.

By contrast, the reactions of authoritarians in the choice group offer a starkly different conclusion. As per Expectation 1, in the choice group, reading an editorial only served to make authoritarians more intolerant. In the low threat condition, change occurred in the direction of greater intolerance only among those who selected the editorial with a message about the risks of allowing a least-liked group to hold meetings and a rally (b=3.7, p<.01). The mean difference of 3.7 is a large effect (Cohen’s d = .83) Further, as per Expectation 2a, attitude change relative to the baseline (i.e., forced control group) did not occur in the high situational threat condition. When threat was high, authoritarians were no more likely to be intolerant (or tolerant) after reading the risk-focused (p=.194), the free speech (p=.256), or the balanced (p=.723) editorials than participants in the control group.

[Figure 1 about here]

Turning to non-authoritarians, in the forced exposure group the results, once again, varied with the level of mortality threat. In the low threat condition, none of the three editorials produced attitude changes relative to non-authoritarians in the control group. When threat was high, reading either the free speech editorial (b=-3.5, p<.05) or the balanced editorial (b=-4.0, p<.05) resulted in lower levels of intolerance.

In the model estimated among non-authoritarians in the choice group, Expectation 3 was supported. It should be noted that, as Hetherington and Weiler (2009) anticipate, the situational
threat induction had a direct effect on the intolerance of non-authoritarians (b=2.9, p<.05) but not authoritarians (b=1.8, n.s.). Further, non-authoritarians who opted to read the free-speech focused editorial in the high threat condition were less intolerant (more tolerant) than those in the forced control group (b= -3.5, p<.05). This is a very large effect (Cohen’s $d = -1.3$).

**Study 2**

The first study established that selective exposure to risk-focused messages increased intolerance among authoritarians even in the absence of a prior situational threat. Such a finding is important because it bolsters the claim that opportunities for selective exposure can serve to promote intolerance. Further, it also revealed that a mortality threat provoked authoritarians to avoid political messages, and thereby diluted the effects of political commentary on attitudes. To further explore the information seeking preferences of authoritarians and non-authoritarians, the second study relaxed the restriction on how many articles could be selected by participants. The dependent variables in Study 2 included both the *number* and the *proportion* of threatening, non-threatening, and non-political online news articles consumed.

**Method**

*Participants.* Once again, undergraduates ($N=112$) at the same university in the Northeastern United States enrolled in several social science courses participated for extra credit. Participates averaged 20 years of age, 59% were men, and they varied in terms of race (59% white, 12% black, 13% Hispanic, and 16% other groups including Asian and Native American).
Procedure. Groups of about 10 students completed a computerized questionnaire that contained the least-liked group selection procedure, the SCA Beliefs Scale, and then were randomly assigned to either the mortality salience (MS) condition or a control condition.

In contrast to Study 1, participants in Study 2 were further assigned to one of three versions of the MS prompt. In the same manner as Study 1, they read, “The news media often report on terrible events such as…” and then either “murders”, “natural disasters” or “terrorist attacks.” The remainder of the prompt continued, “Sometimes these stories can make us worry about our own safety, or even fear for our own lives. In the box below, please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.”

Next, participants were presented with six online news headlines and the instructions, “Please look at these news headlines. If you had an hour between classes, which of these articles would you actually read? You may select up to six articles or select ‘I would not read any of these articles’.” The article titles were presented in random order and presented their least-liked group in a threatening frame (“How {group name} ruin our country and complicate our lives” and “Why {group name} hurt America”), a non-threatening frame (“The history of {group name} in America” and “A story of two {group name}”), or were non-political news titles (“Deep-sea internet to detect tsunamis, spy on smugglers” and “Ten animals you won’t believe actually exist!”). Participants indicating that they would not read any of the articles (N=10) were dropped from the analysis, which reduces the number of participants to 102.

Results

While there was a slight tendency for participants in the treatment groups to select fewer articles than the control condition, the differences did not achieve statistical significance. For
instance, control participants selected an average of 2.7 out of 6 articles, while those in the murder MS treatment selected an average of 2, the terrorist MS group 2.2, and the natural disaster MS group averaged 1.8 (n.s.). Looking at the number of threatening, non-threatening, and non-political news articles selected revealed that these differences were also not statistically significant. The failure to find a treatment effect on the number of articles selected is very similar the findings of Gadarian and Albertson (2014), who only found an effect of their anxiety induction on the proportion of articles consumed in each category.

[Table 3 about here]

Turning to the proportion of different categories of articles, the results mirror those of the first study (Expecation 2a). Authoritarians who received the natural disaster MS induction selected a far higher proportion of non-political news (M=85%, SD = 24%) than all other groups (b=.417, p<.05), which varied from 37% to 54%. Second, authoritarians in the natural disaster MS group selected a far smaller proportion of non-threatening information about their least-liked group (M=15%, SD = 24%) than any other group (b= -.416, p<.05).

This is a theoretically significant finding in several respects. First, the same pattern of defensive avoidance – that is, heightened interest in irrelevant, non-political news – among authoritarians who were reminded of their own mortality was obtained in both Study 1 and Study 2. Second, it was also noteworthy that this result obtained only among authoritarians who received the “natural disaster” version of the MS induction, but not the “terrorist” or “murder” versions. This mirrors results obtained by Merolla and Zechmeister (2009), who found that the interaction effects of their different threat treatments (terrorism vs. economic) with authoritarianism varied by context. Merolla and Zechmeister argue that some threats are more
“tangible” to particular individuals depending on their prior experience with those threats (2009, p. 94). I suspect that my student participants, many of whom witnessed the destruction of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, found that the natural disaster treatment most readily elicited death related cognitions. By contrast, most of the participants have come of age at a time of relatively low murder rates and were just five years of age or younger on 9/11/2001. TMT research showing that mortality salience effects do not occur in children under 8 years old also reinforces this interpretation (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998).

Study 3

Study 3 is meant to address the possibility that defensive avoidance among authoritarians facing a situational mortality threat was an artifact of using a student sample. As an external check on my earlier findings, a portion of the selective exposure protocol in Study 1 was replicated using a non-student sample. However, as in Study 2, participants did not read the articles and, hence, we do not examine effects on political intolerance.

Method

Invitations to participate in an on-line, “quality of life” survey were mailed to 725 addresses in the area surround the university. The online questionnaire included the “child rearing values” portion of the SCA beliefs scale, random assignment to the mortality salience manipulation, as well as the choice of selecting one of the same four articles used in Study 1. The results (N=149) are displayed in Table 3.

Results
Once again, authoritarians in the situational threat (MS) condition displayed a tendency to avoid balanced (pro/con) messages, while also increasing their consumption of non-political information. A preference for reading the non-political news increased among authoritarians as situational threat moved from low (7.1%) to high (32.5%). A preference for the balanced article, also declined from the low situational threat (50%) to the high situational threat (27.5%) conditionsvi. A chi-squared test of association confirmed that the association between authoritarianism and article selection was statistically significant in the high threat condition, \( \chi^2(3) = 7.7, p<.05 \), but not in the low threat group, \( \chi^2(3) = 4.3, \) n.s.

**Discussion**

A growing body of research shows that threat can produce authoritarian attitudes in the general public (e.g., Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011) as well as potentially put democracy at risk (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). Nonetheless, the nature of the authoritarian dynamic in society has been the subject of much debate. This study has shed light on the informational aspect of the authoritarian dynamic by examining online information seeking behavior and the subsequent effects of consuming political information on political intolerance.

Theories of motivated reasoning posit that individuals display a confirmation bias in their information seeking behavior; that is, they seek out attitude congruent information when given a choice. In my laboratory studies, the baseline tendency of authoritarians and non-authoritarians was a mild tendency toward selecting congenial information. Further, when authoritarians
encounter stories about the risks of a group they already dislike, they reacted with increased intolerance. This seems consistent with Heatherington and Weiler’s (2009) claim that the mere mention of a disliked, non-conformist group is sufficient to provoke an intolerant reaction among authoritarians. Such a pattern of attitude change was not present among non-authoritarians under the same circumstances.

However, differences in information seeking behavior became evident after the introduction of a situational threat that evoked mortality considerations. This occurred because authoritarians changed their behavior from displaying a mild confirmation bias to a clear pattern of defensive avoidance. In conditions of high threat, authoritarians were more likely to avoid balanced messages and also *dramatically increased their rate of exposure to non-political news that had no relevance to the civil liberties controversy they were asked to consider*. This tendency to “tune-out” from a controversy, as well as from disagreeable viewpoints, makes the authoritarian especially difficult to reassure in a situation of an episodic threat such as a terror attack, widespread protests, natural disaster, or other context that prompts consider of one’s own mortality. This propensity to tune-out could be added to the other “coping strategies” that authoritarians use in response to anxiety inducing threats (Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009).

Also, my findings improve our understanding of the information seeking strategies of *non-authoritarians*. This study showed that non-authoritarians do not always prefer balanced (pro/con) information at higher rates than authoritarians. This seems at odds with the need for accuracy motivation that Hetherington and Weiler (2009) argue may set this group apart from others. Nonetheless, the introduction of a situational threat did not increase their tendency toward confirmation bias. Non-authoritarians, it seems, are not distinctive in their preference for
information in “normal” times; however, they do not practice the defensive avoidance strategies evident among the threatened authoritarians.

The distinct pattern of attitude change evidenced among non-authoritarians suggests the possibility of a “libertarian dynamic.” The introduction of a situational mortality threat resulted in intolerance among the non-authoritarians; however, it also subsequently corresponded with a reduction in intolerance among those selecting the free speech message. In a sense, many non-authoritarians reassured themselves that the threat they initially perceived did not warrant subsequent intolerance. Another possibility, suggested by terror management theory (TMT) (e.g., Greenberg, et al., 1990, p. 315), is that threatened non-authoritarians were engaging in a defense of their own worldview, which makes a virtue out of holding fast to the importance of civil liberties in the face of a threat. Once again, such a pattern of attitude change is consistent with those who argue public opinion shifts that occur after a unique event (e.g., terror attack) take place among non-authoritarians (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011).
Works Cited


Table 1. Information Choice by Situational Threat and Authoritarianism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Situational Threat</th>
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*Note: Cell entries are percent selecting a particular article.*
Table 2. Effects of Online Editorials on Political Intolerance

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<td>Democratic Values</td>
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N= 156 100
R^2 .24 .23

Notes: Values are OLS coefficients and standard errors. Comparison group is forced control article. Positive coefficients indicate greater intolerance. **=p<.01; *=p<.05
Figure 1. Effects of Online Editorials on Political Intolerance by Level of Authoritarianism and Situational Threat

Authoritarians

<table>
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<tr>
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Non-Authoritarians

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Table 3. Information Choice by Authoritarianism and Situational Threat Conditions

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N = 102
R² = .08

Notes: Values are OLS coefficients and standard errors. Positive coefficients indicate selecting a higher proportion of a given category of news. * = p < .05
Table 4. Non-Student Sample: Information Choice by Situational Threat and Authoritarianism

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*Notes: Entries are percent selecting a particular article.*
Appendix A. Study 1 Stimuli: Wording of news commentary and non-political news.

Local United Front Group: Consider the Risks for Our Community

While reading, “United Front, a local group of {least-liked group}, holds first meeting downtown,” I was surprised to learn that some people feel this activity presents no risk to our community. Free speech is important but do we really know what this group is about? Although not every person with these beliefs is extreme, just the presence of this group is inflammatory. What about their plans to hold a protest here in town? Can we be sure this will not turn into a violent confrontation? It is wrong to call anyone who opposes these meetings “narrow minded.” And it is important that our local leaders and residents face reality. Our freedoms are important but not at the expense of our safety and security.

United Front Group in Our Community: They Deserve Free Speech Rights, Too

While reading, “United Front, a local group of {least-liked group}, holds first meeting downtown,” I was surprised to learn that some people feel this activity presents a risk to our community. It is important to keep the community free from harassment and violence, but has anyone really stopped to consider what this group is about? While I may disagree with the group’s political views, they have the same right as anyone else to hold meetings. Very few members of this group are extreme. Besides, if they hold a protest in town, they’ll be subject to the same rules as all other political groups. It is important that our local leaders and the public face reality and avoid over-reacting. It is important to keep the community free from harassment and violence; but if we sacrifice their freedom, we’ll sacrifice ours as well.

Local United Front Group: Weighing the Pros and Cons for Our Community

While reading, “United Front, a local group of {least-liked group}, holds first meeting downtown,” I was not surprised to learn that different people had strong, and opposite, reactions to this activity. However, we should stop to consider all viewpoints before passing judgment. While I may disagree with the group’s political and moral views, they have the same right as anyone else to hold meetings. Not every member of this group is extreme. Nonetheless, for some residents just the very presence of this group will be upsetting. What if they decide to hold a protest in town? We can’t be sure in advance if this will or will not result in violence or harassment. On the other hand, if they hold a protest, they’ll be subject to the same rules as all other political groups. It is wrong to call anyone who opposes these meetings “narrow minded.” But it is also important that our local leaders and the public face reality and avoid jumping to conclusions. Free speech and public safety are both important considerations.

Deep-sea Internet to Detect Tsunamis, Spy on Smugglers

The Internet may soon reach into the depths of the world's oceans and relay real-time information to smartphones everywhere - about everything from drug-smuggling submarines and the location of untapped oil reserves to the approach of a deadly tsunami. In the tsunami-monitoring scenario, the array of buoys can pool their data using traditional Internet communications tools to issue a warning with more information about the potentially life-threatening event in time for people to escape to safety. What limits this from happening is the
difference between how networks function on land and in water. New research aims to develop a bridge between undersea communications and the traditional Internet.
Study 1 focuses only on the likely effects of consuming political information in a choice environment. Study 2 examines the issue of how frequently such exposure occurs relative to other kinds of information. It is suggestive, though, that about 75 percent of my subjects reported going online for news and current events information “at least a few times per week.”

Support for democratic values is a robust predictor of political intolerance across many societies (Gibson 2012). Inclusion of a measure of support for democracy allows us to compare the impact of this theoretically important factor against information exposure. The support for democratic values scale was created by adding together the responses to the following items, with high values indicating greater support for democracy: “Because demonstrations frequently become disorderly and disruptive, radical and extremist political groups shouldn’t be allowed to demonstrate” and “Society should allow all points of view to be expressed in public, even if the viewpoints are offensive to some.”

As in Study 1, I examine effects using ordinary least-squares regression analysis. Very similar results were obtained using a fixed effects ANOVA.

We did not give respondents the chance to read and react to the articles for two reasons. First, without the controls possible in a laboratory setting, we’d have no idea if the respondents actually read the article they selected. Second, the Web platform we used to make the survey available did not provide any means to check that respondents viewed (let alone read) an article.

Respondents in the non-student sample preferred the balanced (pro/con) article at much high rates than the students in my laboratory experiment. Although this does not change my substantive findings with respect to defensive avoidance, this difference is worth exploring in future research. Working hypotheses might include differences in political interest, current events knowledge, or internet use among students and non-students.

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1 http://www.pewinternet.org/2010/03/01/understanding-the-participatory-news-consumer/ accessed on June 16, 2015

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