**Between Individuals and News Organizations: Developing the ‘News Niche’ as a Conceptual Tool for Examining Audience Fragmentation**

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), raising concerns about a news audience that is fragmented along ideological lines, and not without good reason: Partisan news preferences have been connected to political sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020), 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). While much of the literature has focused on the psychology of media selection (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2011), a parallel line of work has examined macro-level patterns in audience dispersion (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Majó-Vázquez et al., 2019; Mukerjee et al., 2018; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Weeks et al., 2016). Generally, these studies do not find considerable evidence of audience fragmentation at the macro-level, seemingly alleviating fears related to ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’ (Flaxman et al., 2016).

Yet, despite these recent advances in the study of audience fragmentation, the literature has largely overlooked the role of audience-level attributes in shaping news exposure at the individual-level (Barnidge et al., 2021). 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. The present study addresses this need by revisiting and elaborating upon an older concept—*the news niche*. Certainly, the concept of a news 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 not only incorporates elements from selective exposure research, particularly its focus on individual news selections, it also borrows from the audience-centric approach (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Ksiazek, 2011), which looks at the shared audience for a given news organization. This conceptualization of the news niche has several advantages. It promises to not only improve our understanding of audience segmentation, but it also affords the ability to assess the influence of the distributed, ‘imagined’ audience (Anderson, 2006) on people’s news exposure. Thus, researchers can better parse individual-level, audience-level, and organizational-level factors that shape people’s exposure to ideological news.

In this paper, we propose a framework for identifying news niches within audience networks, and employ that framework to examine their various influences on the ideological valence of individuals’ news selections. We perform network and cluster analyses on open-ended survey data (*N* = 1,965; 17 Waves) to re-create the audience attention network (Barnidge et al., 2021; Weeks et al., 2016) and identify news niches. We then test a hierarchical model that parses the influence of (a) individual ideology, (b) organizational ideology, and (c) audience ideology on the valence of individual’s news choices.

**Audience Overlap**

*Audience overlap* or *duplication* is concerned with the tendency for the audience of one program to be ‘duplicated’ in another. Drawing inspiration from the structural functionalist tradition, which treats society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability (Procter, 1980), this approach views news audiences as the interaction between system-level structures and individual preferences (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Hence, scholarship in this area typically observes and analyzes social and political division in the form of information silos or filter bubbles created by the high-choice media environment, which is characterized by a relatively recent and dramatic increase in the number of media channel and programming offerings (Prior, 2007). In contrast to selective exposure research, which looks at personal motivations for partisan media consumption (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012), audience overlap studies are primarily concerned with macro-level patterns of attention and typically employ concepts and methods from network science. In this method, 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 people who are more or less connected through shared attention to the same news sources within the confines of a particular media system. The advantage of this approach is that it enables researchers to observe the extent to which audiences are spread across or concentrated within particular areas of 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 media 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 a relatively small set of legacy media organizations hold a majority share of the market, and the rest (i.e., the majority of organizations) compete for relatively small shares of audience attention along the ‘long tail’ of the distribution. Logically, it follows that the shape of the distribution and the number and scope of organizations at its center will vary from system to system, which implies that structural features of a given media system—and not the ideologies of individuals alone—to some extent affect the degree of audience fragmentation within the system (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Third, recent studies have developed methods for observing individuals’ positionality within 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. Thus, an individual’s ‘attention centrality’ score tells us something about how idiosyncratic people’s habits of news 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 multiple national contexts find that across different media systems, only a small percentage of citizens can be said to be in an ideological filter bubbles (Arguedes et al., 2022; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). However, it would be premature to conclude that these results provide evidence against fragmentation in news audiences; rather, it is possible that fragmentation occurs in other ways that align more closely with the networked relations among individuals and media organizations (Castells, 2013), which are facilitated by a combination of shared connections and shared interests and are characterized by the mediatization of personal and public life (Livingstone, 2005). In particular, social and geographic boundaries may not limit individuals’ shared experiences with a common set of media organizations because they are facilitated by the algorithmic curation of content (Thorson & Wells, 2016), which have an ‘actuarial’ dimension in that one individual’s choices may affect the future selection of content for some similar individual (DeVito, 2017). This type of audience dynamic within the ‘networked’ public sphere has important implications for audience fragmentation, as these selective and curatorial processes may produce distinct audience segments, even if those segments do not manifest along strictly ideological, partisan, or otherwise political lines.

To account for these developments, and to address theoretical shortcomings with current approaches to audience fragmentation, we introduce an expanded application of the concept of the news niche. The idea of a news niche is not new. For example, Stroud (2011) conceptualized it as the product of individual-level tendencies toward partisan selective exposure and their interactions with the increasing competition and segmentation of media channels. Scholars have also employed the term in the context of economic concerns for building specialized ties between organizations and their viewers (Nelson, 2018). Borrowing from these approaches, we assume that a news niche is both the outcome of market forces and a reflection of individuals’ positionality within a media system. But we also build on past uses of the concept by incorporating a sociotechnical dimension: News niches are constituted by social and algorithmic processes of content curation in online spaces. Thus, news niches arise not only from the relations between organizations and individuals, but also from the technological infrastructure of major news platforms, including search engines, aggregators, news apps, and social media sites, which create shared experience through the algorithmic curation of content.

This conceptualization of the news niche also allows for an audience that is at once unified by a broadly shared experience and also fragmented by relatively high levels of attention to specific sets of news organizations with a high degree of audience overlap. That is, while audiences may not be entirely fragmented along ideological lines (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), we should be able to identify segments within the overall attention network in which particular individuals and organizations interact (via shared attention) more frequently, and, through those interactions create media experiences primarily shared by them and less by other individuals or organizations outside of the niche. Thus, the current study takes as its starting point the question or whether audience niches of this nature exist, and, if they do, seeks to understand their role in creating ideologically slanted information environments.

**The News Niche and Individuals**

Two factors affect whether individuals occupy a particular news niche: their motivations for attending to news, particularly their ideological motivations; and the routinized patterns of media use on various devices and channels. In terms of the former, politically motivated selective exposure is a well-documented phenomenon (e.g., Stroud, 2011), and recent evidence from Pew Research Center shows that about a quarter (25%) of Americans regularly relied on attitude-consistent news during the 2020 election cycle (Mitchell et al., 2021). Work on politically motivated selective exposure, which focuses specifically on the ways in which news selections are motivated by an individual’s prior political beliefs, attitudes, or identities, has coalesced around two broad conclusions. First, people tend to select news and information they believe will align with their ‘priors,’ a tendency that arises from a psychological bias known as the confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Second, despite this preference for attitude consistency, people do not necessarily avoid politically incongruent media (Garrett 2009; Garrett & Stroud, 2014), a phenomenon known as non-avoidance, which is partially explained by factors related to the information environment. That is, while people generally prefer content that reaffirms their preexisting beliefs, they also tend to develop regular habits of exposure based on the choices available to them and reinforce those routines for reasons of access and convenience (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Stroud, 2010). These habits result in, for most people, at least some exposure to incongruent media while also producing a fair amount of ‘de facto’ selective exposure, as well. Thus, both selection and non-avoidance owe much to environmental factors in additional to individual-level motivations.

Scholars have developed the concept of *media repertoires* (Edgerly et al., 2018; Taneja et al, 2012) in order to understand these environmental factors and how individual media users navigate them. When faced with information abundance, people tend to develop routines that feature a personalized mix of devices and programs. 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). Evidence of user-defined news repertoires challenge traditional thinking about how the system-level structures of channel offerings dictate audience behaviors (Webster, 2011). Given more choices when it comes at their information diets, people’s preferences tend to reflect personal needs and gratifications (Edgerly et al., 2018), and, thus, they do have a good deal of agency when it comes to determining their own positionality within the media landscape. Still, systemic factors do shape the ‘menu’ of available options, leading to clear patterns in aggregate-level media use. Thus, when two or more people develop similar repertoires, they will have relatively similar experiences with news and can thus be said to belong to the same news niche.

One assumption underlying research on both selective exposure and media repertoires is the notion that people make active decisions to select and pay attention to news. However, technological developments have raised questions about the limits of individual agency over the news content they see. Many digital platforms, particularly social media sites such as Facebook and news aggregators such as Google News, but also popular mobile news apps such as Apple News, use algorithms to filter and curate news content to their users (DeVito, 2017; Joris et al., 2021; Thorson et al., 2019). While early public scholarship on the subject paid particular attention to how these selection algorithms personalize content for people (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007), less attention has been paid to the role of other people’s behavior in informing selection criteria. However, more recently research has shown that a person’s social connections are one of, if not the top criteria for Facebook’s selection algorithm (DeVito, 2017; Thorson et al., 2019). Moreover, social network structures are significantly related to encountering news on social media platforms more broadly (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021), suggesting that news exposure on these platforms is, to some extent, shaped by social connections and curation processes (Thorson & Wells, 2016).

But it is also quite plausible that selection algorithms—particularly on aggregators and news apps but also on social media—also have an ‘actuarial’ dimension in that they share something in common with insurance adjustment: The outcome (i.e., the selection of content) likely depends in part on the actions of other people who 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). Thus, the selections of other individuals shape the ideological valence of selections for the individual in question. If this conjecture is true—that news selection algorithms have an actuarial quality, it is logical to presume that the experience of any given individual will be more strongly influenced by other individuals who fit a similar behavioral profile. Therefore, people’s selections should not only be affected by their own choices, but also by the choices of *others in the same news niche*.

**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, 2018). 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 not expect this structure to be inherently polarizing; work on both selective exposure (Garrett, 2009; Garrett & Stroud, 2014) 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**

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 speculate that organizations that occupy the same audience space share something a common ideology, or what we refer to as *editorial valence*. On the other hand, an equally plausible conjecture is that two organizations occupy the same niche not because they are similar, but because they form symbiotic relationships to serve different needs of that audience segment. Thus, it is an open question whether organizations within niches are similar or different in terms of editorial valence. Likewise, it is not clear whether individuals within a niche differ in terms of the ideological slant of their news selections, which we refer to as *selection valence*. While individuals within a niche share a common experience with a subset of media organizations, this shared experience may not be defined by ideological homogeneity in news selection. Based on this logic, we have developed a set of three interrelated research questions.

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

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

RQ3: Is variation in selection valence greater 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. We have previously reviewed literature on the role of individual motivations (i.e., selective exposure) and routines/habits (i.e., media repertoires), as well as the ways in which these individual-level factors interact with organizational-level market forces and the sociotechnical structures of news curation in online spaces. With these ideas in mind, we can identify and analyze three distinct influences on an individual’s selection valence: (1) their own political ideology (i.e., *individual ideology*); (2) the average editorial valence of news organizations within an individual’s niche, which we refer to as *organizational ideology*; and (3) the average ideology of others in the niche, which we refer to as *audience ideology*. The niche concept helps researchers to parse these effects by structuring relevant comparisons. That is, an individual’s news selections should be most affected by the organizations and audience members within their niche in addition to their own political ideology.

H1: Individual ideology will be positively related to selection valence.

H2: Organizational ideology will be positively related to selection valence.

H3: Audience ideology will be positively related to selection valence.

Finally, given the multilevel nature of the relationships under study (H1-H3), we propose an exploratory research question. If organizational and audience characteristics shape the range of individual choice—that is, they narrow the ‘menu’ options down from many to a more manageable subset, then it is plausible that individual predispositions interact with these contextual factors.

RQ4: Does (a) organizational ideology or (b) audience ideology moderate the relationship between individual ideology and selection valence?

**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).

***Editorial Valence and Organizational Ideology***

The news outlets named in the open-ended measures described above were coded for their 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 (Authors; Stroud, 2010), coders were instructed to adhere to a hierarchical coding guideline: (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 variable ranges from -2.0 to 2.2, with a mean of -0.1 (*SD* = 0.8). Finally, organizational ideology was computed by taking the average editorial valence of the organizations within each niche (i.e., the group mean for each niche).

***Selection Valence***

Selection valence characterizes the slant of an individual’s exposure or attention based on the outlets they named in the survey. We assigned each respondent the coded editorial valence scores for the organizations they named. These scores were then averaged for each respondent, creating an index of selection valence (*M* = -0.1, *SD* = 0.8).

***Individual and Audience Ideology***

Individual ideology 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). Audience ideology was computed by taking the average ideology of respondents within a given niche (i.e., the group mean for each niche).

***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., Ksiasek, 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.

***Identifying the News Niches***

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 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 editorial valence (RQ2) and selection valence (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 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 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 editorial valence (*M =* -0.79 versus a grand mean of -0.10) and selection valence (*M* = -0.73 versus a grand mean of -0.10). 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 for editorial valence and *Var*. = 0.15 for selection valence), whereas the *cable* group displays a relatively large variance estimate with cases widely dispersed around the mean (*Var.* = 1.88 for editorial valence and 0.79 for selection valence). 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 individual ideology on selection valence, 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 important to test whether the outcome varies across sampling frames and niches. A null multilevel model shows that it does vary across these structures (17 frames x 3 niches = 51 groups) with a standard deviation of approximately .31, and a comparison with a null linear model (which does not account for time and group structures), shows that the multilevel model is a better fit to the data (χ2 = 85.94, *p* < .001). Therefore, 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 ideology. The fixed effect is positive and statistically significant (*b* = 0.06, *SE* = 0.01, *p* < 0.001). But while the intercept for selection valence does vary between groups (*Var.* = 0.09), the random effect of individual ideology is close to zero (*Var.* = 0.00), resulting in a relatively low ICC of 0.17. These results indicate that while the mean for selection valence may vary across groups, the effect of individual ideology on selection valence 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 ideology (H2) and audience ideology (H3). These can be interpreted as characteristics of news niches: Audience ideology is calculated as the group mean of individual ideology within each niche, and organizational ideology is calculated as the group mean of editorial valence 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 editorial valence 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 shows that the organizational effect is the largest and the individual effect is the smallest, with the audience effect in between. We standardized these effect sizes by calculating Cohen’s *d* for each, and these statistics show that the organizational and audience-level effect sizes are similar (*d* = .30 for organizational ideology and *d* = .28 for audience ideology), while the effect size of individual ideology is relatively smaller (*d* = .16). Therefore, these results show that while an individual’s own political ideology matters when it comes to shaping the ideological valence of their news exposure, the editorial valence of organizations within the niche, as well as the average ideology of the audience members within the news niche has a comparatively 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 ideology interacts with audience ideology and/or organizational ideology. 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**

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.

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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 Editorial Valence and Selection Valence* | | | | |
| Statistic | Local/Aggregators | Elite | Cable | Full Sample |
| **Editorial 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 | | | |
| **Selection Valence** | | | | |
| 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 Editorial Valence and Selection Valence* NEED TO CHANGE LABELS



|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 3  *The Predictors of Selection Valence 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 |
| Individual 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* |
| Audience Ideology |  | |  | 0.43\*\*\* | 0.04 | |  |  | 0.44\*\*\* | 0.04 |  |  |
| Organizational Ideology |  | |  |  |  | | 1.02\*\*\* | 0.09 |  |  | 1.03\*\*\* | 0.09 |
| **Interactions** | *b* | | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* | *b* | *SE* |
| Individual Ideology \*  Audience Ideology |  | |  |  |  | |  |  | 0.02# | 0.01 |  |  |
| Individual Ideology \* Organizational Ideology |  | |  |  |  | |  |  |  |  | 0.08\*\* | 0.03 |
| **Random Effects** | *Var*. | | | *Var.* | | | *Var.* | | *Var.* | | *Var.* | |
| Intercept Niche:Frame | 0.09 | | | 0.01 | | | 0.01 | | 0.01 | | 0.01 | |
| Individual 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 an individual 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 Selection Valence at the Individual, Audience, and Organizational Levels from Hierarchical Models* NEED TO CHANGE LABELS



Figure 4

*Conditional Effects of Individual Ideology on Selection Valence at Various Levels of Audience Ideology and Organizational Ideology* NEED TO CHANGE LABELS

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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.* | | |