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

*Working RQs*

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Between Individuals and News Organizations: How Audience-Level Factors Shape Ideological News Consumption in the United States**

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 have extensively examined the psychology of individual choice and partisan news exposure (e.g., Garrett, 2009; Peacock et al., 2021; Stroud, 2008), as well as the extent to which news audiences are fragmented, on the whole (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). While these lines of research draw on different theoretical assumptions and observational approaches, they share a concern for the implications of an ideologically valanced press system: Ideological fragmentation has been connected to contentious politics (Aelst et al., 2017), a lack of consensus on issue agendas (Hart & Nisbet, 2012), declining institutional trust (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020), and a communication environment in which facts are contested (Waisbord, 2019).

The present study builds on both of these bodies of literature, offering a different approach for characterizing audiences and/or classifying individuals within audiences according to the news media to which they pay attention: 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 studying news niches 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 approach, which looks at the shared audience for a given news organization. This multilevel approach has several advantages. In particular, it affords the ability to assess the influence of the audience within each niche on individuals’ partisan news exposure, alongside the more traditionally studied individual-level motivations and organizational-level news slant. Thus, using this approach, researchers are able to parse out individual-level, audience-level, and organizational-level influences on the partisanship of individuals’ news exposure.

This framework is particular useful for understanding the dynamics of partisan news exposure on social media platforms. Recent studies on the filtering and selection of news on major platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit raise important questions about individual agency, as one’s political information exposure may be a product of algorithmic filtering (Thorson et al., 2019), incidental exposure (e.g., Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2019), or recommendations from one’s social networks (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Despite these advances, researchers have only partially addressed the nature of attention to ideological news—much of the seminal work predates the dominance of social media platforms—and most studies rely on only one level of analysis (Slater et al., 2006), do not account for news content (de Vreese et al., 2017), and in general have overlooked the potential role of audience-level attributes in shaping news exposure (c.f. Flaxman et al., 2016). These omissions represent a substantial gap in the literature, as the algorithms that filter content in online spaces increasingly rely on activity from others within an individual’s network or on the platform more generally. That is, individuals’ news exposure on these platforms is shaped not only by their own choices, but also by the curation activity of social contacts and even the engagement behaviors of people to whom they are not connected. These audience-level factors are based on shared interests that drive engagement metrics and shape the content and sentiment in popular stories, and therefore determine, at least in part, how individuals come across news and political information. Yet, we know very little about these audience-level factors, and even less about whether they matter for exposure to ideological news content.

To forward scholarship in these areas, we propose a framework for identifying news niches, comprising organizations and individuals connected by shared attention, which in turn reveal the individual, audience, and organizational attributes that influence individuals’ ideological news use. To do so, we combine survey data (*N* = 1,965; 17 Waves) with publicly available posts from the top 25 news organizations on Facebook (*N* = 84,000) to test a hierarchical model of attention to ideological news based on an individuals’ news niche. But first, we turn to an examination of prior research on three kinds of factors that influence ideological news exposure: the content that organizations create, the motivations of individuals, and the ideologies and behaviors of shared audiences.

**Ideological News in the American Media System**

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 and mobile media account for an ever-increasing share of the public’s attention to news; about half (48%) of Americans get their news from one or more social media platforms (Walker & Matsa, 2021). These platforms, including Google, have shifted revenue models to online advertising. Generating billions of dollars, news organizations rely on these companies to direct traffic and sell ad space (Coster, 2021). Newsrooms are under pressure to create click-worthy posts, and publishers have been incentivized to foster engagement via affective appeals. These developments represent an editorial pivot away from traditional reporting norms and an embrace of the logic of emerging media platforms. For example, studies employing automated content analysis with large-scale social media datasets show that sentiment drives both views and shares across platforms: negative sentiment is more common in the former, and positive sentiment disproportionately accounts for the latter (Kraft et al., 2020). This translates to election information as well, where negative posts about out-group opponents are more likely to go viral (Rathje et al., 2021). At the same time, legacy media now compete alongside a “long tail” of alternative and hyperpartisan news content, which largely take advantage of the decentralized nature of content distribution via online platforms. The emergence of these media mean that people may be exposed to political information across a wide spectrum of genres, from memes and user-generated content to alternative and non-mainstream media that exist primarily on social 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. Thus, a small handful of organizations account for the overwhelming majority of the market, but at the same time people report encounters with a plethora of peripheral news sources. Social media and other online platforms play a large role in aggregating and circulating content from all of these sources, and social media feeds tend to be dominated by posts designed to draw engagement via some degree of positive and negative sentiment in their political coverage. Thus, there is a plentiful supply of ideologically valanced news within the typical individual’s daily information diet, as American news organizations are generally incentivized to produce it.

NEED TO CONNECT TO THE STUDY – WHY DOES THIS MATTER? MEDIA COMPETE BUT CAN ALSO BE LINKED TOGETHER THROUGH SHARED AUDIENCE. ECONOMICS OF NICHE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-argument for hierarchical modelling

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

-relationship between valence of the system and individuals

-RQs/H

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