Can Partisan News Be Valuable for Discussion?
An Analysis of the Effects of Internal Balance
on Online Discussion Intention

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What can be the effect of the simultaneous increase in online news seeking and exposure *and* the tendency for online news to be partisan? This study examines the effects of online partisan news on intention to engage in two online discussion dimensions: withdrawal and civil discussion. The novel notion of internal balance is advanced to determine the degree of balance or lack thereof (partisanship) within news stories. The effects are tested in two traditionally different media systems, the United States and Spain, using a controlled experiment. Results demonstrate that partisan news leads to less withdrawal and more civil discussion intention compared to balanced news. Moreover, results are consistent in both countries, thereby suggesting a democratic value for partisan news.

Keywords: partisan news, internal balance, online political discussion, media systems, cross-national research

In *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, Ward (2004) questioned the traditional notion of journalistic objectivity following a historical review of the concept and its applicability to contemporary journalism. Ward claimed that the search for objectivity has led to a hard line separating objective news and subjective opinion. This, however, contrasted with the realities of modern life: a confusing and deceitful world where facts and values frequently are intertwined. Indeed, Ward's claims can be experienced in the online world, especially among nontraditional news sources such as social media and blogs, which tend to be more partisan (Sesno, 2008) and less objective. Partisan news is usually defined as news that favors a political cause or party (Ward, 2004). Moreover, these nontraditional news outlets are growing in popularity as more Americans get their news online, especially from social networking sites (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012).

One important goal of news dissemination is to create an informed and involved citizenry. Researchers have shown that newspaper readership carries a host of democratic benefits, including increased political discussion (Mondak, 1995a, 1995b; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah et al.,

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2007). However, most studies of news media effects have employed traditional objective news. What, then, is the impact of exposure to partisan news on its consumers?

Using experimental data from the United States and Spain, this study tests the effects of the novel concept of "internal balance"—the degree of balance among issue positions within a news article—on online discussion intention (i.e., the reader's willingness to engage in conversational behaviors). The cross-national experiment entails a control for media system (i.e., the structure and political role of the news media in a given country) through a randomized block design. The news topic of assisted suicide is used as a controversial issue because it lends itself to fruitful cross-national comparisons.

Traditional Objectivity and News Outlets in Networked Societies

Eighty-one percent of adults in the United States are currently online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2015). When online, they make friends, maintain social ties, play, shop, read or watch the news, and discuss personal and political issues. By 2012, 50% of adults were getting their news online (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012), including from traditional online outlets such as *The New York Times* online version, and nontraditional online sources such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube (Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, & Brundidge, 2013; Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Christian, 2012; Purcell, Raine, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). Alternative or nontraditional online news sources are becoming increasingly present in the daily news diet (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012), especially for younger generations (18- to 29-year-olds; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012), who represent the largest group of social media and blog consumers (Zickuhr, 2010).

Alternative or nontraditional online news sources are notably different from traditional news outlets in several ways. Two of these ways are relevant to the present study. First, alternative online news tends to be partisan (Sesno, 2008; Sunstein, 2007). In general, the format imposes no ethical requirements such as objectivity (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), so the potential for partisanship is high. This is especially true among networked political environments (Meraz, 2011) and in the blogosphere (Gil de Zuniga, Lewis, Willard, Valenzuela, & Baresch, 2011; Tremayne, Zheng, Kook Lee, & Jeong, 2006). Second, online news can be shared widely; thus, the possibilities for audience reach are remarkable.

The combination of content and audience reach makes nontraditional online news an intriguing research subject with potentially decisive implications for everyday talk (Mansbridge, 1999). Following Ward's (2004) observation that facts and values are becoming challenging to discern, it is important to assess the effects of increasingly present, nontraditional news features, such as partisanship. Provided that partisan news favors a political faction, partisan news is not balanced. Unfortunately, the precise meaning of *balance* is not straightforward in the literature, even in the ethics literature.[1]

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[1] One meaning given to *fairness/balance* is "the availability of multiple perspectives and endless background" (Ward, 2004, p. 324).

The Standard of Balance

Among the standards of objectivity discussed by Ward (2004),[2] fairness or balance is sometimes considered the most important (Fico & Cote, 1999), and it continues to drive story composition in contemporary newspapers (Rivers, Schram, & Christians, 1980). When newspapers consider ethics, balance always requires attention (Rivers et al., 1980; Rouner, Slater, & Buddenbaum, 1999). Balance involves representing each point of view fairly (though there is no exact definition of what *fairly* means), and is also called *fairness and balance* or *fair play*. Hence, the meaning of balance in the literature or in codes of ethics can be highly ambiguous (Fico & Cote, 1999). For example, does it mean treating all sides of a story identically? Or should coverage reflect the legitimacy of each side (Shoemaker, 1984)? The answer to these questions and how newspapers ultimately adhere to balance have strong implications for a democratic society's ability to "make full, informed choices among candidates with differing policy priorities" (Fico & Cote, 1999, p. 124) or among differing points of view on an issue. Journalism ethics needs to grapple with how to consider deviations from the completely balanced news reports (i.e., each side is given the same weight regardless of support). For instance, what happens if the support or the facts are not equally distributed among the contending parties (e.g., the debate about global warming)? Should journalists continue to try to produce balanced news reports? What are the consequences of news that takes a partisan angle?

In terms of *effects* on consumers, balance has been rather understudied (Lacy, Fico, & Simon, 1991). Even though Fico and colleagues have examined balance effects (Fico & Cote, 1999; Fico, Richardson, & Edwards, 2004; Fico & Soffin, 1995), their results only added to this literature partially. First, their studies focused on assessing the balance of newspapers through content analysis, not balance *effects*. Second, when they looked at the consequences of balance, they used fake news stories. Finally, they did not question or discuss the concept of balance, and they defined it as giving equal story space to an issue, regardless of its acknowledged representation in actual events (Fico & Soffin, 1995).

News that is considered partisan may not adhere to the standard of balance, but claiming that it is "unfair," or that it does not represent each point of view fairly, does not offer a reasonable definition of what partisan news actually implies. Ward's (2004) definition of *fairly* is not completely clear-cut, and no other literature further clarifies the term. Therefore, in an effort to explain balance as an underlying feature of partisan news, a distinction between external and internal balance is introduced here as a first step to disentangle the concept of balance.

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[2] According to Ward (2004), the standards of objectivity are factuality, nonbias, independence, noninterpretation, neutrality, and fairness (or balance). Other scholars (e.g., Bennett, 1996) have also treated objectivity, though Bennett's concept of objectivity is conflated with balance and their intimate relationship with official sources, which ultimately makes a practical separation of objectivity and its standards more challenging.

The Notion of Internal Balance

Balance has been studied at the story level (Fico & Cote, 1999; Fico et al., 2004; Lacy et al., 1991) and at both story and issue levels (Fico & Soffin, 1995). The story level is a micro level (internal to one story). The issue level is a macro level (external to any particular story and encompassing many or all news stories about a given issue). Despite this theoretical and empirical distinction, a lack of conversation persists in the literature as to whether these two levels have different effects on news consumers and whether it matters. As a result, a refinement is proposed.

Let the definition of balance distinguish between the notion of *internal* and *external* balance. Internal balance refers to the balance, or lack thereof, within each news article *individually*. External balance refers to the balance, or lack thereof, at the issue level (all newspaper articles about an issue), or at the diet level (a particular mix of news and news sources an individual enjoys). For example, one could receive a balanced news diet or a set of news that is externally balanced either by combining partisan news from all sides of an issue or by combining internally balanced news articles.

Internal balance allows for a full range of possibilities. Thus, in a partisan news article, only one side of the issue may be represented (at the one extreme), or at least one side is perhaps more developed than the other(s). Conversely, in a balanced news article, each side of a controversial issue typically receives equal treatment.

The distinction between internal and external balance is valuable to unravel because of differences found in news readership and among media systems. Scholars have found that, in a fragmented news landscape, news consumers choose various partisan outlets in a more (LaCour, 2013) or less (Garrett, 2009a; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013) balanced way. However, there is also evidence that consumers gravitate toward balanced sources (LaCour, 2013). Both diets would seem to be equivalent in terms of external balance but not in terms of internal balance. On top of this, journalistic standard traditions—including balance—in media systems have led to different practices in partisanship. The literature has substantiated the existence of balanced and partisan news in different media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The next section addresses the relationship between internal balance, or the extent of partisanship, and media system traditions.

Media Systems and Internal Balance

Journalism exists within a context, a media system, usually within the boundaries of a country. A media system defines the structure and political role of the news media in that country. Media systems differ across the world, even across Western countries. Broersma (2007) proposed classifying Western media systems into two styles: *reflective* style and *news* style.

The reflective style (or Mediterranean model; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) is discursive and rooted in the partisan press. It centers on opinions and analysis, with more emphasis on views than on news. It is often employed in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and France. The news style (or Liberal model; Hallin &

Mancini, 2004) is quite the opposite. It is rooted in facts and strives to be strictly nonpartisan. It is practiced in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.[3]

In the Mediterranean model, internal balance takes the form of *partisan news*, with individual stories in the media each aiming to represent one or more political views (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The journalist decides how much weight to give to each side of a controversial issue depending on his or her judgment, the perceived reality behind each side of the issue (support, evidence, etc.), and the partisan bias of the employing newspaper. In the Liberal model, internal balance takes the form of *balanced news*, which presents all sides (usually two) of a controversial issue by giving equal space to each side in the news story. Often this happens regardless of whether there is equal support or an equal number of facts for each side of the issue.

Plenty of evidence (e.g., van Kempen, 2007) confirms that print news in the Liberal model adheres to internal balance. This is typified by journalists firmly holding on to neutral role positions (Patterson, 1998), and by news being bound to traditions of political neutrality (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and confined within a narrow (political) spectrum in which only two issues are discussed (Schudson, 1978).

Most research on media systems consists of content analysis (testing differences among media systems). However, with the notable exception of Schmitt-Beck (2003), little research has focused on the effects of these media systems on individuals' news exposure. Schmitt-Beck examined the effects of partisan news on individuals, but chose partisan *perceptions* as the outcome variable. Schmitt-Beck tested whether differences among media systems were perceived as such by individuals as opposed to testing media systems effects per se. So, what are the consequences of exposure to externally equivalent news packages (diets), but internally different articles (partisan versus balanced) on discussion intention?

Effects of Internal Balance on Online Discussion

News media use has long been associated with a higher frequency of political discussion (Brundidge, 2010b; Kim et al., 1999; Mondak, 1995a, 1995b; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Rojas et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2005, 2007). Research also has revealed a positive relationship between online news sources (Brundidge, 2010b) or alternative news sources (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009) and online political discussion.

Research concerning online news has confirmed that nontraditional news outlets tend to be partisan (Garrett, 2009a; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2011; Sesno, 2008; Sunstein, 2007). Because of this characteristic, a thesis about online selective exposure was initially formulated. The thesis claimed that

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[3] Whereas partisan cues in most European countries can be found throughout the entire newspaper, in the North American Liberal model, partisan cues are strictly confined to the editorial pages. Gaziano (1989) found that it was in this editorial section where newspapers endorse candidates or parties and take editorial positions, but the bulk of the daily remains balanced.

Internet users would be interested only in likeminded information. Additionally, the thesis posited that, when Internet users would encounter political difference, they would tend to avoid it (Sunstein, 2007). The simultaneous occurrence of these two behaviors within individuals would create fragmented publics (Sunstein, 2007) growing further apart and leading to polarization (Sunstein, 2007; Wojcieszak, 2010). However, more recent research examining engagement with online news points to a more nuanced thesis. Indeed, individuals tend to flock toward likeminded information online. Yet they do *not* dismiss contrary information (Brundidge, 2010a; Garrett, 2009a, 2009b). What does this crosscutting exposure lead to?

Brundidge (2010a, 2010b) found that exposure to online news is positively related to online political discussion. Still, these studies did not test the relationship between exposure and discussion using a control group. It remains to be seen whether internal balance affects discussion or whether it was an effect of news exposure in and of itself (Brundidge, 2010b). The concept of internal balance lends itself to empirical testing much better than the more general concept of balance, because internal balance delimits where the balance occurs (within the news article) and what the end points are (complete partisanship and complete balance).

There are a few explanations for the positive relationship between online news media use and political discussion based on direct effects. First, within communication mediation, scholars have found that online news exposure is a direct antecedent of online discussion (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Shah et al., 2005). Second, communication infrastructure theory builds on the idea of a storytelling neighborhood, where communicative networks among residents and the media—including from online news to online discussion—contribute to community integration (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003). A third explanation by the so-called traversability thesis (Brundidge, 2010b) claims a connection between online news and online political discussion. The traversability thesis posits that individuals on the Internet move from news to discussion seamlessly, with the lines between the two acts increasingly becoming blurred. The affordances of Web 2.0 and constant connectivity mean that one can read news on Facebook while commenting on the piece almost instantaneously.

Aside from direct effect explanations, there also could be indirect effects. Hallin and Mancini (2004) proposed that the partisan press reinforces the ideological predispositions of readers. Similarly, past research has shown that exposure to partisan press leads to stronger party-political attitudes (Rokkan & Torsvik, 1970), party attachment (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammel, & Semetko, 1999; Patterson, 1998), and vote choice (Newton & Brynin as cited in van Kempen, 2007). Attitude strength, in turn, predicts willingness to speak out in public (Baldassare & Katz, 1996; Matthes, Rios-Morrison, & Schemer, 2010), even in a hostile climate of opinion (Matthes et al., 2010). Thus, according to all this evidence, partisan news exposure would lead to more discussion.

On the strength of previous research linking partisan news engagement to subsequent discussion, this article uses two dimensions of the precursor to discussion, discussion intention, to examine the relationship between internal balance and discussion. The two dimensions, withdrawal and civil discussion intention, represent the extremes of an array of behavioral intentions. Although classifying these strategies is not the objective of this study, observing how individuals online are willing to engage with the two extremes (withdrawal and civil discussion) could offer insight into engagement intentions that

online users may adopt. By and large, these behavioral intentions can take place when an individual is involved in an online discussion, especially a discussion entailing disagreement (Brundidge, 2010a). Let us consider these two dimensions.

Discussion Intention Dimensions

Online discussion activities range from complete discussion withdrawal to civil discussion engagement—and everything in between.[4] Both avoidance and engagement outcomes include many possible strategies. For instance, among discussion avoidance strategies, Hayes (2007) reported that individuals may change the topic, say nothing, or walk away from the discussion. Among discussion engagement strategies, individuals may say their opinion diplomatically or tell their true opinion hoping to engage in a discussion. Some discussion engagement strategies could be considered on the verge of avoidance because they do not involve feedback, may be off topic or evasive, and/or are not truthful. This is the case when reflecting on the question, bouncing the question back to the inquirer, mentioning an opinion in passing while quickly changing topics, expressing uncertainty or ambivalence, expressing indifference, talking about someone else's opinion, and/or pretending to agree.

Withdrawal implies walking away from a discussion (Hayes, 2007) either physically or mentally. Individuals may turn off the chat, go to other posts, engage in another activity, or change the topic. On the other hand, civil discussion involves respecting the collective traditions of democracy (Papacharissi, 2004), thereby contributing to civil society and a revived public sphere (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2003). This is an encompassing view of civil discussion (as advanced by Papacharissi) that can be attained by many rather than the more restrictive Habermasian notion of deliberative discussion (Mansbridge, 1999). As discussed, with the arrival of online alternative news sources, the news environment is rapidly changing. However, research into the societal effects of these changes has not kept up.

Several hypotheses of direct and indirect effects support a positive relationship between online news and discussion (e.g., the traversability hypothesis; Brundidge, 2010b; or a mediation hypothesis via attitude strength; Rokkan & Torsvik, 1970). Formally, this study proposes the following two hypotheses:

H1:   *Controlling for media system, participants exposed to a set of (internally) partisan news will experience a lower intention to withdraw than participants exposed to a set of (internally) balanced news.*

H2:   *Controlling for media system, participants exposed to a set of (internally) partisan news will experience a higher intention to engage in civil discussion than participants exposed to a set of (internally) balanced news.*

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[4] Uncivil discussion could also occur, but this remains a matter for future research.

Use of discussion intention is justified by the research of prominent public opinion scholars, who have used behavioral intentions or hypothetical scenarios to gather information about the influencing factors in public opinion (Hayes, 2007; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004; Rojas et al., 2005). The logic is that behavioral intentions are a strong predictor of behavior itself (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970). The present research represents a continuation of this work.

The following section provides context for the study in terms of the selected media systems and news topic, and continues with the study design, sample, experimental stimulus, and measurement.

Method

Media Systems Considerations

Analysis of this study's outcomes requires an understanding of the media system context. At least two different media systems should be considered, one with a primarily balanced press and the other with a partisan press, thus requesting participants from at least two countries. This way, the country itself (media system) can act as control in the study, albeit an imperfect one. In Dogan and Pelassy's (1990) words, "if the same factor [internal balance] produces the same effects in two very different situations [media systems], its influence tends to be confirmed" (p. 130).

The country choices were the United States and Spain. First, they represented two different media systems in Western journalism, the Liberal model and the Mediterranean model, respectively. This means that individuals in the United States and Spain may experience online partisan news differently. Second, these two models represent the two Western media systems that are farthest apart in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology, so variance is potentially maximized. Although the United States and Spain were chosen to represent two distinct media systems, this study recognizes that, obviously, they differ in more dimensions than internal balance.

The Issue of Assisted Suicide

Assisted suicide was chosen as the topic for this study for several reasons. First, assisted suicide is a controversial issue, in both the United States (Byock, Corbeil, & Goodrich, 2009; Holody, 2006; Pollock & Yulis, 2004; Weir, 1989) and Spain (Cardona Ramírez & Medina Echeverri, 2014). Second, assisted suicide was a current-day controversy during data collection and it continues to be. For instance, *The New York Times* has reported on it every month on average over the last 10 years (http://www.nytimes.com/pages/topics). Moreover, the cases of Eluana Englaro in Italy (who died in 2009) and Chantal Sébire in France (who died in 2008) had been in the news extensively and revived the cases of Terri Schiavo in the United States (who died in 2005) and Ramón Sampedro in Spain (who died in 1998), to name a few. The news media played a crucial role in stirring and shaping public opinion about the issue of assisted suicide in all these cases. Third, assisted suicide is an issue that most democratic countries have debated fiercely in recent years and still remains unresolved. Fourth, assisted suicide was confirmed to be of interest to study participants (see information on the sample below). Finally, the issue

of assisted suicide travels well across Western countries because both opponents and supporters' claims are grounded in the same arguments. For example, supporters appeal to notions of freedom of choice and patients' rights, and opponents appeal to the sanctity of life.

Study Design

To test the two hypotheses, the experiment used a randomized block design. When participants are not homogeneous because they are from two different countries, grouping them into homogeneous blocks and using a randomized block design reduces the experimental error and increases the validity of inferences about the treatment effects (internal balance; Keppel & Wickens, 2004). The assignment to the conditions (partisan or balanced news set) in a randomized block design is random but carried out separately for each block.

The study was administered online and consisted of an experiment embedded in a Web survey. It was pilot-tested before fieldwork. Study participants were contacted via e-mail through class electronic mailing lists. The e-mail contained the study URL. Each participant received a set of two news articles embedded in the questionnaire. The researcher obtained informed consent online.[5] The instructions recommended that participants complete the study in one sitting and that it would require about 25 minutes.[6] Data were collected in April 2009.

Two versions of the same instrument were created, one in English for participants in the United States and one in Spanish for participants in Spain. The randomized block design ensured that only participants in the United States accessed the study in English, and only participants in Spain were able to do so in Spanish. Translation of the original English instrument into Spanish was done using Google translation. The researcher, who is fluent in both languages, further edited the instrument. Last, there was a second round of editing by a Spanish native to ensure quality.

Sample

The sample consisted of collegiate participants. This choice was deemed appropriate because collegiate participants' online presence is much higher than any other age group. For instance, in 2009 92% of 18- to 29-year-olds were online in the United States (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2015) and 84% in Spain (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2015). Thus, asking participants to imagine an online socializing event seemed typical and common for this age group.

Prior to the experimental manipulation, the researcher determined that assisted suicide was a topic that college students cared about. The data indicated that, on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*), participants felt the issue of assisted suicide (assisting someone to die and having the right to be

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[5] The collection of all the data was done in accordance with Human Subjects Research Protection, Protocol #SE-2009-0194.

[6] The order of questions was randomized to avoid order effects.

disconnected from life support) was important to them (M = 4.52, SD = 1.19; r = .69), and they perceived themselves to have quite a bit of knowledge about it (M = 3.52, SD = 1.19; r = .74).[7]

The sample was diverse. Participants were recruited from a wide variety of majors, including communication, journalism, political science, economics, business, psychology, nursing, education, social work, biology, philosophy, pharmacy, engineering, history, languages, finance, consumer science, accounting, and animal science, to name the most represented. In all, students from 14 Midwestern universities and minor colleges in the United States as well as 8 universities in Spain participated.

Participants who spent less than 10 minutes completing the study or who took more than one hour to finish were eliminated. This action removed participants for whom the manipulation may not have worked. Eventually, 517 participants were retained. The sample had a mean age of 23.3 years (SD = 7.56) and was 69.9% female.

Experimental Stimulus: Internal Balance

To begin, two partisan articles were selected from print newspapers in Spain using a search on LexisNexis with the following criteria: (a) major world publications (not in English), (b) March 2007 to March 2009,[8] and (c) keywords "assisted suicide" or "euthanasia" (in Spanish). Out of the 340 hits for newspapers, the researcher reviewed the 138 articles published in Spanish newspapers. To create the partisan condition, one article in favor of and one article against assisted suicide were chosen from the set of Spanish articles. The pro–assisted suicide article appealed to notions of free choice and the right to stop suffering. The article against assisted suicide maintained that it was a religious sin and that no one should play God. Both articles were regular newspaper articles (i.e., not editorials).

To create the balanced condition, all paragraphs from the two partisan articles were mixed together and then split into two new articles. The paragraphs were moved around to create a logical argument, and then transitions were added or changed to make the argument flow. Thus, in essence, both sets of articles (the partisan condition with two partisan articles and the balanced condition with two balanced articles) were equivalent but packaged differently. In fact, in terms of external balance, the two news sets had the same external balance. However, the news articles differed in terms of internal balance. An advantage of upholding external balance across conditions is that it eliminated the need to control for assisted suicide support or opposition.

The translation procedure for the articles was the same as for the instrument, but in reverse. Additionally, the second English editor was a professional journalist. For the English translation, story

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[7] Throughout this article, r is the Spearman-Brown reliability test (split-half), which is an unbiased and appropriate inter-item reliability coefficient to report for a two-item scale (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013).

[8] The time period was selected to include the most recent cases in which assisted suicide had been discussed in the media.

details were localized. References were made to events in the United States of a similar nature so participants would believe the articles originated in a U.S. newspaper and the reading would be fluid. Hence, the overall content was equivalent across languages.

The order of appearance of each of the two articles in every condition was random to control for order effects. The titles of the balanced articles were: "The Debate Over Assisted Suicide Is Reignited Again" (468 words) and "Notes on Assisted Suicide" (563 words). For the partisan articles, the titles were "The Government Plans to Regulate Assisted Suicide This Term: It's Time to Accept Assisted Suicide" (498 words) and "Conservatives Say That Assisted Suicide is 'Slaying' People Using Public Funds" (537 words). As shown in Table 1, random assignment to the two conditions was evenly split and produced two equivalent groups.

Table 1. Differences Across Groups.

Variables	Balanced (n = 257)	Partisan (n = 260)	α	r	p value
Age (years)	23.26	23.41			.82
Gender (female)	72.6%	66.9%			.14
Ideology	2.40	2.41		.77	.96
Media use	3.00	3.19	.55		.06
Self-censorship	2.66	2.52	.81		.17
Political talk (size)	4.35	4.73	.66		.41
Political talk (frequency)	2.76	2.87	.63		.26
Political talk (heterogeneity)	3.55	3.65	.67		.29
Issue importance	4.47	4.58		.69	.30
Issue knowledge	3.45	3.59		.74	.20

Note. All variables except age and gender were asked before the experimental manipulation. Scales are from 0 to 6 for ideology, media use, self-censorship, frequency, heterogeneity, and issue importance and knowledge. Tests are two-tailed *t* tests except for gender, which is a nonparametric test. *r* is reported for variables with two items, Chronbach's α, for variables with three or more items. For a description of the variables, see the Appendix.

Measurement

Two variables were used as criterion variables: withdrawal and civil discussion intention, both using items that were on a scale from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 6 (*very likely*). These items were answered

after reading a contentious online scenario about assisted suicide[9] that set the tone for a controversial discussion. *Withdrawal intention* was measured with three items, inquiring about the likelihood that participants would change the topic, walk away from the discussion, and not say anything at all (Cronbach's α = .83). *Civil discussion intention* was measured with two items that inquired about participants' willingness to engage in a discussion diplomatically and in a lively manner ($r = .67$). See Table 2 for the means and their distribution across conditions.

Table 2. Means for the Outcome Variable.

Outcome	Internal balance	Mean	SD	N
Withdrawal intention	Balanced	1.89	1.69	257
	Partisan	1.57	1.51	260
	Total	1.73	1.61	517
Civil discussion intention	Balanced	3.55	1.63	257
	Partisan	3.84	1.57	260
	Total	3.69	1.60	517

Results

A manipulation check indicated that participants effectively identified whether the news sets had articles with internal balance (condition with two balanced news articles) or not (condition with two partisan news articles). This was tested by the item "How would you characterize the news stories you just read?" Responses were on a scale ranging from 0 (*containing many pro-assisted suicide statements*), to 3 as the midpoint (*containing* both *pro- and against assisted suicide statements*), to 6 (*containing many statements against assisted suicide*). Responses were then transformed into a dichotomous 0 (balanced) and 1 (partisan) variable. Values 0, 1, 5, and 6 were considered partisan; the rest, balanced. Folding this item (Lee, 2005) was necessary to account for the fact that, in the partisan news condition, the statements were grouped into favoring or opposing assisted suicide, one position for each article; whereas in the balanced news condition, the statements were mixed in each article. Nonparametric tests indicated that participants exposed to the partisan news condition perceived the news stories to be more partisan than participants in the balanced news condition ($p = .00$).[10]

To test the hypotheses posed in this study, 2 two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used. Following analysis for randomized block designs (see Keppel & Wickens, 2004), first the researcher checked that there was no interaction between the factor and the block in the ANOVAs (see Tables 3 and

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[9] For exact wording of the questions as well as the description of the online scenario see the Appendix.

[10] Independent samples Mann-Whitney test.

4). Second, the researcher checked that the error term was smaller than with a one-factor analysis (which was corroborated). Both checks confirmed the well-functioning of the block.

Participants who were exposed to partisan news intended to withdraw significantly *less* ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.51$) than participants who were exposed to balanced news ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.69$), $F(1, 513) = 5.21$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This supported Hypothesis 1 (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 3. Two-Way ANOVA for Withdrawal Intention.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η²
Internal balance	12.96	1	12.96	5.21	.02	.01
Block (media system)	48.96	1	48.96	19.47	.00	.04
Internal balance × block	0.09	1	0.09	0.04	.85	.00
Error	1,277.07	513	2.49			
Total	1,338.31	516				

Note. Dependent variable is withdrawal intention (scale is 0-6). SS is sums of squares; MS is the mean SS. Effect sizes are small: $.01 \leq \eta^2 < .06$; medium: $.06 \leq \eta^2 < .14$; large: $\eta^2 \geq .14$. *F* tests are one-tailed (Ley, 1979).

Participants who were exposed to partisan news intended to engage in significantly *more* civil discussion ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.57$) than participants who were exposed to balanced news ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.63$), $F(1, 513) = 4.77$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This supported Hypothesis 2 (see Tables 2 and 4).

Table 4. Two-Way ANOVA for Civil Discussion Intention.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η²
Internal balance	12.00	1	12.00	4.77	.03	.01
Block (media system)	26.44	1	26.44	10.51	.00	.02
Internal balance × block	0.40	1	0.40	0.16	.69	.00
Error	1290.33	513				
Total	1328.21	516				

Note. Dependent variable is civil discussion intention (scale is 0-6). SS is sums of squares; MS is the mean SS. Effect sizes are small: $.01 \leq \eta^2 < .06$; medium: $.06 \leq \eta^2 < .14$; large: $\eta^2 \geq .14$. *F* tests are one-tailed (Ley, 1979).

Discussion

Balance in the news has long been considered a journalistic standard of objectivity to follow (Ward, 2004). Yet this contrasts with online news features, which are typically partisan (Sesno, 2008) and do not adhere to the same ethical standards as traditional balanced news (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Hence, it is important to assess the potential effects of partisan news on democratic outcomes such as online discussion intention.

This study analyzes the effects of partisan vis-à-vis balanced news articles on reader political discussion intention. The effects of partisanship were assessed using a randomized block design with two countries, the United States and Spain, in order to control for media system. The experimental condition contended with the issue of assisted suicide, an issue that participants deemed important, with one condition containing two partisan news articles and the other, two balanced news articles. Results demonstrated that individuals exposed to the partisan news condition were *less* willing to withdraw from an online discussion than individuals exposed to the balanced news condition. Moreover, this result was consistent in both countries. Results also demonstrated that individuals exposed to the partisan news condition were *more* willing to engage in online civil discussion than individuals exposed to the balanced news condition. Again, the results were consistent in the two countries considered.

The consistent findings in both countries means that the study results were not an artifact of the media system participants had grown up in, but rather an actual effect of internal balance (see Dogan & Pelassy, 1990). In other words, the tradition of reading news in a given media system, say the Liberal model (with mostly balanced news), had no effect on how individuals processed internal balance in the study experiment. Perhaps the effect of internal balance is psychological and does not interfere with journalistic traditions, or maybe the effect is a result of assisted suicide having the same undergoing arguments in both countries. Only study replicability with other discussion topics and including psychological measures may clarify this.

Although the *p* values were significant, the size of effects of internal balance was small, with η²s in the neighborhood of .01. However, the experimental conditions were set up to produce the conditions *least likely* to yield *big* differences. The intention was that any significant difference would be much more important than comparing exposure to single-valence partisan news content (i.e., one partisan article). The two conditions (partisan and balanced news) contained the same information but packaged differently. Individually, the two articles were either completely partisan, each with discussion of only one side of the issue, or completely balanced, each with equal space given to both sides of the issue. That is, there was a difference in internal balance in the two conditions. Together, however, each package (experimental condition) had the same external balance (i.e., each had the exact same information). Future research must address the issue of dosage—or how much deviation from balanced news (partisanship) is needed to produce more civil discussion since only the extremes have been considered here.

Another design concern was mimicking the online experience. Usually, a news event may generate more than one news story or article on a Twitter, Facebook, or other social network site, thereby

exposing individuals to a variety of news, including different sides of a story (Garrett, 2009a). Even though selective exposure to online content tends to be homogeneous (Sunstein, 2007), individuals tend to stumble upon news of different valence (Brundidge, 2010a; Garrett, 2009a). By exposing participants to a package of news rather than a single article, the objective was to create a more valid environment of news exposure representing an online experience. Thus, the experimental condition can be thought of as ecologically valid. Still, the lack of probability sampling made it difficult to generalize about effects at the population level.

In terms of internal validity, participants were first randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Pretreatment checks indicated that the two conditions were equivalent at the onset (see Table 1), thus confirming adequate randomization. Second, the randomized block design controlled for media system (creating homogeneous blocks). Both features increased the internal validity of the experiment (Keppel & Wickens, 2004).

Although these results are promising, two limitations to this study need to be discussed. First, participants were asked to express their intention to withdraw from discussion and/or engage in it rather than actually doing it. Therefore, the conclusions of this study must rely on the assumption that behavioral intentions are strongly indicative of behaviors themselves (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1970), but do not necessarily lead to them. The conclusions offered are in full recognition of this limitation. Second, the effect of partisan news readership on political discussion intention may not be direct as tested here. Ideological reinforcing or attitude strength (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Norris et al., 1999; Patterson, 1998) may have mediated the effect, but this mediation was not formally tested. Mediation is a question for future research to address.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of understanding communication processes in the public opinion and political discussion domains and sheds light on the role of partisanship (an aspect of journalism ethics) in an increasingly important facet of everyday life—online discussion. In his book, Ward (2004) invited researchers to rethink and question the notion of traditional journalism objectivity and to examine its parts systematically. This study accepted his invitation by developing the notion of internal balance, which clarified and opened a dialogue about the previously unclear standard of fairness/balance (Fico & Cote, 1999) in journalism ethics. Even though this study is not the first to link journalistic standards to their effects on everyday talk, it is one of the first to do it applying the standard of fairness/balance, particularly using the notion of internal balance to test partisanship in news articles.

Furthermore, this study may be one of only a few studies to test discussion intentions comparatively beyond the Asian–American contrast. Given the need for comparative research in the realm of public opinion while taking media systems into account (Nir, 2012), and the importance of cross-cultural research to challenge prior research, generalize theories, and see how communication is organized at a societal level (Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992), the hope is that this study may encourage a body of research that takes a comparative perspective.

Future studies could also consider short- versus long-term consequences of internal balance. Likewise, new studies could include internal balance in TV news. The increasingly popular Fox News and MSNBC certainly challenge the notion of balance. Are the effects alike in this medium?

The growing popularity of online news in the United States (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012) makes this study especially pertinent. Understanding the complex nature of balance, as well as the particular effects of internal balance on discussion intention, may be a useful way to advance both theories of journalism ethics and theories of media effects and public opinion. The findings bolster the notion that partisan news may not be as deteriorating for discussion as previously thought, at least not for the issue of assisted suicide. It is long overdue that partisanship is considered a viable journalistic approach.

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Appendix

Question Wording

Variable	Items
Withdrawal intention	I would try to change the topic.
	I would walk away from the discussion in that instance.
	I would not say anything at all.
Civil discussion intention	I would say my opinion in a diplomatic way.
	I would tell my true opinion, hoping to engage in a lively discussion.
Ideology	In terms of social issues and people's behavior, would you say you are: very liberal; moderate; very conservative
	In terms of economic issues would you say you are: (same)
Media use	Daily newspapers
	Television news programs
	Radio news programs
	News on the Internet
Self-censorship (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005)	It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say.
	There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong but I didn't let them know.
	When I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it.

	I'd feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me.
	I tend speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust.
	It is safer to keep quiet than publicly speak an opinion that you know most others don't share.
Political talk (size)	Close friends
	Other students
	Family members
	People that I only meet online
Political talk (frequency)	(Same items as size)
Political talk (heterogeneity)	People who have liberal political views
	People who have conservative political views
	People of a different age than mine
Issue importance	How strong is this sentiment? (For each of the two items about assisted suicide)
Issue knowledge	How much would you say you know about this issue? (For each of the two items about assisted suicide)

Online discussion scenario

       Imagine you are socializing online with people you only meet online. You are enjoying the chat and laughs, and suddenly one of the buddies/contacts starts talking about assisted suicide using an example he or she saw on the news . . .