**Discussion**

This study proposed extending the concept of niche news beyond the original framework of market segments based on partisan motivations (e.g., Stroud 2011) to incorporate audience-level characteristics that influence one’s exposure to ideological news. Drawing on audience overlap studies (Barnidge et al., 2021; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Majó-Vázquez et al. 2019, Murkerjee et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2016), we develop an approach for situating people within discrete but overlapping clusters, arranged by shared preferences for news and public affairs information. Using this approach, we find three niches within the broad attention network, which we have labeled *right-leaning cable and television*, *left-leaning elite press*, and *local—aggregators*, and these niches are empirical distinct from one another in terms of both the editorial valence of organizations and the selection valence of individuals. Additionally, we find that the average ideology of the audience within each niche is a strong predictor of individuals’ selection valence above and beyond the influence of their own individual ideology or the average organizational ideology within each niche. Moreover, we find that audience ideology may interact with individual ideology, although the statistical significance of this interaction was marginal (*p* < .10). These findings point to three broad conclusions: (1) identifiable niches can be detected and distinguished from one another; (2) the ideology of the audience within each niche is related to the news selections of individuals within that niche; and (3) individuals’ news selections are related to predictors at multiple levels of analysis, and these may interact with one another. We will now elaborate about each of these conclusions.

First, it is clear from our analysis that news niches are identifiable features of the audience attention network, although it is also true that we observe considerable overlap between the niches. Furthermore, and in contrast to the majority of studies on audience overlap (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Majó-Vázquez et al. 2019), we find some support for ideological fragmentation, as some, but not all, of the niches we observed were substantially different from others in terms of their ideological character, both at the organizational and individual levels. That said, our observations do not necessarily fit cleanly with the idea that segmentation occurs purely on ideological grounds. For example, while both organizations and individuals in the *elite press* niche were decidedly more left leaning than their counterparts in other niches, the other two niches did not cleanly align with a particular ideological slant. The *local—aggregator* niche is essentially centrist or perhaps even non-ideological, while the *cable* niche displayed a wide range of variation in terms of ideology. In particular, the *cable* niche is at once the most extreme—especially on the right—but it also comprises both news organizations and individuals from across the political spectrum, indicating that audience members in this niche pay attention to both left- and right-leaning cable outlets (e.g., CNN and Fox News). At the individual level, we could speculate about the reasons why people watch both despite strong theoretical predictions that they would watch one or the other. For example, it could be that these individuals shape their repertoires not around ideological preferences but around a preference for television news. Combined with non-avoidance, this might lead to at least some exposure to ‘the other side.’ Alternatively, we could hypothesize that some individuals enjoy watching ‘both sides,’ perhaps as a form of inoculation against oppositional arguments, or perhaps merely as a form of entertainment. At the organizational level, it is clear that cable television news channels operate in the same audience space, and this may be one reason why prominent shows on major cable channels frequently (and critically) reference one another on air (Barnidge et al., 2020). Regardless of these post-hoc speculations, which could be formalized and tested in future research, it is clear from our study that it is possible to detect distinct niches that are defined not only by the ideologies of organizations and individuals but also by audience repertoires and organizational competition/symbiosis.

Second, our approach yields some novel insights about the role of other audience members in shaping individuals’ news selections. This kind of audience-level influence has been largely overlooked by the literatures on audience fragmentation and selective exposure, and therefore theorizing it required elaboration on two key ideas: (1) news exposure in online environment may take on an ‘actuarial’ quality thanks to news curation algorithms on major platforms including social media (e.g., Facebook), news aggregator and search engines (e.g., Google), and news apps (e.g., Apple News); and (2) if this kind of actuarial influence exists, it follows that an individual’s exposure would be *most* influenced by other individuals whose past news selections were similar to their own. The niche provides leverage over this prediction by classifying individual audience members according to their news tendencies and grouping them with other individuals who have similar tendencies. Tests of the hypothesis support our theory: We find a statistically significant influence of the average ideology of audience members within a niche on the valence of news selections for individuals within that niche. While it is not possible to formally compare effect sizes observed at different levels of a multilevel model, it is worth noting that the effect size for audience ideology is more than 10 times the standard error, yielding a Cohen’s *d* of .28, which is widely viewed as a small-but-substantial effect size, particularly in light of the relatively small effect sizes commonly observed in the field of communication. Moreover, this effect was estimated *while also accounting for the role of individual ideology*, which has a smaller Cohen’s *d* of .16 (remembering the caveat about comparing multilevel effect sizes), which makes it a relatively stringent test of the influence of audience ideology. These insights about the relative influence of audience ideology on individuals’ news selections advances literature on selective exposure in an important way. While the literature has offered explanations based on individual motivations and/or psychology (Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2011), as well as on factors related to repertoires and convenience, the literature has not accounted for environmental factors related to sociotechnical changes, particularly the ways in which news curation algorithms shape individuals’ exposure. Thus, our study adds a new layer to this ongoing conversation by showing how news selection is at least partially explained by these kinds of sociotechnical factors.

Third, our study advances theory by examining the interactions among influences at the individual, organizational, and audience levels. Prior literature has conceptualized the audience as an ‘interaction’ between news organizations and individuals. For example, Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) describe the audience as the interaction between system-level structures and audience preferences. Similarly, Stroud (2011) conceptualizes the news niche as the intersection of market competition and individual motivation. These ideas imply that news exposure is shaped by multiple levels of influence, which can perhaps be traced to independent origins (market forces, psychology, sociotechnical features of platforms), but which necessarily interact with one another. Our study explicitly tests these interactions, and finds that the relationship between individual ideology and the valence of news selection—that is, the core relationship at the heart of selective exposure theory—is stronger when an individual ‘belongs’ to a news niche in which the average organizational ideology aligns with their own. The inverse interpretation is that the influence of individual ideology is *weaker* where the news environment does not align with it. This study therefore presents a substantial step forward theoretically by offering a framework for contextualizing the role of individual motivations in shaping news selection.

The conclusions of the study are limited in several important ways. First, while the research design does incorporate a ‘rolling’ time element, this over-time component does not include multiple responses from each participant in the study. Thus, the design reduces to a ‘cross-section’ of the target population during a specific time period, and therefore the data cannot be used to make causal inferences. Future research is necessary to understand the causal effects of audience structures on individuals’ news selections. Second, the study relies on self-reported measures of news use. Prior research shows that survey respondents tend to underestimate the volume of news to which they are exposed, particularly in online settings (González-Bailón & Xenos, 2020). Potentially, this tendency is caused by poor recall, a cognitive shortcoming that could also affect our open-ended measures. That said, because these measures tend to require more cognitive effort than close-ended measures, we can be relatively certain that respondents were, in fact, exposed to the media they named in the survey. Another measurement limitation is related to systematic error inherent in open-ended media use measures. Whereas close-ended measures are more susceptible to non-systematic or random error (Mangold & Scharkow, 2021), open-ended measures may capture one-time or serendipitous encounters with media that do not reflect individuals’ habitual patterns of news use (Barnidge et al., 2021). To address this issue, the study employs a data filtration method specifically tailored to the problem of systemic measurement error. Finally, the analyses presented in the paper are also limited. While the Louvian clustering algorithm is one of the fastest and most widely-used algorithms for detecting ‘communities’ within social networks, prior research shows that it may detect communities that are only loosely connected (Traag et al., 2019). Future research should embark on a systematic comparison of clustering algorithm performance for detecting news niches. Additionally, while the multilevel analysis has shown significant relationships at different levels of observation, these ‘effects’ are not strictly comparable, and comparative interpretations of effect sizes should be made with caution.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a novel approach for detecting and analyzing niches within news audience networks. Doing so provides new insights in the study of audience fragmentation, providing a finer-grained approach for understanding the tendencies of specific segments of news audiences, and it also affords researchers the ability to examine multiple levels of influence on individuals’ news selections, including the influence of other audience members, which has been largely overlooked by existing literature until now. Thus, by returning to and expanding upon the now-classic concept of the news niche, we are able to gain additional leverage over questions related to news selection and audience fragmentation. While prior research has dispelled claims about coherent ‘filter bubbles’ or severe fragmentation in the U.S. news audience, our analysis suggests that, nonetheless, there are identifiable audience segments that are characterized ideological difference at multiple levels of observation, and these segmentation is related to individuals’ news selections. Thus, even while segmentation may not unfold along strictly ideological lines, it could still play a role in contributing to the erosion or deterioration of social cohesion in the United States.

González-Bailón, S. & Xenos, M. A. (2020). The Blind Spots of Measuring Online News Exposure: A Comparison of Self-Reported and Observational Data in Nine Countries. Preprint available at SSRN, abstract 3522774.

Traag, V. A., Waltman, L., & van Eck, N. J. (2019). From Louvian to Leiden: Guaranteeing Well-Connected Communities. *Scientific Reports, 9*, article 5233.

Cohen’s D

Individual = .16

Audience = .28

Organizational = .30