**Between Individuals and Organizations: How News Audience Niches Shape Exposure to Partisan News**

**Audience Overlap**

As media choice accelerated with cable television and the internet, scholars examined the role of choice in creating isolated, fragmented audience clusters. Broadly referred to as the study of *audience overlap*, or the tendency for an audience of one program to be represented in another, the line of research is less concerned with the individual-level motivations for partisan media preferences, as selective exposure research is, and more concerned with the extent to which news audiences are split along ideological lines. Generally, these studies follow a social network analysis approach, treating news organizations as nodes in a network and connections between news organizations as edges (for an overview, see Ksiazek, 2011), and this type of analysis allows studies of audience overlap to occupy a middle ground between “media-centric” research that looks at the relative popularity of news organizations (e.g., XXX), and “user-centric” research that observes micro-level patterns of news use and the psychological processes that shape them (e.g., Althaus & Tewksbury, 2007). Thus, the study of audience overlap takes a third, “audience-centric” approach, which is based on the interplay between media supply and user demand (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012, p. 45). Here, the audience is conceptualized as groups of people within a media ecosystem who pay attention to the same sources, creating various levels of audience overlap (Webster, 2014), and this approach allows researchers to identify how audiences are dispersed across the media landscape.

Recent research on audience overlap has generally converged on 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). Despite concerns about political clustering, audience “silos” are less common than expected. Employing both large-scale datasets of online linking patterns (e.g., Mukerjee et al., 2018) and survey responses (e.g., Weeks et al., 2016) audience studies have found considerable evidence of heterogeneous news consumption, resulting in a substantial degree of audience overlap across channels. Second, recent scholarship has developed additional methodological techniques to observe the “backbone” network (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2019; Mukerjee et al., 2018), revealing a power-law distribution in which the majority of audience attention goes to a core set of primarily mainstream news outlets. Legacy media organizations often represent the most powerful organizations in these core networks, suggesting that the structure of media systems has an influence on the centrality of particular outlets (Majó-Vázquez et al., 2019). Indeed, some researchers in this area have argued that these audience structures—that is, the relationship between media supply and user demand—may be more important in shaping audience attention than the ideologies of individuals or news organizations alone (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Third, recent research has also developed methods for observing individuals’ positionality within audience networks, and they have used it to explain the ideological valence of their attention (Barnidge et al., 2021). This methodological innovation centers on characterizing individuals according to their roles within a broader network, bridging the gap between audience-level and individual-level studies. Drawing on core concepts from network analysis, a person’s centrality to the attention network can be calculated based on their news selections, and this position in the network reflects how isolated their habits are: Individuals positioned farther from the center of the network share news experiences with a narrower portion of the audience, whereas individuals positioned more centrally in the network share experiences with a wider portion of the audience. Positionality within the attention network matters for the ideological valence of news exposure: 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).

**Expanding the News Niche Concept**

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. A limitation of the current approach is a 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 it does not manifest along strictly partisan lines.

To account for these developments, and to address theoretical shortcomings with current approaches, we introduce an expanded theoretical application of the concept of the news niche. The idea of a news niche is nothing new. Stroud (2008) 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 (e.g., 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 the information ecology. This definition encompasses the symbiosis of 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 of the news niche captures the segmented audience, one comprised of diffused individuals but a shared experience. If attention to news is approximately uniform across the niche, then audiences of a particular segment should have more similar preferences than others outside the niche. That is, though audiences may not be ideologically fragmented per se, we should be able to identify segments in which individuals and organizations have more in common. Exposure to ideological and politically-valence content is a product of the relative presence or absence of ideologically charged content within one’s news niche. If shared experiences determine exposure, it follows that people within the niche should have similar experiences with partisan media. There are two considerations that determine the nature of niche construction: the relations between niches and individuals, and the symbiosis of markets and organizations.

**The News Niche and Individuals**

The first factor that constitutes the niche is the fact that people are linked by shared 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 phycological mechanisms when they filter new information. So-called ‘de facto’ selection occurs when people regularly turn to the same news organizations for reasons of trust and convenience. That is, while people seek to reaffirm preexisting beliefs, they eventually develop habits of exposure for reasons beyond political identity building (Stroud, 2008). Initial work in this area argued that relieving cognitive dissonance was the primary motivating factor, but recent studies show that perceptions of credibility may be more important (Metzger et al., 2020). 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 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, we should see shared repertoires among those 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. These concerns have merit, because repertoires have also been connected to patterns of participation in politics (Edgerly et al., 2018; Ksiazek et al., 2010).

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

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

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

Taken together, scholarship on partisan preferences, repertoires, and incidental attention suggests that people with shared interests and motivations should be observable at the audience-level as separate, but internally consistent groups with varying degrees of attention to ideological news. People are connected to displaced but potentially internally consistent niches based on the nature of their pooled habits of attention and shared experiences. Yet, previous work has yet to link people to meso-level phenomena in a way that accounts for various uses and attention to news. It is also not entirely clear weather the degree of internal variance in preference for ideological news is more consistent within or between audience niches. A final consideration is that the niche itself is shaped by the editorial slant of the news organizations people turn to.

**The News Niche and Organizations**

***Market Strategy***

Mainstream news organizations in the United States have increasingly turned to ideological content to compete for viewers (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Benkler et al., 2018), and there are several structural factors that influence this shift in programing, including a) the historical trajectory of the American press system, as well as the current policy climate, and b) the information and communication infrastructure, particularly the development online and cable media in the 1990s and, more recently, the emergence of mega-platforms such as Facebook and Google. 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. While in the past the U.S. system has featured a heavier hand in regulating media and communication, 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).

Second, the emergence of online media and cable television altered the characteristics of supply and demand for political information. In particular, social media account for an ever-increasing share of the public’s attention to news; about half (48%) of Americans get their news from one or more social media platforms (Walker & Matsa, 2021). Generating billions of dollars, news organizations rely on these companies to direct traffic and sell ad space (Coster, 2021). Newsrooms are under pressure to create click-worthy posts, and publishers have been incentivized to foster engagement via affective appeals. These developments represent an editorial pivot away from traditional reporting norms and an embrace of the logic of emerging media platforms.

Putting these dynamics together the U.S. media system has produced a unique information environment where a handful of companies compete for audience attention, but people also have access to a seemingly infinite range of choices for their daily dose of public affairs information. The incentives for organizations to create tailored content for markets segments is rather strong (Nelson, 2017). Ideological news is one strategy, and the most popular news outlets are now either objectively partisan, or circulate narrative from the fringes of the media system (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Benkler et al., 2018).

***Competition and Symbiosis***

***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 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 undergirding these affordances 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/individuals within and between niches. For example, one might conjecture that organizations that occupy the same audience space share something in common, such as ideology. On the other hand, two organizations are able to 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 along some characteristic of interest. Frames in analytic terms, we might ask whether within-group variance 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 what are 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: Are ideological differences among news organizations greater within niches or between niches?

RQ3: Are ideological differences among individual news users 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. Selective exposure theory has long held that individuals’ personal ideologies (or partisan preferences) shape the ideological valence of their news selections (Stroud, 2008). But while this is true, we also know that there are other influences on news attention, as well, such as individuals’ 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 predominated by organizations that slant one way or another. This prediction draws from the much older 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, individuals’ 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 all consider the past behavior not only of the individual news consumer but of *other news consumers*, as well (DeVito, 2017; Thorson et al., 2019). In that 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 one news user 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 have shaped the ideological valence of selections for the individual in question.

With these ideas in mind, we can identify and analyze three distinct influences on the ideological valence of an given individual’s news selections: personal ideology, organizational ideology, and 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: Individual’s political ideology will be related to the ideological valence of their news attention.

H2: The average ideology of news organizations within each niche will be related to the ideological valence of individuals’ news attention.

H3: The average ideology of the audience within each niche will be related to the ideological valence of individuals’ news attention.