Between Individuals and Organizations: How the Audience Niche Shapes Exposure to Partisan News

As media choice accelerates alongside the rise of social and mobile platforms, market forces in the United States have incentivized news organizations to create politically valanced content for the motivated news consumer (Benkler et al., 2018; Prior, 2007). Accordingly, scholars share a concern for the implications of an ideologically valanced press system: Partisan news preferences have 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 communication environment in which facts are contested (Waisbord, 2019). To identify the nature of audience fragmentation, one body of literature has examined the psychology of individual choice and selective exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Peacock et al., 2021). A second emergent trend has developed around the use of network analysis techniques to uncover macro-level patterns in audience dispersion (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). These studies find some evidence for partisan sorting at the individual-level (Stroud, 2010), but also considerable overlap at the macro-level (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2019; Mukerjee et al., 2018), seemingly alleviating fears of information silos and filter bubbles.

Despite recent advances, researchers have only partially addressed the nature of attention to ideological news as most studies rely on only one level of analysis (Slater et al., 2006) and more importantly, have overlooked the role of audience-level attributes in shaping news exposure (c.f. Flaxman et al., 2016). The present study builds on current literature by offering a revised approach for situating individuals within discrete but overlapping news audiences: the *news niche*. Certainly, the concept of a niche isn’t novel—to find a similar use of the label, one need only look at Stroud’s now classic *Niche News* (2011), a study of selective exposure in the United States in the late 2000s. But our approach to explicating the news niche not only incorporates elements from the selective exposure paradigm, which focuses on individual-level motivations for partisan media use, it also borrows from the audience-centric approach (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Ksiazek, 2011), which looks at the shared audience for a given news organization. We bridge these sperate traditions by explicating a definition of the news niche as an audience-level characteristic comprised of both individual- and system-level features that determines one’s place within an information ecology.

This multilevel conceptualization of ideological news exposure has several advantages. It affords the ability to assess the influence of the distributed, ‘imagined’ audience on people’s news exposure. Researchers can better parse individual-level, audience-level, and organizational-level factors that shape people’s exposure to ideological news. Audience-level factors have been particularly underdeveloped in the theoretical literature. This omission represents a significant oversight, as the algorithms that filter content in online spaces increasingly rely on the activity of others within a news niche. That is, news exposure is shaped not only by one’s own choices, but also by the behaviors of others in the network. Yet, we know very little about whether audience-level factors matter for news preferences.

To address this gap in the literature, we propose a framework for identifying a news niche and examine its influence on ideological news use. To do so, we combine survey data (*N* = 1,965; 17 Waves) with network analysis to re-create the overall attention network (Barnidge et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2016) and then derive discrete niches based on cluster analysis techniques. We then test a hierarchical model of attention to ideological news based on an individuals’ news niche. But first, we turn to an examination of prior research on three factors that influence the construction of the news niche: audience overlap, individual motivations and repertoires, and market forces that determine the supply for ideological content.

**Audience Overlap**

*Audience overlap* or *duplication* is concerned with the tendency for the audience of one program to be ‘duplicated’ in another. Drawing on the functionalist tradition, and in response to the explosion in channel offerings over the last two decades, scholars assume that media choice enhances social and political division, because it may lead to information silos or filter bubbles where affective tensions can ferment. In contrast to scholarship that looks at personal motivations for partisan media consumption (e.g., selective exposure theory), overlap studies are concerned with macro-level patterns of attention. Employing concepts and methods from network science, news organizations serve as nodes, and people’s attention and/or selection habits represent the edges between outlets (Ksiazek, 2011). This ‘audience-centric’ approach captures the interplay between the supply of news and citizen demand (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 45). In other words, the audience is conceptualized as groups of people who pay attention to the same sources within the confines of a particular media system. The benefit of this approach is that it enables researchers to determine the extent to which audiences are spread, or concentrated, across the media landscape.

The overlap approach has uncovered several important conclusions, some of which have been enabled by methodological innovations. First, and perhaps most importantly, overlap studies regularly find that audiences are not quite as fragmented as feared (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Network analysis of the macro-level patterns in shared attention to news do not find evidence of ideological silos. Citing both large-scale datasets of online linking behaviors (e.g., Mukerjee et al., 2018) and survey responses (e.g., Weeks et al., 2016) there is considerable evidence of heterogeneous news consumption, resulting in a substantial degree of audience overlap across channels. A second major development clarifies these findings; scholars have devised various techniques for filtering the otherwise noisy data associated with larger sample sizes, revealing a core, “backbone” structure of news audience attention (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2019; Mukerjee et al., 2018). The defining feature of the core network is a power law distribution, where legacy media organizations hold a majority share of the market. The implication is that the structural features of a particular system—that is, the relationship between media supply and user demand—determine the degree of fragmentation and these patterns are not necessarily driven by the ideologies of individuals or news organizations alone (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Third, recent studies have developed methods for observing individuals’ positionality within audience-attention networks, and they have used it to explain the overall ideological valence of their news habits (Barnidge et al., 2021). This methodological innovation centers on characterizing individuals according to their roles within a broad network, bridging the gap between audience-level and individual-level studies. Drawing on concepts from network analysis, a person’s centrality to the attention network can be calculated based on their news selections. In theory, this so-called ‘attention centrality’ should tell us something about how idiosyncratic people’s habits of selection and attention are. While media scholars tend to think of partisan news as “peripheral” as compared to an imagined “center” of politically neutral media, evidence shows that media outlets at the center of the attention network also carry ideologically slanted content, which means that even people with high levels of attention centrality are exposed to a healthy dose of partisan news. 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 are exposed to ideological content without traveling to the extreme edges of their information environment (Barnidge et al., 2021).

**The News Niche**

Findings from across media systems show that ideological filter bubbles account for only a small percentage of citizen’s media habits (Arguedes et al., 2022; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). However, it would be premature to conclude that these results provide robust evidence for the homogeneous news audience. One lingering limitation of the current approach is the lack of accounting for the nature of displaced communities in emerging media spaces (Castells, 2013). As network technologies have uprooted geographic barriers to shared experiences, people are participating in online groups and social networks through some combination of shared interest, algorithmic filtering, and reliance on multiple platforms for news and information. Audiences have shifted to virtual, diffused, and imagined communities (Anderson, 2006) characterized by the mediatization of personal and public life (Livingstone, 2005). This type of ‘networked public sphere’ has important implications for ideological news, as a potentially infinite number of channels for expression and consumption inevitably leads to some form of self-selected segmentation, even if fractures do not manifest along strictly partisan lines.

To account for these developments, and to address theoretical shortcomings with current approaches, we introduce an expanded application of the concept of the news niche. The idea of a news niche is nothing new. Stroud (2011) explicated niche news as an interaction between the individual-level psychological tendency toward partisan selective exposure on one hand and increasing competition and segmentation of media channels on the other. Scholars have employed the term in the context of economic concerns for building specialized ties between organizations and their viewers (Nelson, 2017). A niche also refers to the symbiosis between individuals and their environment. *We assume that a niche is both the outcome of market forces and a reflection of one’s position in an information ecology.* This definition encompasses the relationships between organizations and their audiences, as well as the various habits of selection and attention people may employ when seeking news and public affairs information.

This expanded definition captures the segmented audience, one comprised of diffused individuals but a shared experience. There is little doubt as to whether market segments exist, but we know very little about how these niches are formed, and less about their role in creating a tailored information environment where exposure to valanced content may occur. That is, though audiences may not be ideologically fragmented per se (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), we should be able to identify segments within the overall attention network in which individuals and organizations operate to create shared media experiences.

**The News Niche and Individuals**

***Motivations and Interests***

The primary factor that constitutes a niche is the fact that people are linked by shared interests and motivations. 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). 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 psychological 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 regular habits of exposure based on the choices available to them (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Stroud, 2010). 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). People do not avoid counter-attitudinal information and often seek out views that challenge their side (Garrett, 2009). Therefore, we should expect motivations for partisan content to partially explain niche membership.

A second consideration is the role of political interest in shaping discrete repertoires. One strategy people employ to navigate their information environment—and therefore increasingly important to determining membership in and characteristics of niche membership—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, and at the meso level, shared repertoires should lead to more similar media experiences within a particular news niche.

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. In addition, at least one study employing mixed methodologies has linked repertoires to variance in selective exposure and attitudes of political polarization (Tóth et al., 2022).

***Pooled Users and Newsfeeds***

Motivations and interests provide a convincing account for how people exercise autonomy over their news selections. However, the question of user choice has only been partially addressed in the literature. 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. As companies that control information flows on mobile phones and social media platforms command an increasingly larger share of the market for attention, the unique affordances that these platforms provide casts doubt on the nature of autonomy in one’s media habits (DeVito, 2017; Joris et al., 2021; Thorson, 2020; Thurman et al., 2019). Filtering algorithms based on both the characteristics of the user, as well as *others in the same news niche* alter what people see in the first place. In other words, these platforms do not only shape user experiences, but place people into artificial segments based on shared preferences and behaviors.

In this sense, selection algorithms can be said to be ‘actuarial’ in that they share something in common with insurance adjustment: The outcome depends in part on the actions of other people are classified as similar to a particular individual. For example, if a person selects a story from Fox News, then subsequently selects a second story from Breitbart News, online platforms record this link and consider it not only for that user, but also for other users who subsequently select Fox News. The more users who co-select stories from these organizations, the stronger the link becomes over time, and the more likely a given user will be to receive a recommendation for Breitbart after having selected Fox (the same could be said for any two news organizations). Therefore, the selections of other individuals shape the ideological valence of selections for the individual in question.

**Niche and Organizations: Markets and Symbiosis**

If the interaction between individual motivations and technology creates the initial conditions for a news niche to form, the supply of ideological content within a niche is determined, at least in part, by system-level factors. Mainstream news organizations in the United States have increasingly turned to ideological content to compete for viewers (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Benkler et al., 2018). Several structural factors influence this shift in programing, including the historical trajectory of the American press system, as well as the current policy climate. First, the United States has a unique press system with a historical legacy that combines initial public investment in media technology and infrastructure with a *laissez faire*, free-market approach to the regulation of media organizations thereafter (Starr, 2004), and thus the press system characterized by the rapid development and proliferation of news media technologies, as well as the swift segmentation of media markets as corporations compete for audience shares (McChesney, 2008; Pickard, 2014). Generally, this system encourages journalism that prioritizes profit-seeking over civics-oriented journalism (McChesney, 2008; Pickard, 2014). The current regulatory climate has added another dynamic to this trajectory. The current policy climate, with its roots in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, is inherently deregulatory and encourages the growth of media conglomerates. As a result, even with the proliferation of alternative media organizations online, the core of the American media system is currently dominated by a handful of major companies, and there has been a clear decline in the number of independent local news outlets and/or publicly funded news outlets (Waldmen, 2011).

Putting these dynamics together, the U.S. media system has produced a unique information environment where the incentives for organizations to create tailored content for market segments is rather strong (Nelson, 2017). Ideological news is one strategy, and the most popular news outlets are now either objectively partisan or circulate narratives from the fringes of the media system (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Benkler et al., 2018). Based on these considerations, we expect to find ideologically slanted news to be a regular feature of any audience niche, regardless of individual preferences. Yet we do expect this structure to be inherently polarizing; work on both selective exposure (Garrett, 2009) and overlap (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) shows that the demand for ideological content is not homogeneous. People do not avoid counter-attitudinal information, but instead rely on a mix of sources. These patterns reflect a relationship of *competition and symbiosis* between organizations and individuals, where segments are not bifurcated according to left and right leanings, but a working balance is achieved within each news niche based on shared interest, trust, and regular habits of program switching across the political spectrum.

**Utility of Concept**

***Research Questions and Hypotheses***

The concept of a news audience niche has great utility for the study of audience fragmentation. Specifically, we have identified at least three advantages of the approach that cannot be gained without examining and comparing portions of the overall news audience. First, the revised niche concept allows for a more fine-grained look at the news audience, allowing researchers to (a) identify characteristics of organizations and individuals who comprise a given niche and (b) describe the differences between niches. The assumption is that organizations/ individuals within a niche will occupy the same or nearly the same space within the broader media ecology, and this assumption gives rise to a host of empirical questions regarding the relationships among organizations and individuals within and between audience niches.

For example, one might conjecture that organizations that occupy the same audience space share something in common, in this case ideology, or what we refer to as editorial valence. On the other hand, two organizations occupy the same niche not because they are similar, but because they are different. Drawing from biological sciences, we might hypothesize that organizations form *symbiotic relationships* within audience niches because they serve different needs of that audience segment. Thus, it is an open question whether organizations within niches are similar or different not only in terms of editorial valence, but also whether their audiences reflect a corresponding ideological homogeneity. In analytic terms, we ask whether within-group variance in editorial valence and audience political identity is greater or less than between-group differences. We have developed a set of three interrelated research questions based on this logic. The first is necessary to set up the other two, and simply asks about the observable niches in the American attention network. The next two questions ask about ideological differences for news organizations and individuals, respectively.

RQ1: What news niches can be observed in the American attention network?

RQ2: Is the range of editorial valence of news organizations greater within niches or between niches?

RQ3: Are the political identities among individuals within the same niche more heterogenous within niches or between niches?

Another distinct advantage of the niche approach is that it affords researchers the ability to parse out different levels of influence on an individual’s news selections. Selective exposure theory has long held that personal ideologies (or partisan preferences) shape the ideological valence of their news selections (Stroud, 2010). But while this is true, we also know that there are other influences on news attention, such as developed repertoires (Edgerly et al., 2018; Taneja et al, 2012) as well as positionality within the attention network (Barnidge et al., 2021). That is, people may be exposed to partisan news not because of their own ideologies and motivations, but rather because they are embedded in a news audience niche dominated by organizations that slant one way or another. This prediction draws on the concept of ‘de facto’ selective exposure, or the idea that people may be exposed to ideologically driven news because of environmental factors rather than individual preferences (Sears & Freedman, 1967).

Finally, we know from research on social media platforms, search engines, and aggregator apps that in online spaces, news exposure is driven by selection algorithms (DeVito, 2017; Joris et al., 2021; Thorson, 2020; Thurman et al., 2019). While the specific criteria used by these algorithms may differ across platforms, we are certain that to some degree, they consider the past behavior not only of the individual news consumer but of *other news consumers* as well (DeVito, 2017; Thorson et al., 2019). These findings suggest that people with shared interests and motivations should be observable at the audience-level as groups with varying degrees of attention to ideological news. People are connected to displaced but stable niches based on the nature of their pooled behaviors, as well as a shared preferences for news and political content.

With these ideas in mind, we can identify and analyze three distinct influences on the ideological valence of an individual’s news selections: personal political ideology, editorial valence (organizational ideology), and the collective political identity of others in the niche (audience ideology). The niche concept helps researchers to parse these effects by structuring relevant comparisons. That is, an individual’s selections should be most affected by the *organizations and audience members* *within their niche*. Hence, we present three hypotheses, starting at the individual-level, which represents the classic selective exposure prediction, and then moving to organizational and audience influences, respectively.

H1: Political identity will be positively related to attention to ideological news.

H2: The average editorial valence of all news organizations within one’s niche will be positively related to attention to ideological news.

H3: The political identity of others within the same niche will be positively related to attention to ideological news.

Finally, given the multilevel nature of the relationships under study (H1-H3), we propose the following exploratory research question. If audience characteristics drive ideological news consumption, then it stands to reason that the context of exposure (ideological extremity of the organization or that of the audience) may interact with (moderate) the relationship between individual predispositions and ideological news use.

RQ4: Is there a moderation effect between individual political ideology and the context of news exposure (editorial valence of news organizations within a niche and political identity of the audience) on attention to ideological news?

**Methods**

**Design and Data**

The study is based on a 17-wave, rolling cross-sectional survey administered in the United States (*N* = 1,965). Respondents were recruited by Qualtrics and completed the survey online between September 3 and November 1, 2020 (Incidence Rate = 100%; Cooperation Rate (CR3) = 70%; AAPOR, 2016). Each survey wave (i.e., sampling frame) was balanced according to quotas for age, race, gender, and census region according to the 2018 American Community Survey (Table A1 in the online appendix). These data were weighted by non-quota demographics including education and income (see Table A2 online). Missing values were imputed using a chained equations technique (Fully Conditional Specification; see van Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011).

**Measures**

***Open-Ended News Use Questions***

Survey respondents were asked three times to “write the name of a news outlet (e.g., The New York Times or nytimes.com, Fox News or foxnews.com, WBRC Birmingham) that you used in the past week.” These open-ended news use measures require respondents to engage in free recall, which is more cognitively demanding than close-ended measures that rely on cued recall (Kruikemeier et al., 2018). But because of this additional demand, open-ended news use measures likely reduce random measurement error arising from patterned response or poor recall associated with close-ended news use measures (Prior, 2009). The responses were cleaned and categorized to indicate discrete news outlets (e.g., “*New York Times*” or “Fox News”), with broader categories created for responses where data reduction reduced noise and enhanced clarity (e.g., television call letters, channel numbers, or network affiliations were combined into a “local television” category). After cleaning and coding, respondents named 37 distinct outlets/categories (see Table B1 online for a list).

***News Ideology***

*News ideology* refers to the editorial valence of the outlets one pays attention to, and it is the primary outcome of interest. It is measured at both the organizational (editorial valence) and individual levels (attention to ideological news). At the organizational level, the news outlets named in the open-ended measures described above were coded for editorial valence (-3 = *Very Liberal*, 0 = *Neutral*, 3 = *Very* *Conservative*) by three trained coders (Krippendorf’s alpha > .90 for 10% of the list). Based on prior literature (Barnidge et al., 2020; 2021; Stroud, 2010), coders were instructed to adhere to a hierarchical guideline for coding organizational ideology: (1) the editorial valence as identified by existing scholarship (e.g., Budak et al., 2016; Niculae et al., 2015; Otero, 2018); (2) if not identified in prior literature, the outlet’s stated ideology; (3) if not stated, the balance of candidate endorsements dating back to 2012; (4) if no endorsements, ideological stances in editorials about gun control, abortion, immigration, and same-sex marriage. If coders could find no information based on these criteria, the outlet was assumed to be neutral. The final organizational-level variable ranges from -2.0 to 2.2, with a mean of -0.1 (*SD* = 0.8).

At the individual level, each respondent was assigned up to three coded news ideology scores based on the outlets they named. These scores were then averaged for each respondent, creating an index of individuals’ news ideology as indicated by their named outlets (*M* = -0.1, *SD* = 0.8). NOTE ABOUT VARIATION ACROSS FRAMES.

***Individual and Audience Political Identity***

Individuals’ political identity was measured with three survey items asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point, L-R scale (-5 = *Liberal*, 0 = *Neutral*, 5 = *Conservative*). This item has a mean of 0.2 (*SD* = 3.0). Note on our measure of nice/audience identity as well. We use the term ‘identity’ as to not conflate this item with our measure of news ideology.

***Control Variables***

Regression analyses control for demographics, including *age* (*M* = 3.0, *SD* = 1.6 where 1 = *18-24* and 8 = *85 or older*), *gender* (51% female, including 1 non-binary respondent), *race* (40% persons of color, not including white-identifying Hispanics), *education* (*M* = 4.5, *SD* = 1.8 on a 7-point scale where 1 = *No high school* *diploma* and 7 = *Post-graduate degree*) and *income* (*M* = 4.7, *SD* = 2.3 on an 8-point scale where 1 = *Less than $15,000* and 7 = *More than $150,000*). Finally, analyses control for *political interest*, which was measured with three items asking how interested respondents are (1 = *Not at all* and 5 = *Very*) in politics, news, and community (*M* = 3.5, *SD* = 1.0).

**Analysis and Results**

***Analytical Strategy***

Following previous work on audience overlap studies (e.g., Kzsiak, 2011; Mukerjee et al., 2018), we constructed a network projection of audience overlap from the open-ended news use measures. Defining audience overlap as the extent to which the audience for one news organization is contained within the audience of another, the network projection is constituted by individual respondents who are connected via shared attention to news organizations, which occurs when two or more respondents name the same news organization. Thus, news organizations act as nodes in the network, and when a respondent names two organizations, the projection creates an edge between the two nodes. The more frequently the organizations are co-mentioned, the larger the edge weight of the connection between them. Based on recommendations from prior literature, the projected network was filtered to reduce systematic measurement error by removing connections with an edge weight < 2 (Barnidge et al., 2021). While studies of audience attention networks employing close-ended survey measures use other filtration methods designed to reduce non-systematic measurement error (Mangold & Scharkow, 2020), open-ended data present a different problem, that of systematic measurement error, which arises from systematic tendencies to over- or underestimate phenomena of interest (King et al., 1994). Therefore, we rely on filtration methods specifically tailored to this measurement issue.

***Deriving the News Niche***

After filtering the network, and to answer RQ1, we ran a series of clustering algorithms on the projection that: a) best fit the theoretical assumptions for audience fragmentation; and b) produced the most consistent results. Louvain clustering met these criteria, producing three stable “news niches” (see Figure 1), which we have labeled according to the organizations they comprise (see Table 1): (1) *right-leaning cable* *and television*, which is characterized by high levels of attention to television news (both national broadcast and cable news on the left and right), as well as prominent right-wing or right-leaning digital news organizations (e.g., Breitbart and the *New York Post*); (2) *left-leaning elite press*, comprising prominent coastal prestige newspapers including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, along with left-leaning digital news organizations such (e.g., Huffington Post and Politico);and (3) *local—aggregators*, which features heavy reliance on news aggregators, local media, and social media in addition to prominent centrist newspapers (e.g., *USA Today* and the *Chicago Tribune*). After obtaining categories from the cluster analysis, respondents were assigned a nominal code representing their news niche based on the extent to which their responses to the open-ended news attention measures aligned with one of the categories (cable: *n* = 905; elite: *n* = 195; local: *n* = 344). Respondents whose answers did not fall cleanly into one of the three categories were considered to have no niche (*n* = 564).

[Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here]

Having identified the three news niches (RQ1), one-way ANOVA was used to assess the between-group and within-group variance in news ideology at both the organizational (RQ2) and individual levels (RQ3). A visual inspection of the projection network shows considerable overlap among news niches (see Figure 1), which raises the question of whether there are differences between the niches in terms of news ideology. The answer to this question is unequivocally yes. At both the organizational (RQ2) and individual levels (RQ3), the between-group variance is substantially larger than the within-group variance (see Table 2), resulting in significant *F*-statistics (at the organizational level, *F* (2) = 5.19, *p* = 0.011; at the individual level, *F* (2) = 81.20, *p* < 0.001), which can be interpreted as the ratios of between-group to within-group variance. These results indicate that the differences between the news niches are larger than differences among individuals within each niche. A closer inspection of the means for news ideology show that at both levels, the mean of the *elite* group is different from the means of the other two groups (see Figure 2), with a significantly more liberal news ideology (*M =* -0.79 versus a grand mean of -0.10 at the organizational level, and *M* = -0.73 versus a grand mean of -0.10 at the individual level). Meanwhile, the other two groups have similar means, but different variances. The *local* group displays a relatively small variance estimate with cases tightly clustered around the mean (*Var*. = 0.09 at the organizational level and *Var*. = 0.15 at the individual level), whereas the *cable* group displays a relatively large variance estimate with cases widely dispersed around the mean (*Var.* = 1.88 at the organizational level and 0.79 at the individual level). Thus, the three niches are substantially different from one another: The elite niche is solidly liberal with both individuals and organizations ranging from left-leaning to solid left; the local niche is primarily centrist, with individuals and organizations tightly clustered around the neutral point; and the cable niche is the most ideologically diverse, with a centrist average but also a broad array of individuals and organizations on either side.

[Insert Table 2 and Figure 2 about here]

***Hypothesis Testing***

Next, we used multilevel modeling to assess the effects of political identity on news ideology (i.e., the valence of news exposure), while also accounting for how those effects are shaped by the news niches (H1). Because the time-ordered and grouped data structure could produce measurement invariance, it is necessary to include both sampling frame and news niche as grouping variables (3 niches x 17 frames = 51 groups). Level-one predictors are centered on the group mean to ease interpretation of the fixed effects. Results are shown in Table 3. The first model in the table shows the baseline fixed and random effects of individual identity. The fixed effect is positive and statistically significant (*b* = 0.06, *SE* = 0.01, *p* < 0.001). But while the intercept for news ideology does vary between groups (*Var.* = 0.09), the random effect of political identity is close to zero (*Var.* = 0.00), resulting in a relatively low ICC of 0.17. These results indicate that while the mean for news ideology may vary across groups, the effect of political identity on news ideology is relatively stable. Thus, H1 is confirmed.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

The next two models in the table layer on contextual effects for organizational valence (H2) and audience ideology (H3). These can be interpreted as characteristics of news niches: Audience niche ideology is calculated as the group mean of individual identity within each niche, and organizational valence is calculated as the group mean of editorial slant for all outlets within each niche. That is, the former captures the effects of *the ideology of other people within a niche*, and the latter captures the effects of *the ideology/editorial slant of organizations with a niche*. As shown in the table, both effects are statistically significant and also substantially larger than the effect of individual ideology. For audience ideology, the effect is *b* = 0.43 (*SE* = 0.04, *p* < 0.001), and for organizational ideology, it is *b* = 1.02 (*SE* = 0.09, *p* < 0.001). These effect sizes are compared in a dot-and-whisker plot in Figure 3, which clearly shows that the organizational effect is the largest and the individual effect is the smallest, with the audience effect in between. Therefore, these results show that while an individual’s own political identity matters when it comes to shaping the ideological valence of their news exposure, the editorial ideologies of organizations within the niche, as well as the pooled ideological extremity of the audience members within the news niche has a larger effect. H2 and H3 are confirmed.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

To further explore the relationships among the various levels of analysis, and to answer RQ4, the final two models in Table 3 test whether individual political identity interacts with audience ideology and/or organizational slant. Results show a marginal but non-significant interaction with audience ideology (*b* = 0.02, *SE* = 0.01, *p* < .10), and a statistically significant interaction with organizational ideology (*b* = 0.08, *SE* = 0.03, *p* < .01). These conditional effects are plotted in Figure 4, which shows that the positive effect of individual ideology is stronger where it aligns with audience and organizational ideology (with the caveat that the interaction with audience ideology is marginal).

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

**Discussion**

1) Aim of study and summary of results

This study proposed extending the concept of niched 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; Weeks et al., 2016), we provide a methodology for situating people within discrete but overlapping clusters, arranged by shared preferences for news and public affairs information. We can briefly summarize the results as follows: a) clustering techniques reveal three stable niches within the broad attention network for *cable television*, *elite prestige press*, and *local/aggregators* b) there is far greater variance between niches than within, both at the organizational and individual level, and the elite prestige press is decidedly more liberal than the other two niches, c) in the hierarchical models, the average ideology of the audience within a niche is a strong predictor of exposure to ideological news, behind organizational slant, which unsurprisingly is the strongest predictor, d) individual partisan preference has the smallest effect on ideological exposure, and e) there is a statistically significant interaction effect between individual partisan leaning and editorial slant at the organizational level, suggesting that the supply for news is met with increasing demand from strong partisans.

2) Implications for the study

a) Niches are identifiable features of the attention network, though considerable overlap between niches, so boundaries are ‘fuzzy’ and in contrast to traditional overlap studies, some support for selective exposure/avoidance theories. While cable contained the more ‘extreme’ partisan content in terms of overall variance, the audience also consumed news across the spectrum, and the overall slant in the cable niche was like that of the local/aggregator niche. In contrast, the patterns of overlap in the elite niche were decidedly more left leaning at both the individual and organizational level, providing evidence this this niche strikes a more homogeneous balance than others. In other words, niche matters for ideological content, despite no clear left/right boundary, but repertoires seem to be a better explanation than selective exposure. However, the within group variation points to discrete ecologies where people are indeed engaged in at least some channel switching across the spectrum.

b) Ecological argument: interaction b/t individual/organizations /audience: Our approach builds on existing paradigm of overlap based on network analysis. This approach provides benefits over traditional repertoire studies as the attention network represents the entire audience and therefore, we can approximately quantify position within an information ecology. System-level features seem to be enhancing one’s tendency to be exposed to ideological news, and in particular the novel finding here is that connections to the displaced audience matters for one’s personal habits/preferences.

3) Implications for field

a) A way to bridge levels of analysis and account for seemingly conflicting findings about selective exposure on one hand and overlap on the other-- and look beyond simple explanations for fragmentation, like the expectation to find clear clusters but instead complex symbiosis

b) A turn to audience-level characteristics in determining how people come across and perhaps respond to ideological news. That is, not just a matter of individual choice, but the structure is shaping experiences among groups of people (which are created by algorithms, etc.)

c) Potential role of social media in curating niches and the challenge capturing autonomy/rational choice concepts if one participates in a niche

d) Normative implications: too soon to conclude that lack of coherent filter bubbles/fragmentation means that the media does NOT play a role in polarization/contentious politics. That is, the symbiosis revealed here suggest that ideological narrative can ferment within a niche, and that niche may contain highly charged content without an anchor in traditional news, thus enforcing existing cleavages that are not necessarily reflected in one’s media diet. Future work on selective exposure may consider the ways in which counter-attitudinal narrative shapes perceptions of contentious issues, instead of focusing on locating signs of social cleavage at a structural level. A second consideration here is that ‘marketplace for ideas’ may not be the ideal solution in a system that encourages market segmentation and profits over civic/public journalism. For example, those in the local/aggregator niche are overall less ideologically charged.

3) Limitations: Self-report measures and open-ended responses (but we have some idea of the nature of this bias (XX) and open-ended responses provide advantages over discrete measures (XX). Need a complete accounting of the role of social media in creating the niche, future work should somehow address that. Would also like more information about stability of niche memberships + cross-niche and avoidance behaviors over time, perhaps multiple measurements can get at that. Clustering algorithms are not perfect, but OK for now. Finally, the rolling cross section has limitations, but provides XX benefits.

4) Conclusion

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**List of Tables and Figures**

Figure 1

*Network Projection Based on Louvain Cluster Analysis*

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|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1  *Organizational Niche Membership* | | | | | |
| **Niche 1** | | **Niche 2** | | **Niche 3** | |
| *Right-Leaning Cable & TV* | | *Left-Leaning Elite Press* | | *Local/Aggregators* | |
| ABC\*  BBC\*  Breitbart  CBS\*  CNBC\*  CNN\*  Fox | LA Times\*  MSNBC\*  NBC\*  Newsmax  NY Post  OAN  Right Sphere  Univision\* | Huffington Post  NY Times  Washington Post  Politico  NPR\*  Buzzfeed  International Media\*  Wall Street Journal\*  New Magazines\*  PBS\*  Left Sphere |  | Aggregators  Chicago Trib.  Local Paper  Local Radio  Local TV  Local Web  MSN  Neutral Sphere  Social Agg. | USA Today  Yahoo |
| \* Denotes organization that does not conform to theoretical expectations based on selective exposure theory. | | | | | |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 2  *Means and Variances for News Ideology at the Organization and Individual Levels* | | | | |
| Statistic | Local/Aggregators | Elite | Cable | Full Sample |
| **Organizational Level Valence** | | | | |
| Mean | -0.10 | -0.79 | 0.41 | -0.10 |
| Variance | 0.09 | 0.27 | 1.88 | 1.08 |
| *N* | 11 | 11 | 15 | 37 |
| Between-Group Variance | 4.57 | | | |
| Within-Group Variance | 0.88 | | | |
| Test Statistic | *F* (2) = 5.19, *p* = 0.011 | | | |
| **Individual Level Attention** | | | | |
| Mean | -0.07 | -0.73 | 0.03 | -0.10 |
| Variance | 0.15 | 0.15 | 0.79 | 0.62 |
| *N* | 344 | 195 | 905 | 1,444 |
| Between-Group Variance | 41.29 | | | |
| Within-Group Variance | 0.51 | | | |
| Test Statistic | *F* (2) = 81.20, *p* < .001 | | | |
| *Note*: Outcome variable has theoretical range of 6 (Min. = -3 ‘far left’ and Max. = 3 ‘far right’) and an observed range of 5.0 (Min. = -2.0, Max. = 3.0). Data weighted by education and income. | | | | |

Figure 2

*Boxplot of News Ideology at the Organizational and Individual Levels*



|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 3  *The Predictors of News Ideology at the Individual, Audience, and Organizational Levels* | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | |
| **Fixed Effects** | *b* | | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* |
| Intercept | -0.21\*\*\* | | 0.05 | -0.14\*\*\* | 0.03 | | 0.00 | 0.03 | -0.14\*\*\* | 0.03 | 0.00 | 0.03 |
| Age | -0.04\*\*\* | | 0.01 | -0.04\*\*\* | 0.01 | | -0.04\*\*\* | 0.01 | -0.04\*\*\* | 0.01 | -0.04\*\*\* | 0.01 |
| Gender (1 = Female) | 0.01 | | 0.04 | 0.00 | 0.04 | | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.00 | 0.04 |
| Race (1 = Person of Color) | -0.15\*\*\* | | 0.04 | -0.15\*\*\* | 0.04 | | -0.16\*\*\* | 0.04 | -0.15\*\*\* | 0.04 | -0.15\*\*\* | 0.04 |
| Education | -0.01 | | 0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 | | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 |
| Income | 0.00 | | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 | | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| Political Interest | -0.04\* | | 0.02 | -0.04\* | 0.02 | | -0.04\* | 0.02 | -0.04\* | 0.02 | -0.04\* | 0.02 |
| Political Ideology | 0.06\*\*\* | | 0.01 | 0.06\*\*\* | 0.01 | | 0.06\*\*\* | 0.01 | 0.06\*\*\* | 0.01 | 0.07\*\*\* | 0.01 |
| **Contextual Effects of Niche** | *b* | | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* |
| Ideology of Audience |  | |  | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.04 | |  |  | 0.44\*\*\* | 0.04 |  |  |
| Organization Valence |  | |  |  |  | | 1.02\*\*\* | 0.09 |  |  | 1.03\*\*\* | 0.09 |
| **Interactions** | *b* | | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* |
| Political Ideology \*  Audience Ideology |  | |  |  |  | |  |  | 0.02# | 0.01 |  |  |
| Political Ideology \* Organization Valence |  | |  |  |  | |  |  |  |  | 0.08\*\* | 0.03 |
| **Random Effects** | *Var*. | | | *Var.* | | | *Var.* | | *Var.* | | *Var.* | |
| Intercept Niche:Frame | 0.09 | | | 0.01 | | | 0.01 | | 0.01 | | 0.01 | |
| Political Ideology | 0.00 | | | 0.00 | | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | | 0.00 | |
| Residual | 0.45 | | | 0.44 | | | 0.44 | | 0.44 | | 0.44 | |
| **Fit Statistics** |  |  | |  | |  |  |  |  | |  | |
| LR | -1,720.00 | | | -1,686.47 | | | -1,685.37 | | -1,688.34 | | -1,684.30 | |
| ICC | 0.17 | | | 0.02 | | | 0.02 | | 0.03 | | 0.02 | |
| *Notes*: Cell entries are parameter estimates from multilevel models (MLM) with random slopes and intercepts. Outcome variable is mean ideological valence of outlets one pays attention to (+ = right). *N* = 1,444. Groups = 51 (3 niches by 17 frames). #*p* < .10,\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001. Data weighted by education and income. Variables are group-mean centered. | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Figure 3

*Dot-and-Whisker Plot Showing Effects on News Ideology at the Individual, Audience, and Organizational Levels from Hierarchical Models*



Figure 4

*Conditional Effects of Political Identity on News Ideology (Attention) at Various Levels of Audience Niche Ideology and Organizational Valence*

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**Appendix A:**

**Sample Demographics and Weighting Scheme**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table A1  *Demographic Profile of Survey Sample and Target Population* | | |
|  | Current Survey | U.S. Census Bureau:  2016 American Community Survey | |
|  | (%) | (%) | |
| Gender |  |  | |
| Male | 49.0 | 49.2 | |
| Female | 51.0 | 50.8 | |
| Age (median) | 35-44 | 37.7 | |
| Ethnicity/race |  |  | |
| White | 59.6 | 62.0 | |
| Black or African American Native | 15.9 | 12.3 | |
| American Indian and Alaska Native | 1.5 | 0.7 | |
| Asian | 12.9 | 5.2 | |
| Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander | 0.2 | 0.2 | |
| Hispanic | 7.6 | 17.3 | |
| Household income (median) | US $60,000–75,000 | US $57,617 | |
| Education |  |  | |
| Less than high school graduate | 2.1 | 13.0 | |
| High school diploma or equivalent | 15.7 | 27.5 | |
| Some college or associate degree | 26.2 | 29.2 | |
| Bachelor’s degree or higher | 56.1 | 30.3 | |
| *Note*: The US Census Bureau 2016 American Community Survey is available online at http://factfinder.census.gov/ | | |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Table A2  *Survey Weights* | |
| Income | |
| Category | Weight |
| Less than $15k | 1.02 |
| $15k to 30k | 1.00 |
| $30k to $45k | 1.00 |
| $45k to 60k | 1.00 |
| $60k to $75k | 1.00 |
| $75k to $100k | 0.86 |
| $100k to $150k | 0.95 |
| More than $150k | 0.95 |
| Education | |
| Category | Weight |
| None, or grades 1-8 | 5.75 |
| High school incomplete (grades 9-11) | 1.77 |
| High school graduate (grade 12 or GED certificate) | 1.33 |
| Some college, no 4-year degree (includes Associate’s Degree) | 0.89 |
| Technical, trade, or vocational school after high school | 0.65 |
| College graduate (Bachelor’s Degree) | 0.42 |
| Post-graduate training/professional school after college | 0.42 |
| *Note*. Income measured as annual household income. Education measured in terms of highest level completed. Final survey weights created by multiplying weights for income and education. | |

**Appendix B:**

**Lists of News Organizations Included in Study**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table B1  *List of News Organizations Named in Survey* | | |
| *Rank* | Organization | Mentions |
| 1 | Fox News | 650 |
| 2 | CNN | 642 |
| 3 | New York Times | 318 |
| 4 | ABC News | 306 |
| 5 | Local TV News | 292 |
| 6 | NBC News | 246 |
| 7 | CBS News | 206 |
| 8 | MSNBC | 186 |
| 9 | Local News | 179 |
| 10 | Aggregators | 162 |
| 11 | Social Media Sites | 159 |
| 12 | Yahoo News | 130 |
| 13 | BBC News | 110 |
| 14 | Washington Post | 106 |
| 15 | Neutral Sphere | 66 |
| 16 | International Media | 56 |
| 17 | Wall Street Journal | 49 |
| 18 | Right-Leaning Sphere | 46 |
| 19 | NPR | 43 |
| 20 | USA Today | 42 |
| 21 | News Magazines | 41 |
| 22 | Huffington Post | 40 |
| 23 | Buzzfeed | 39 |
| 24 | MSN | 34 |
| 25 | PBS | 32 |
| 26 | CNBC | 31 |
| 27 | One America News | 21 |
| 27 | Los Angeles Times | 21 |
| 29 | Local News Websites | 19 |
| 29 | New York Post | 19 |
| 29 | Left-Leaning Sphere | 19 |
| 32 | Politico | 16 |
| 32 | Newsmax | 16 |
| 34 | Local Radio | 14 |
| 34 | Breitbart | 14 |
| 36 | Chicago Tribune | 12 |
| 37 | Univision | 11 |
| *Note. Raw responses coded by three-step filter a) prominence b) if less prominent collapsed into outlet/platform, c) receiving < 10 mentions coded as valanced spheres.* | | |