Beyond niche news: A multilevel analysis of environmental factors that shape ideological news consumption

*Working RQs*

RQ1: Based on a network projection, what are the potential patterns of niche news consumption?

RQ2a: How does the ideological valence of the audience within one’s news niche relate to ideological news consumption?

RQ2b: How does the ideological valence of the organizations within one’s news niche related to ideological news consumption?

RQ3a: How are individual’s various uses of social media related to ideological news consumption?

RQ3b: How is audience engagement with the news on social media during a news cycle related to ideological news consumption?

RQ3b: How is the sentiment of the news on social media during a news cycle related to ideological news consumption?

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An ideological press is nothing new in the United States. The progressive era emphasis on fact-based ‘hard news’ was preceded by a notoriously partisan media industry in the 19th century (Hamilton, 2004). Today, as choice accelerates alongside the rise of social and mobile platforms, market forces have incentivized news organizations to create politically valanced content for the motivated news audience (Benkler et al., 2018; Prior, 2007). Accordingly, scholars have extensively examined the psychology of individual choice and partisan news exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Peacock et al., 2021; Stroud, 2008). A second area of scholarship has looked to the macro-level nature of audience fragmentation. Employing network analysis, these studies find evidence of significant duplication across media outlets, suggesting that audiences are not as fragmented as intuition would suggest (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). While studies on news audience fragmentation draw on a variety of social-scientific approaches, they share a common concern for the normative implications of an ideologically valanced press system: ideological fragmentation has been connected to contentious politics (Aelst et al., 2017), a lack of consensus on issue agendas (Hart & Nisbet, 2012), declining institutional trust (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), and a chaotic communication environment where facts are contested (Waisbord, 2019).

Recently, scholars have turned to the role of major platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit in the filtering and selection of news. These studies raise important questions about individual agency, as one’s political information exposure may be a product of algorithmic filtering (Thorson et al., 2019), incidental exposure (e.g., Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2019), or recommendations from one’s social networks (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Despite these advances, researchers have only partially addressed the nature of attention to ideological news—much of the seminal work predates the dominance of social media platforms—and most studies rely on only one level of analysis (Slater et al., 2006), do not account for news content (de Vreese et al., 2017) and in general have overlooked the potential role of audience-level attributes (c.f. Flaxman et al, 2016). These omissions represent a major oversight. As networked structures have displaced audiences to online spaces (Castells, 2013), the algorithms that filter content increasingly rely on activity from others in the network. Audience-level factors are based on shared interests that drive engagement metrics and favor sentiment in popular stories, and therefore determine, at least in part, how one comes across news and political information. Yet, we know very little about these displaced audiences, and even less about whether they matter for exposure to ideological news content.

To forward scholarship in this area, we propose a framework for identifying one’s “news niche” which in turn reveals the individual, audience, and organizational attributes that influence ideological news use. Applying theories of social and political integration (Kim et al., 2006; Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2008) and developing a novel methodological technique derived from audience overlap studies (Barnidge et al., 2021; Majo-Vazquez et al., 2019), we combine survey data (N=1,965; 17 Waves) with publicly available posts from the top 25 news organizations on Facebook (N = 84,000) to test a hierarchical model of attention to ideological news. The model is based on a network projection (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) that situates respondents as members of a news niche. We then identify the antecedent factors of ideological news consumption while accounting for a) attention to news, including incidental exposure, b) the ideological valence of the outlets within each news niche, and c) contextual factors of the audience ideology as well as the overall engagement and sentiment of the most popular posts circulating on Facebook. The novel design offers new insights into the layered, complicated composition of contemporary news audienences.

**Media Systems and Ideological News**

The prevalence of ideological news at the macro level has been associated with social fragmentation, as the proliferation of channels allows some people to avoid news altogether (Prior, 2005) while others may be radicalized. Scholars argue that exposure to ideological divergence stimulates affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) because it reenforces in-group sentiment via “outrage” coverage (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), creates gaps in turnout (Prior, 2007), and makes policy consensus difficult to achieve (Hart & Nisbet, 2012). Alternatively, the plethora of choice in contemporary information environments may in theory lead to fragmentation in the form of information inequality, where the ‘rich get richer’ (Kümpel, 2020). The extent to which these outcomes are caused by information and communication variables alone is debatable (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2019), but we do know that political sectarianism is a growing trend in Western democracies (Finkel et al., 2020) and these trends have coincided with a decline in objectivity journalism and a rise in ideological and hyperpartisan content. Connecting media influence with specific social phenomena is challenging because scholars have only partially accounted for the various socio-technical factors that may, or may not, direct attention to ideological news in the first place.

There are several structural factors that influence the shift in programing toward ideological news, including a) policy climate b) information architecture and c) impact of emerging platforms. First, the United States has a unique press system, where a combination of corporate libertarianism and the decline in public service requirements have created a media landscape characterized by market segmentation and profit seeking over traditional journalism (McChesney, 2008; Pickard, 2014). At the same time, the policy climate has favored self-regulation and media monopolies. The result is a media system dominated by a handful of companies with a clear absence of local and publicly funded outlets (Waldmen, 2011). News organizations have turned to ideological content to compete for viewers, and increasingly, mainstream organizations have eschewed objectivity and embraced party talking points in their news narratives (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Benkler et al., 2018).

Second, the recent explosion of network technologies has altered the characteristics of supply and demand for political information. Legacy media now compete alongside social media platforms, where content distribution is decentralized. The lack of gatekeeping functions mean that people may be exposed to potentially relevant political information across a wide spectrum of genre, from memes and ‘news-like’ posts to conversations around user-generated content. For the purposes of this study, *we are primarily concerned with people’s subjective consideration of what they rely on for news and public affairs information* (Edgerly et al., 2020). Broad questions about information quality or attention to other types of content is beyond the scope of the current paper. Rather, we take as a given that the media system in the United States has produced a unique information environment where a handful of companies compete for audience attention, but people also have access to a seemingly infinite range of choices for their daily dose of public affairs information.

Finally, social and mobile media account for an ever-increasing share of the public’s attention to news; about half (48%) of Americans get their news from one or more social media platforms (Walker & Matsa, 2021). These platforms, including Google, have shifted revenue models to online advertising. Generating billions of dollars, news organizations rely on these companies to direct traffic and sell ad space (Coster, 2021). Newsrooms are under pressure to create click-worthy posts, and publishers have been incentivized to foster engagement via affective appeals. These developments represent an editorial pivot away from traditional reporting norms and an embrace of the logic of emerging media platforms. For example, studies employing automated content analysis with large-scale social media datasets show that sentiment drives both views and shares across platforms: negative sentiment is more common in the former, and positive sentiment disproportionately accounts for the latter (Kraft et al., 2020). This translates to election information as well, where negative posts about out-group opponents are more likely to go viral (Rathje et al., 2021).

Based on these considerations we can reasonably infer that the patterns of supply of political news loosely reflect the information environment in that overall, a small handful of organizations account for a large share of the market, but at the same time people will report a healthy diversity of sources. In addition, social media feeds will be dominated by engagement-heavy posts that rely on some degree of positive and negative sentiment in their political coverage. Thus, given the shift away from objectivity journalism and the decline in public service information, there should be a plentiful supply of ideologically valanced news within one’s daily information routine. However, supply does not account for demand, and we do not have a complete accounting of the demand for ideological news. This is because studies examining macro-level systems by default avoid individual-level factors and often do not code for ideological valence (e.g., Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), while others overlook the network structure of news audiences (Flaxman et al, 2016). In the following sections we propose a hierarchical model that outlines the individual and audience level factors that determine ideological news selection.

**Individual-level predictors of ideological news consumption**

During the 2020 election cycle an overwhelming majority of both Democrats and Republicans regularly consumed some mix of ideologically valanced news and about a quarter (25%) of regularly relied on attitude-consistent news and (Mitchell et al., 2021). People prefer ideological content for a variety of reasons. We can situate the factors that drive individual-level news selection within three related areas: de facto selectivity, media repertoires, and the spectrum of attention in emerging media environments. Theoretically, these research programs draw on a cognitive resource model of information processing. Humans respond to complexity by employing strategies that reduce cognitive load via mental shortcuts and pattern recognition.

First, work on partisan selective exposure to information—defined as an individual’s tendency to self-select ideological news that aligns with existing attitudes and re-affirms in-group affiliations—is based on rational choice theory and argues that people rely on phycological mechanisms when they filter new information. So-called ‘de facto’ selection occurs when people regularly turn to the same news organizations for reasons of trust and convenience. That is, while people seek to reaffirm preexisting beliefs, they eventually develop habits of exposure for reasons beyond political identity building (Stroud, 2008). Initial work in this area argued that relieving cognitive dissonance was the primary motivating factor, but recent studies show that perceptions of credibility may be more important (Metzger et al., 2020). Despite of warnings of ideological enclaves (e.g., Sunstein, 2018), people do not avoid counter-attitudinal information and often seek out views that challenge their side (Garrett, 2009).

A second strategy people employ to navigate their information environment is developing a media repertoire (Edgerly et al., 2018; Taneja et al, 2012). When faced with a seemingly infinite number of channels, people rely on an idiosyncratic mix of programs and communication technologies to cope with information abundance. Evidence of user-defined sourcing patterns challenge traditional thinking about how the system-level structures of limited channel offerings dictate audience behaviors (Webster, 2011). Given more freedom and autonomy over their information diets, people’s preferences tend to reflect personal needs and gratifications.

Empirical evidence from factor analyses usually derive a limited number of repertoire types. For example, people may tailor experiences for work, entertainment, and socializing (Taneja et al, 2012) or gravitate towards specific platforms, like television over newspapers (Kim, 2014). In general, most people avoid news and public affairs information, while those with higher levels of political interest and education tend to be categorized as news seeking ‘junkies’ (Ksiazek et al., 2010), a trend that scholars worry may be accelerating information inequality. These concerns have merit, because repertoires have also been connected to patterns of participation in politics (Edgerly et al., 2018; Ksiazek et al., 2010).

Repertoire theory provides a convincing account for how people exercise some autonomy over their news selections. However, the question of user choice has only been partially addressed. That is, the underlying theoretical assumption for both repertoire and de facto selectivity research is that people make a rational decision to pay attention to news (or not) based on the range of options available to them in their environment. Those options are in turn defined by the structural features of the media system. As mobile phones and social media platforms rise in popularity, the unique affordances that these technologies provide casts doubt on the nature of autonomy in one’s media habits. Infinite scroll news feeds represent a shift in how people might pay attention on one hand, and on the other hand, filtering algorithms based on both the characteristics of the user and others in the network alter what people see in the first place.

In emerging media spaces—characterized by a multitude of overlapping information flows from various sources and actors (Thorson & Wells, 2016)— people are more likely to be inadvertently exposed to political information via their news feeds, friend recommendations, or both. Thus, scholarship has turned to the conditions under which incidental news consumption might take place (e.g., Bockowski et al., 2018; Barnidge, 2021; Weeks et al., 2017). On mobile and social platforms, people are less likely to see information hierarchies as news posts appear alongside editorial and social information, an experience that coincides with fragmentary reading habits (Bockowski et al., 2018). Attention to news mostly likely occurs on a spectrum of incidental attention, from passive scanning to cognitive engagement (Nanz & Matthes, 2020).

Incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information drives those with stronger partisan identities to then seek out re-enforcing information and share political content (Weeks et al., 2017). Incidental exposure to ideological news also further heightens affective responses toward the out-group (Zhu et al., 2021). Political interest plays a major role in so-call ‘lean forward’ behaviors, as those with higher levels of political interest are more likely to engage with the news via sharing in response to incidental exposure (Barnidge, 2021). Political interest may also influence the algorithms that filter news; those that are categorized as interested in news politics by Facebook’s filtering mechanism are more likely to see political content in their feeds (Thorson et al., 2019).

Taken together, these three research traditions paint a complicated picture, where in the presence of multiple options for media content, individual traits (namely partisanship, education, and interest in politics) drive attention to news on a spectrum of cognitive engagement. Results from empirical studies provide evidence of information inequality (Kümpel, 2020); those that are interested in politics are more likely to curate habits of regular attention to and engagement with the news. These findings have implications for social fragmentation in terms of political participation (Edgerly et al., 2018; Ksiazek et al., 2010) and knowledge (Nanz & Matthes, 2020). Despite research emphasis on attributes of attention within the context of algorithmically curated news flows it is not clear whether or how these habits of individual-level selection influence fragmentation at the audience level.

**Audience-level factors: Networks and fragmentation**

News audience fragmentation is thought to reflect social and political division because it creates information silos or filter bubbles where affective tensions can ferment (Sunstein, 2018). These concerns are not without merit, as people tend to process news along party lines (Hart & Nisbet, 2012) and online conversations often parrot elite talking points, especially in the case of science issues (e.g., Williams et al., 2015). However, network analysis of macro-level patterns in attention to news do not find evidence of ideological silos. In contrast, so-called overlap studies regularly find that audiences are duplicated across channels (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Employing both large-scale datasets of online linking patterns (Mukerjee et al., 2018) and survey responses (Weeks et al., 2016) audience studies find considerable evidence of heterogeneous news preferences. Audience attention tends to be distributed by a power law distribution, where a handful of the most popular, mainstream outlets garner the largest share of the audience.

One lingering limitation in this area is the lack of accounting for ideological valence of media organizations. Scholars have investigated ideological sorting for news audiences based individual-level selective exposure (Flaxman et al, 2016), however network analyses of audience duplication have only begun to account for the system-level valence of programming choices (Barnidge et al., 2021). While audiences may be duplicated, if media outlets at the center of the network carry primarily valanced content, we may be prematurely concluding that a lack of fragmentation represents a corresponding lack of ideological sorting. In other words, ideological news may be augmenting mainstream news, even if people regularly consume a variety of content. For example, Fox news often amplifies radical right-wing talking points (Benkler et al., 2018) and their position as a dominant force in the market means that people will be exposed to ideological content without traveling to the extreme edges of their information environment (Barnidge et al., 2021).

A second limitation of the current approach audience-level overlap studies is a lack of accounting for the nature of displaced news audiences in emerging media spaces (Castells, 2013). As network technologies have uprooted location-based media consumption, people are participating in online groups and social networks based on shared interests. However, we do not know whether these disparate audiences manifest in fragmentation, mor do we know whether they matter for ideological news.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses: The Environmental Model of Attention to News**

-argument for hierarchical modelling

-argument for using the overlap approach to ID clusters in the news niche

-relationship between valence of the system and individuals

-RQs/H

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