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The Effects of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Selective Exposure: Evidence from 17 Countries

Alon Zoizner , Tamir Sheafer , Laia Castro , Toril Aalberg, Ana S. Cardenal , Nicoleta Corbu , ...show all

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ABSTRACT

A widely believed claim is that citizens tend to selectively expose themselves to like-minded information. However, when individuals find the information useful, they are more likely to consume cross-cutting sources. While crises such as terror attacks and pandemics can enhance the utility of cross-cutting information, empirical evidence on the role of real-world external threats in selective exposure is scarce. This paper examines the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to test the extent to which citizens were exposed to information from cross-cutting sources on traditional and social media after the outbreak. Utilizing a two-wave panel survey among 14,218 participants across 17 countries – conducted before and after the initial outbreak – we show that citizens concerned about COVID-19 were more exposed to cross-cutting information on traditional and social media. The positive relationship with cross-cutting exposure to

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