



The Internet, selective learning,  
and the rise of issue specialists

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## Abstract

Using national survey data ( $N = 1,208$ ) in the U.S., the present study found that individuals relying upon the Internet translated their interest in the health care issue into issue-specific knowledge. However, those who depended on network TV, newspapers, and radio failed to display a high level of issue-specific knowledge, even when they were interested in the issue. The findings suggest that the Internet plays an important role in fostering issue specialists rather than generalists.

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## Introduction

Theorists welcomed television as a “knowledge leveler” [1] that reduces the inequality in political knowledge (Eveland and Scheufele, 2000). They suggest that incidental and habitual exposure to daily evening newscasts leads to a narrowing knowledge gap between the more and less educated citizens. More specifically, the less educated inadvertently benefit from watching television as they become generalists who are aware of a wide range of political and social issues in spite of their relatively low interest in politics. However, as the information environment changes, many have been concerned about whether new media can fully serve a function of fostering generalists (Sunstein, 2001). By virtue of decentralized media outlets and increased user controllability, individuals — especially those who are uninterested in politics — can avoid news efficiently and seek entertainment single-mindedly. As a result, mass publics might fail to obtain the political information necessary for competent citizenship in a democratic society. Additionally, the knowledge gaps between the educated and uneducated, news junkies