Original

Ideological fragmentation in news audiences has been studied by looking at either individual’s media selections, or by observing aggregate patterns of attention to news organizations. While the former set of studies typically shows evidence of fragmentation, the latter generally does not. This study engages with the mixed evidence on audience fragmentation through multilevel conceptualization and analysis. We develop a theoretical approach that builds upon the classic notion of niche news, and we then test this framework with multilevel survey data from the United States (N = 1,965). While results reveal three distinct-but-overlapping audience niches, we do not find support for clear fragmentation along ideological lines. Instead, news consumption within a niche reflects competition and symbiosis among news organizations, highlighting the influence of system-level factors, rather than individual ideology, on partisan news selection. Results are discussed in light of our current knowledge about audience fragmentation in the United States.

Revised

Ideological fragmentation in news audiences has been studied by looking at either individual’s media selections, or by observing structural patterns of attention to news at the macro level. While the former set of studies typically shows evidence of fragmentation, the latter generally does not. This study engages with the mixed evidence on audience fragmentation through multilevel conceptualization and analysis. We first develop a theoretical framework for studying politically motivated news selection at the individual, audience, and organizational levels. In doing so, we revitalize the classic notion of ‘niche news’ to account for the actuary mechanisms of algorithms and content filtering systems that shape people’s options for news. We then introduce a methodology for identifying political valence in projection networks with community detection techniques. Multilevel analysis with survey data from the United States reveal three distinct-but-overlapping niches. We do not find support for fragmentation along ideological lines. Instead, news consumption within a niche is reflected in competition and symbiosis at the organizational level, and the ideology of others within the same niche at the audience level. Results highlight the complex ecology of system-level factors on news selection.