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Media Dissociation, Internet Use, and Antiwar Political Participation: A Case Study of Political Dissent and Action Against the War in Iraq

Hyunseo Hwang
School of Journalism & Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Michael Schmierbach
Department of Communication
College of Charleston

Hye-Jin Paek
Department of Advertising/Public Relations
University of Georgia

Homero Gil de Zuniga and Dhavan Shah
School of Journalism & Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Media are thought to exert social control over dissenters by discouraging political expression and oppositional activities during periods of conflict. With the rise of the Internet, however, people play an increasingly active role in their media interactions, potentially reducing this media influence and increasing dissenters' likelihood of speaking out and taking action. To understand what spurs some dissenters to become politically active, we conceptualize the perceived discrepancy between mainstream media portrayals and an individual's own views as "media dissociation." This study, then, explores if people who are alienated from mainstream media engage in information gathering and discussion via the Internet, and whether these

Correspondence should be addressed to Hyunseo Hwang, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 5014 Vilas Communication Hall, 821 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53706. E-mail: hyunseohwang@wisc.edu

online behaviors lead to political participation aimed at social change. A Web-based survey of political dissenters conducted during the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq ($N = 307$) provides the case study data used to test relationships among media dissociation, Internet use, and antiwar activism. Structural equation modeling revealed that the more the individuals surveyed felt their views differed from mainstream media portrayals, the more motivated they were to use the Internet as an information source and discussion channel. These effects of media disassociation appear to be channeled through Internet behaviors, which then facilitate antiwar political action.

International conflicts, such as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, present a unifying national crisis in which a majority of citizens "rally around the flag" and their leaders (Mueller, 1970). The media are seen as central agents in this process, aligning the public with elites through carefully constructed appeals by government officials (Entman, 2004; Powlick & Katz, 1998). In such situations, mass media can exert social control over "dissenters"—those who oppose positions advanced by political elites through the media—by reinforcing dominant views and reducing their willingness to speak up or act on their political beliefs (e.g., Luther & Miller, 2005; D. M. McLeod & Hertog, 1992, 1999; Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

Many scholars have noted that the potential for social control is especially powerful when audiences depend heavily on mainstream mass media for information and this coverage lacks oppositional voices (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Merskin, 1999). The degree and limits of press freedom when covering these issues remains in question (see Althaus, 2003), as does the extent to which the Internet contains oppositional perspectives. Dissenters who have access to media that contain alternative viewpoints, as many argue is the case with the Internet, should feel less constrained. Recent research has suggested that individuals who encounter media coverage adverse to their views may actively search for information over the Internet, taking advantage of the diversity of perspectives the Web offers to find points of view that are different from mainstream news sources and closer to their own views (Rainie, Fox, & Fallows, 2003).

To understand the active role dissenters play in their interaction with media in a digital age, we examine their information search and exchange over the Internet as a result of their reaction to traditional media reports. To do so, we introduce the concept of *media dissociation*—conceptualized as the difference between an individual's opinion on an issue and his or her perception of the mainstream media's presentation of the issue—which we contend is a factor in explaining patterns of Internet news use, political discussion, and oppositional political activism among those who opposed the war in Iraq.

A Web-based survey of individuals largely opposed to the war in Iraq conducted during the start of the U.S.-led invasion ($N = 307$) provides the case study data used to explore the relationships among political dissent, media dissociation,

Internet use, and antiwar participation. Participants for the survey were purposively recruited through discussion groups, Weblogs, and listservs critical of the U.S.-Iraq conflict. These data allow us to look closely at the role of the Internet in moving some dissenters to political participation in opposition to the War in Iraq, providing unique insights unavailable through conventional research strategies

CONCEPTUALIZING MEDIA DISSOCIATION

People often talk about the point of view represented by the media, writ large. For example, conservative commentators often complain about the "liberal media" (see Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999) and peace activists lament the prowar coverage by embedded reporters. We assert that individuals tend to contrast their own views on current events with what they see as a unified view represented by the media. This discrepancy between an individual's opinion on an issue and his or her perception of the media's presentation factors into several news perception processes, such as the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). However, measures of the difference between media opinions and individual opinions have not been well developed or consistently labeled. We label this difference *media dissociation*—the perception that an individual's opinion is at odds with that advanced in mainstream media content.

The concept of media dissociation can be linked to previous research on individuals' perceptions of media news. For example, research on the hostile media phenomenon, which refers to the tendency for partisans to judge mass media coverage as unfavorable to their own point of view, has made apparent the significance of individuals' issue positions in judgments of media bias (Christen, Kannaovakun, & Gunther; 2002; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Perloff, 1989). Perloff found that partisans tend to perceive content seen as neutral by nonpartisans as biased against their issue positions. Gunther (1988) also found strong empirical evidence that the strength or intensity of attitudes on a topic was related to perceived media bias in reporting on that topic. The tendency of partisans to make biased evaluations of media content was also confirmed when the coverage was unbalanced. This work on relative hostile media perception shows that partisans perceive slanted coverage as relatively more unfavorable compared to nonpartisans even when both recognize the news as slanted in a particular direction (Gunther & Christen, 2002).

Although both hostile media perception and our conception of media dissociation are related to the audience's perception of news slant, there is a clear distinction between these two concepts. Previous studies on hostile media perception

including relative hostile media perception have centered on examining partisan's *biased* judgment of news coverage and identifying factors affecting such biased judgments. Consequently, perceived news slant in this line of research has been operationalized as a departure from a neutral midpoint on a scale, which was treated as the anchor point.[1] That is, hostile media perception research typically measures bias perceptions by calculating the distance from the *neutral* scale value located between conflicting positions of an issue (e.g., Gunther, 1988; Gunther & Christen, 1999).

In contrast, the concept of media dissociation is concerned with the perceptual distance between the perspective advanced in media coverage of an issue and self-position on that issue and its possible outcomes. It is unconcerned with whether this judgment of media coverage is correct or not and whether an individual feels media coverage as neutral or biased per se. Thus, self-position on a given issue is a key comparison anchor for media dissociation, rather than the perceived neutrality of the media message. As such, this concept shares some commonality with hostile media perceptions and relative hostile media perceptions, yet is both conceptually and operationally distinct from these related phenomena.

By using the self as a comparison anchor, media dissociation provides a new way to explore the potential effects of comparisons between the self and an other (the other, in this case, being the media) on communication behaviors, which have been largely unexplored in prior media perception research. Scholars have long argued that counterattitudinal messages may produce dissonance, which has been found to be important factors in determining the amount and course of people's information search (e.g., Adams, 1961; Lanzetta & Driscoll, 1968; Stempel, 1981). This concern with the outcome of media perceptions, rather than their causes, is another unique feature of media dissociation. Indeed, we conceive of this perceptual gap as particularly relevant for understanding other types of communication and political behavior. Media dissociation, then, provides an additional way to understand how certain people respond to an environment of messages perceived as counterattitudinal, and a unique view of how this response structures information-seeking behaviors.

DISSOCIATION AND DISSONANCE

Individuals who have a high level of media dissociation are likely to seek to rectify the discrepancy between the opinion of the expert media and their own views.

[1]We found only one exception (Eveland & Shah, 2003). The authors measured media bias perception by asking how media coverage is biased against respondents' own views. However, they did not clearly point out the conceptual distinction between their measure and typical measure of hostile media perception research.

This state of opposition between cognitions may produce feelings of dissonance (Festinger, 1957). From the standpoint of cognitive consistency theories, these conflicting cognitions drive individuals to acquire or generate new thoughts, or modify existing thoughts, in an effort to minimize the amount of conflict between cognitions. Research on dissonance-reduction strategies concludes that when an individual holding an opinion on a matter of importance experiences dissonance, that person can adopt several strategies to reduce the dissonance produced by communication interactions (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). One strategy is for people experiencing dissonance to selectively expose themselves to specific information that supports their opinion.

Empirical tests on such selective exposure phenomenon, however, have not produced consistent results concerning people's preference for supportive information. Although many studies show that subjects experiencing dissonance tend to avoid exposure to the dissonance-increasing communication and seek exposure to consonant communication (e.g., Adams, 1961; Ehrlich, Guttmann, Schonbach, & Mills, 1957; Mills, Aronson, & Robinson, 1961; Schramm & Cater, 1959; Stempel 1981), some work has concluded that dissonance increases information search for nonsupportive information (Brodbeck, 1956; Sears, 1965), or produces no differences in information preferences (Feather, 1962; Mills & Ross, 1964; Sears, 1966).

In response to this lack of clarity, D'Alessio and Allen (2002) conducted a meta-analytic review of 16 selective exposure studies. They argued that these inconsistent results are mainly due to differences in research design. The results of their meta-analysis led them to conclude that dissonance is associated with selective exposure to supportive information. Indeed, they suggest that dissonance arousal might be an important precondition for selective exposure, with those who are experiencing dissonance showing a greater tendency to select supportive information than those who are not. Thus, media dissociation is expected to spur the search for attitudinally consistent information that can be used to bolster existing attitudes.

Research on selective exposure and dissonance reduction, then, suggests that individuals faced with mainstream media content that differs sharply from their views will be motivated to seek out content from supportive sources, rather than passively consuming and accepting mainstream media messages. That is, in the case of those individuals with high levels of media dissociation on an issue, especially those who have strong ego-involvement on the issue, their motivation to reduce dissonance would likely drive them to turn to information sources such as the Internet. Given the ability to seek specific content for a much more diverse array of sources, including those ideologically at odds with mainstream viewpoints, the Internet provides an ideal source for information and perspectives that are more consonant with dissenting views.

MEDIA DISSOCIATION AND INTERNET USE

This perspective counters passive images of audiences. As some communication scholars have argued, audiences actively determine what media they use, as well as how they process the information received from the media, based on their evaluations of the news media (Fredin, Kosicki, & Becker, 1996; Kosicki & McLeod, 1990; J. M. McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991; J. M. McLeod & McDonald, 1985). This is particularly true in the online environment, where the mix of gratifications sought and attained is decidedly under audience control (see Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Rojas, & Shah, 2003). In line with this perspective, recent research has found that negative evaluations of mainstream news quality in terms of accuracy, completeness, fairness, and trustworthiness, are positively related to nonmainstream news use such as call-in radio talk show listening and Internet use for political information (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

In particular, the Internet provides two resources that can be especially valuable for those motivated to reduce dissonance: (a) online news from credible sources outside the country and nonmainstream perspectives within the country (e.g., political Weblogs or activist Web sites), and (b) online political discussion with like-minded people who might not be readily available for face-to-face conversation. Although some online news content comes from mainstream news sources, the Internet provides a relatively low-cost mechanism for other sources of information to spread their message. News sites by international journalists and the domestic partisan media are readily available (Maybury, 2000), as are information resources provided by social movements and opinionated individuals (Denning, 2001; Melucci, 1996). If these resources prove inadequate, the Internet provides numerous forums where individuals can exchange their views with other people, from chat rooms to blog posts (Kaye & Johnson, 2003).

In addition, Internet news use may drive subsequent online discussion; researchers have consistently linked news use with political discussion (J. M. McLeod et al., 1996; Price & Cappella, 2001; van Dijk, 2000). Indeed, Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) connect online news consumption with the exchange of political views via the Internet.

These paths, from media dissociation to online news use and discussion over the Internet, and from news consumption to discussion, lead us to the following hypotheses:

H1: Media dissociation will be positively associated with Internet news use.
H2: Media dissociation will be positively associated with online political discussion.
H3: Internet news use will be positively associated with online discussion.

INTERNET USE AND OFFLINE PARTICIPATION

Early studies of the effects of the Internet on political participation have been mixed. But recent research that focuses on specific Internet activities has consistently shown that certain Internet activities have positive effects on political participation. Specifically, Internet use for information exchange is positively associated with civic engagement (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Using American National Election Studies survey data, Tolbert and McNeal (2003) also found that access to the Internet and online consumption of election news significantly increased respondents' conventional modes of political participation, such as voting, political discussion, and donating money, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, partisanship, attitudes, traditional media use, and other factors.

In addition to conventional forms of political participation, the Internet is also thought to facilitate unconventional forms of collective action such as social protest. Previous research has identified interpersonal networks as a key predictor of collective action (see Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Della Porta & Diani 1999; McAdam, 1986; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980). These networks can provide information about how to become involved in protest action and serve to recruit potential participants (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). The Internet may serve a similar function as offline interpersonal networks but on a much larger scale. It provides users with easier and faster ways to exchange their opinions and information regardless of geographical distance and temporal asynchronicity. Recent research supports the view that the expression of political views online parallels, and may even exceed, the effects of interpersonal talk on traditional forms of participation (Shah et al, 2005).

Individuals who turn to the Internet when experiencing media dissociation might be driven to participate for two reasons. First, these exchanges could provide information about how to get involved; discussions might mention upcoming protests and events, organize transportation, and discuss strategies (Ayers, 2001). Second, online discussion can lead individuals to identify with a group or movement. Indeed, a number of social movement theorists have concluded that group identity is a key factor predicting activism (Melucci, 1989; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Simon et al., 1998). The social identity and deindividuation model (Lea, Spears, & de Groot; 2001; Spears & Lea, 1994; Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Haar, 2002) argued that the anonymity of computer-mediated communication can increase group solidarity by making group cues salient, and decreasing individuating in-group differences such as race, gender, and age. Given this, we test the following hypotheses:

H4: Web news use will be positively associated with political participation, including protest participation.
H5: Online discussion will be positively associated with political participation, including protest participation.

METHOD

Testing the hypothesized relationships would be difficult, perhaps impossible, in an experimental setting. Individuals' judgments about the tenor of mainstream news content are grounded in their day-to-day exposure to press reports, either purposeful or inadvertent. Even with strict control, a laboratory setting could not reproduce the ecology of the media system in a natural setting. An appropriate test of these hypotheses requires a context in which a sizable minority of the public has the potential to experience dissociation from mainstream news portrayals and also has opportunities to act on these judgments. A related challenge involves gathering responses from this population subset during the period in which media dissociation is likely to occur, that is, when there is considerable unanimity in mainstream news reports.

The period during the start of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq provides one such context. For example, the most-watched cable news channel, Fox News, has been widely critiqued for taking an "overtly patriotic approach" in their reporting on the War (Sharkey, 2003, p. 25). Similarly, Massing (2004) characterized MSNBC's coverage as defined by "mawkishness and breathless boosterism" (p. 10). Systematic content analyses of press coverage of pro- and antiwar demonstrations before and during the 2003 U.S.-led Iraq war found that U.S. news media tended to delegitimize antiwar groups and legitimize prowar groups (Luther & Miller, 2005). It is not surprising, then, that during this period, a vast majority of the public supported the U.S. invasion. For example, a series of public opinion polls conducted during April 2003 found that roughly four-fifths of the public supported the United States having gone to war with Iraq (76%–80%), with less than one-fifth (17%–20%) opposing this military intervention.[2] Our concern here is with those who opposed the war and in understanding whether their perceptions of the information environment spurred action.

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[2]ABC News and the Washington Post poll, April 2–6, 2003, of 1,030 national adults, asked whether respondents support or oppose the United States having gone to war with Iraq: support 77%, oppose 17%. Retrieved from poll results archived at Lexis-Nexis (http://Web.lexis-nexis.com/statuniv).

ABC News and the Washington Post poll, April 9, 2003, 509 national adults, asked whether respondents support or oppose the United States having gone to war with Iraq: support 80%, oppose 18%. Retrieved from poll results archived at Lexis-Nexis (http://Web.lexis-nexis.com/statuniv).

ABC News and the Washington Post poll, April 16, 2003, 504 national adults, asked whether respondents support or oppose the United States having gone to war with Iraq: support 78%, oppose 20%. Retrieved from poll results archived at Lexis-Nexis (http://Web.lexis-nexis.com/statuniv).

FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, April 22, 2003, 900 national adults, asked whether respondents support or oppose the United States having taken military action to disarm Iraq and remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein: support 76%, oppose 20%. Retrieved from poll results archived at Lexis-Nexis (http://Web.lexis-nexis.com/statuniv).

Accordingly, the relationships hypothesized among media dissociation, Internet use, and political participation were tested using a Web-based survey of people who largely opposed the war fielded between mid April and early May 2003, during the very period of prowar coverage previously described. This online survey provided the case study data used to test the hypothesized relationships. We used a snowball sampling technique to recruit respondents. The invitation to participate in this survey was posted through online discussion groups (e.g., www.urban75.org and www.nonviolence.org), Weblogs (e.g., www.kevinsites.net and www.blogsofwar.com), and listservs (e.g., www.moveon.org and www.freedomforum.org) discussing the Iraq conflict. It was also distributed as a press release to major antiwar sites such as www.moveon.org. In addition, respondents were asked to further distribute the invitation to participate. We excluded responses that were submitted after our predetermined field period and submissions where less than half of the questions contained a response, resulting in a final sample size of $N = 307$.

Although not a random or representative sample, this purposive approach allowed us to focus on those individuals who were largely opposed to the conflict and had the potential to experience media dissociation. Although this approach did not yield a generalizable sample, it provided a relevant case study of media dissociation in action. As a preliminary test of whether this approach produced a pool of dissenters for our subsequent analysis, we ran a frequency analysis of Iraq war opinion among our sample. Notably, 86% of the sample opposed the war in Iraq—almost exactly the opposite of general public support for the war at the time—indicating that we generated the pool of respondents that we sought.

Measurement

Media dissociation is based on the difference between respondents' support for the war in Iraq and their perceptions of media support for the war. Respondents indicated the extent to which they opposed or supported the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 7 (*strongly support*; $M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.56$). Using the same scale, respondents indicated how much the news media opposed or supported the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.94$). The absolute value of the difference between these two scores formed the measure of media dissociation that was used for the hypothesis test, which ranged from 0 (11.7% of respondents) to 6 (19.4% of respondents; $M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.05$). Even with our purposive sample, there was considerable range and variation in the media dissociation measure (see King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, for problems of selection bias restricting variance).

Internet news use was measured by a single item that tapped how often respondents consulted the Internet for news or information about the Iraqi situation, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*every day*; $M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.42$). This measure was found to be skewed in such manner that relatively few respondents did not consume news about Iraq war (3.3%) as compared to consuming heavy amounts (64%). Nonetheless, the range and variation within this skewed distribution was adequate (King et al., 1994).

Online discussion was an additive index of six items asking respondents how often they talked about politics via the Internet with family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, acquaintances, and strangers ($\alpha = .65$, $M = 2.10$, $SD = 0.78$). All the six items were measured by a 5-point scale, where 1 = *rarely*, and 5 = *often*. The range of online discussion was from 1 to 5, where 12% of the respondents reported that they rarely had online discussion with others about politics and 26% reporting that they were above the scale midpoint in online talk.

Political participation was measured with respondents' indication of whether they had engaged in the following seven activities in response to U.S. actions toward Iraq: contacting the media, signing a petition, donating money to an activist organization, displaying a sign or banner at your home, participating in direct action, and protest participation (KR-20 =.83, $M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.39$). Again, this variable was not restricted in range or variance, even though our purposive sample contained a sizable number of people who engaged in multiple forms of political participation concerning Iraq. Slightly less than 16% of the respondents reported that they had not engaged in any civic participation around the lead up to the war in Iraq; 12.1% of them reported they had participated in all seven activities as a response to the Iraqi situation.

Because variables like demographics, ideology, and media use all potentially influence Internet use and political behavior, as well as perceptions of media content, we controlled for these in the analyses. Television and newspaper use were each measured with a single item asking respondents to indicate on a 5-point scale (0 = *not at all*; 5 = *every day*) how often they consulted television and newspapers for information about the Iraqi situation (television: $M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.82$; Newspaper: $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.73$). Gender (woman = 45.1%, man = 54.9%), age (median = 20s), education (median = Bachelor's degree), and income (median = between $20,000 and $40,000) were asked directly. Ideology was based on two items asking the respondents to rate themselves on a 7-point scale (1 = *very liberal*; 7 = *very conservative*) in terms of economic and social issues (Interitem correlation = .48, $M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.14$). Finally, opinion about the war with Iraq was based on two items using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) asking whether respondents would have supported U.S. intervention in Iraq with U.N. Security Council approval or with support from traditional allies (Interitem correlation = .77, $M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.28$). This low mean is consistent with their general opposition to the war in Iraq previously noted, and reflects the

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of News Media Use by Media Dissociation

	Media Dissociation						
	Low[a]		*Medium*[b]		*High*[c]		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*
Televison news	2.99	.18	2.46	.20	2.35	.16	3.43*
Newspaper	2.59	.17	3.01	.20	2.91	.16	2.14

Note. For the analysis of variance test, respondents were classified into three groups (low, medium, and high media dissociation) according to the percentile of media dissociation. Age, gender, education, income, other media use, and ideology were controlled.

[a]$n = 100$. [b]$n = 70$. [c]$n = 124$.

*$p < .05$

fact that the sample included a large pool of political dissenters (for question wording, see Appendix A).

RESULTS

Verification of Media Dissociation

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined whether media dissociation actually affected respondents' information source selection. To test whether there are any meaningful differences in use of various mainstream media (television news and newspaper) depending on the level of media dissociation, we conducted analysis of variance tests after controlling for basic demographic variables and the other media use variables. The results indicate that media dissociation was linked with respondents' information-source selection, specifically their television news use (see Table 1). Respondents with higher media dissociation were less likely to consume television news on the Iraqi situation than those low in media dissociation. Notably, differences in newspaper use were not explained by media dissociation. Based on these results, we conclude that media dissociation has predictive validity in explaining individuals' orientations toward television news sources. This indirectly supports the contentions of Sharkey (2003) and Massing (2004), who each characterized television coverage as particularly skewed in favor of war.

Hypothesis Test

To explore the relationship between media dissociation, Internet news use, online discussion, and political participation among our sample of dissenters, we performed

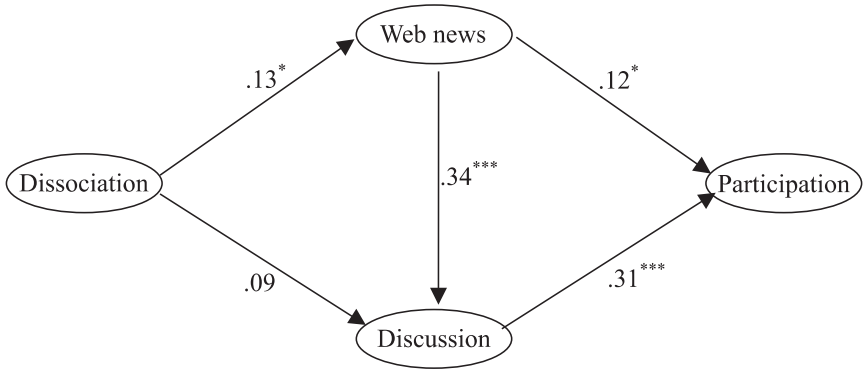

FIGURE 1 Path coefficients of the theorized model. The models include media dissociation, Web news use, online talk, and political participation with the following variables controlled; demographics (age, gender, education, and income), traditional news media uses (television news and newspaper), ideology, political efficacy, and individual opinion about war in Iraq were control. Model fit: $\chi^2(1) = 1.40$, $p = .24$, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .02, CFI =.99, and TLI = .97. Numeric values are standardized coefficients.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

path analyses ($N = 307$) using the LISREL 8.30 program (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). A path analysis via this structural equation modeling approach is useful because it evaluates the general fit of the model and tests other competing models in comparison with the theorized model. To achieve both model parsimony and control, demographics (age, gender, education, and income), traditional news media uses (television news and newspaper), ideology, political efficacy, and individual opinion about war in Iraq were controlled using the residualization procedure (see Cohen & Cohen, 1983, pp. 487–518). This involves regressing all of the study variables on the control variables and then using the residuals of the study variables in the substantive analyses. The model fit was assessed with multiple goodness-of-fit indexes. In addition to a chi-square (χ^2) goodness-of-fit index, the following fit indexes were considered together: the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR), the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). The fit indexes were designed to avoid some of the problems of sample size and distributional misspecification associated with the conventional overall test of fit (the χ^2 statistic) in the evaluation of a model (Bentler & Bonnet 1980; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1999). All indexes confirmed a good fit of our model, $\chi^2(1) = 1.40$, $p = .24$, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .02, CFI =.99, and TLI = .97.

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, most of the hypotheses were supported by these data. First, media dissociation was positively related to Internet news use ($\gamma = .13$, $p < .05$), consistent with hypotheses 1.[3] The more the respondents to our

TABLE 2
Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects and Variance Explained of Path Model[a]

Variables		*1*	*2*	*3*	R^2 *(%)*
1. Media dissociation	Direct	—	—	—	—
	Indirect	—	—	—	
	Total	—	—	—	
2. Web news use	Direct	.13*	—	—	2
	Indirect	—	—	—	
	Total	.13*	—	—	
3. Online talks	Direct	.09	.34***	—	13
	Indirect	.04*	—	—	
	Total	.14*	.34***	—	
4. Political participation	Direct	—	.12*	.31***	13
	Indirect	.06*	.10***	—	
	Total	.06*	.22***	.31***	

Note. Our model includes media dissociation, Web news use, online talk, and political participation with the following variables controlled; demographics (age, gender, education, and income), traditional news media uses (television news and newspaper), ideology, political efficacy, and individual opinion about war in Iraq were control. Due to the relatively large sample size, the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) was used for statistical tests of the total indirect effects. Goodness-of-fit test: $\chi^2(1) = 1.40$, $p = .24$, Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation = .04, Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual = .02, Comparitive Fit Index = .99, and Tucker-Lewis Index = .97.

[a]$N = 307$.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

survey felt that there was a discrepancy between their own opinion on an issue and that advanced by mainstream media, the more likely they were to search for news via the Internet. However, the results revealed that media dissociation had only indirect effects on online discussion through Web news use, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 2, which predicted a direct effect. Hypothesis 3, which predicted a positive relationship between respondents' Internet news use and online discussion, was supported ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$). The more respondents consumed online news about Iraq, the more likely they were to engage in online discussion about politics.

The results also revealed that Web news use was positively related to political participation ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$), providing support for Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5 also received support; online discussion was a significant predictor

[3]To identify separate effects of individual position and perceived media position about the war in Iraq composing media dissociation on Web news use, additional regression analyses were conducted after controlling for the effects of each component and the effects of control variables on Web news use. The results revealed that both individual position and perceived media position had significant effects on Web news use. More specifically, the results showed that individual support for war in Iraq was negatively associated to Web news use ($\beta = -.214$, $p < 01$); perceived mainstream media support for war was positively associated to Web news use ($\beta = .171$, $p < 01$).

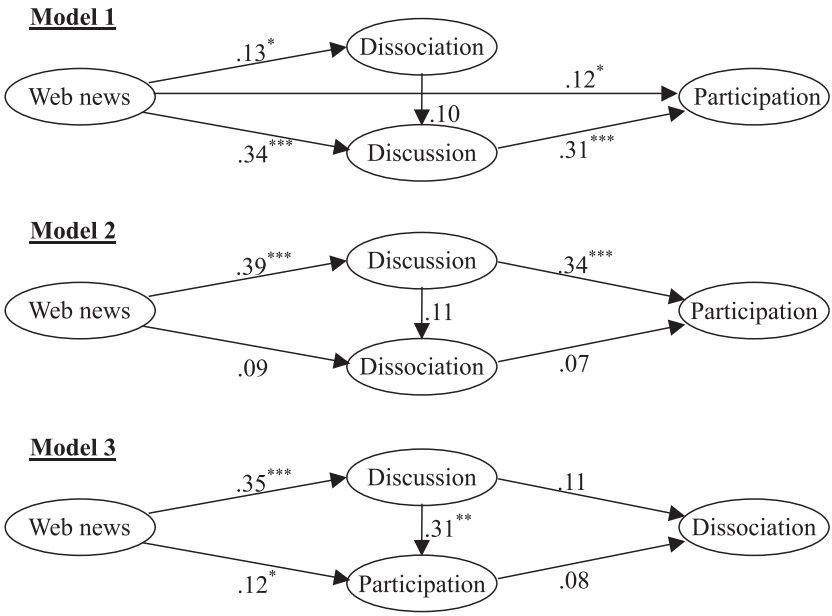

FIGURE 2 Alternative causal models. The models include media dissociation, Web news use, online talk, and political participation with the following variables controlled; demographics (age, gender, education, and income), traditional news media uses (television news and newspaper), ideology, political efficacy, and individual opinion about war in Iraq were control. Numeric values are standardized coefficients.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

of political participation such as contacting the media, signing a petition, donating money to an activist organization, displaying a sign or banner at your home, or participating in direct action and protest participation ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest a process whereby feelings of media dissociation among those who dissented to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq exert some mediated influence on participatory behavior through information search and discussion over the Internet.

Alternative Models

Although our theoretical model revealed satisfactory model fit, there may be other orderings of these variables that are also conceptually and statistically justified.

TABLE 3
Model Comparison

Model	*CFI*	*TLI*	*SRMR*	*RMSEA*	χ^2/df	*P-Value*
Theorized	.99	.97	.02	.04	1.40/1	.24
Model 1	.98	.90	.03	.07	2.44/1	.12
Model 2	.97	.80	.03	.10	3.94/1	.05
Model 3	.99	.93	.02	.06	2.01/1	.16

Note. CFI = Comparitive Fit Index. RMSEA = Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation. SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual. TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index.

For example, rather than media dissociation leading dissenters to search for information over the Internet, exposure to the greater diversity of content available online might actually have led respondents to perceive traditional media coverage as narrow and biased in scope. Political discussion through the Internet may also propel a strong tendency to "polarize towards one of the extremes" (Wallace, 2001, p. 76; also see Eveland & Shah, 2003), which would increase media dissociation. In addition, engaging in political participations might lead people to feel that mainstream media reports are biased against them by reinforcing their initial attitudes. Although the causal ordering of the information–expression–action relationship has been established (Shah et al., 2005), the position of media dissociation in this dynamic—and among this sample—is decidedly less clear. To test whether Web news use, online discussion, or political participation are antecedent to media dissociation among our respondents, three alternative models were established (see Figure 2 and Table 3). This analysis sought to determine whether these alternate models produced a better fit than the current structuring of the variables in Figure 1 and Table 2.

As seen in Table 3, analysis yielded less support for the alternative models as compared to our theorized structural model. When media dissociation served as the mediator between Web news use and online discussion (Model 1), model fit was acceptable but not better than that of the theoretical model. When both online news use and online discussion served as predictors of media dissociation and media dissociation mediated the relationship between online discussion and political participation (Model 2), the structural equation modeling results provided relatively less support for this model than our theoretical model. Similarly, the test of the final alternative model, in which online news use, online discussion, and political participation served as predictors of media dissociation (Model 3), produced acceptable model fit but still not a better fit than that of the theorized model. These results suggest that the causal order of the theorized model, which situates media dissociation as antecedent to seeking and exchanging information, is superior to the alternate causal structures in the competing models.

DISCUSSION

This study introduces a concept that explains information seeking and related political behaviors as a result of individuals' reaction to mainstream media coverage: media dissociation. Our findings revealed that those who felt that their views differed from those presented in mainstream media—a group largely comprised of antiwar opinion holders—sought out online sources for perspectives about the war. Use of the Internet as a news source among this group was, in turn, related to online discussion and political action, revealing the indirect effects of media dissociation on online political discussion and action. The structure of these relationships suggests that media dissociation can drive online news consumption, and through its effects in Internet information seeking can influence both expressive and activists political behaviors. The absence of direct effects between dissociation and these political behaviors further highlights the import of news seeking via the Internet as a spur for expression and action (Shah et al., 2005).

Two points are particularly noteworthy about our findings concerning this new concept of media dissociation. First, it appears that those who dissociated themselves from mainstream news content were mainly reacting to television coverage, based on the finding that they were less likely to consume TV news on the Iraqi situation but no less likely to consume newspapers. This suggests that the source of this dissociation was the "echoing press" found in television news reports that began after 9/11 and continued through the start the Iraq War (Domke, 2004, see also Massing, 2004; Sharkey, 2003). Second, statistical tests of competing models also provided empirical evidences that alternative causal orders among the study variables did not perform better than the structure theorized, providing some evidence that media dissociation is antecedent to these communication and political behaviors.

In addition to introducing a new concept for scholarly inquiry on the perceptual side of media effects, similar to hostile media and third-person perceptions, this case study data provides important clues about how antiwar mobilization took place and the unique role that the Internet played in encouraging some dissenters to become politically active by actually engaging in participatory behavior opposed to the actions of the U.S. government. The current media environment, characterized by increasing choice and control from media consumers, especially in online settings, may be critical to this spurring of political activity. Without the diversity of perspectives and opportunities to share opinions available via the Internet, this might not have been possible. This finding, although isolated to a specific case in the context of the Iraq War, suggests the need to rethink traditional models of social control via the media (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; D. M. McLeod & Hertog, 1992, 1999). This is particularly true for research on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). In the current news and information context, there are many more options for those who believe that there is little

support for their opinions in the media or social environment. Instead of falling silent, these individuals have the option of seeking out perspectives that more closely align with their viewpoints and opinions.

The implications of this research do not end there. Although we collected the data from a purposive sample of political dissenters to study the implications of media dissociation more closely, such findings seem to be consistent with a recent Pew Research Center for the People and the Press general sample survey (2000) about Internet use for political news. The survey found that 29% of respondents who went online to get news and information about the 2000 elections reported they did so because they did not get all information they wanted from traditional news sources, such as the daily newspaper and the network television news. Another Pew Research Center survey regarding Internet use for information about the Iraqi war also revealed that among online users, war opponents were more likely to engage in information search and exchange over the Internet than war supporters (Rainie et al., 2003). In addition, war opponents were more likely than war supporters to report that they think the Internet is very important, because it provides points of views that are different from traditional news sources.

Our findings, then, reinforce the increasingly important role the Internet can play in helping mobilize activism. As many social movement theorists have pointed out, free spaces are critical for social dissenters to nurture collective identity that challenge prevailing social arrangements and dominant cultural codes, because they provide the social networks in which participants safely express and share their resentments and beliefs (Melucci, 1989; Mueller, 1994; Polletta, 1999). For the social dissenters studied here, the Internet may provide an important free space that enables them to get the diverse information and safely exchange their views with others. Collective identity, nurtured by online discussion, may make an important contribution to the origins and dynamics of these social activities. Online discussion, characterized by anonymity, reduced social cues, and accessible like-minded people, makes it easier for those who hold dissenting viewpoints to share their resentments, build solidarity, and organize collective action. Online discussion can also provide necessary information to organize, allowing individuals to learn about upcoming events and to share news and calls to action.

These findings must be viewed with some caution, however. By relying on a purposive sample that drew heavily on Internet users who were largely antiwar opinion holders, these data may not generalize to average citizen actions and attitudes. Nonetheless, by testing these relationships with the purposive sample, we are able to explore the role that media perceptions and online behaviors play in converting interest to activism among some political dissenters. Contrary to theories of media's role as agents of social control during periods of external conflict, some antiwar opinion holders who encountered media reports and public opinion they felt stood in opposition to their perspectives, nonetheless, took part in various activities designed to express their views and alter policy.

A particular strength of this study rests on its timing and the collection of data during a period when media dissociation was likely to be high, at least among certain segments of the population. As noted, the period leading up to the start of the 2003 Gulf War was marked with general support for U.S. military action in Iraq and relatively negative media reports on antiwar protesters. Given this situation, it is worth noting that even though antiwar opinion holders may have felt dissociated from the mainstream media and perhaps even alienated from many of their fellow citizens, this alienation did not result in silence or withdrawal from political action. The results suggested that this was due to individuals' ability to find other information sources or voices that shared their views, validating their perspective and spurring action. The Internet seems to provide a counterpoint to the traditional media's power as agents of social control for those who dare to oppose majority opinion and the apparent skew of media coverage, transforming private resentment into social resistance.

By conceptualizing and testing the effects of the discrepancy between individual attitudes and those seen as being advanced in mainstream media as media dissociation, this research introduces a phenomenon that has gone largely unexplored in previous media bias perception research. Although this concept shares some similarity with hostile media perceptions, which concerns partisan's judgment of news coverage as biased, the two are not synonymous. Hostile media perceptions have been operationalized as a departure from a neutral midpoint indicating a lack of bias (see Gunther, 1988; Gunther & Christen, 1999). Media dissociation, however, is concerned with the perceptual distance between the perspective advanced in media coverage of an issue and self-position on that issue, regardless of whether the perceiver views the coverage to be biased or whether this judgment of media coverage is correct or not.

By focusing on an audience's reaction to media reports rather than direct media effects on the audience's attitude and behavior, media dissociation may provide a new approach in understanding the active role individuals play in making sense of political news. The concept is applied here to the problem of activism among the already interested, but it could be applied in other contexts and even among general population. Testing this construct in other contexts would expand our understanding of how people seek out diverse viewpoints when confronted with media views that appear to conflict with their own. The Internet may be a particularly important resource in such situations, but interpersonal networks and other alternative information sources may also prove valuable and worthy of further research exploration.

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APPENDIX A
QUESTION WORDING

[Gender] What is your gender?

[Age] How old are you?

[Education] What's the highest level of education you've obtained?

[Income] What was your total household income for 2002?: less than $20,000; between $20,000 and $40,000; between $40,000 and $60,000; between $80,000 and $100,000; more than $100,000?

[Ideology] Economic Ideology: The terms "liberal" and "conservative" may mean different things to different people, depending on the kind of issue one is considering. In terms of *economic* issues, would you say you are generally: very liberal, liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, conservative, or very conservative? *Social Ideology:* In terms of *social* issues, would you say you are generally: very liberal, liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, conservative, or very conservative?

[Opinion about the war with Iraq] Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq

a. The U.S.-led coalition should have attacked Iraq only with U.N. Security Council approval
b. The U.S.-led coalition should have attacked Iraq only with the support of traditional allies

[News Media Use] How often have you consulted the following sources for news or information about the Iraqi situation?

a. Television
b. Newspaper
c. Internet

[Media Dissociation] Individual support for Iraqi war: Using the scale below, please choose the number that best corresponds to *your* level of opposition or support for the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq. *Perceived mainstream media position for Iraqi war:* Using the scale below, please circle the number that best corresponds to your opinion about the level of opposition or support for the U.S.-led coalition's war with Iraq *expressed by the news media.*

[Online Discussion] Discussion Frequency: How often do you talk about politics *via the Internet with …*

a. Family members
b. Friends
c. Coworkers
d. Neighbors
e. Acquaintances
f. Strangers

[Antiwar Political Participation] Please indicate whether you have engaged in any of the following activities as a response to the Iraqi situation:

a. Displayed a sign or banner at your home
b. Contacted an elected official
c. Written or called a media organization
d. Signed a petition
e. Donated money to an activist organization
f. Participated in direct action
g. Participated in a protest or rally