**Individual-Level Motivations for 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%) regularly relied on attitude-consistent news (Mitchell et al., 2021). At least three intertwined research areas help to explain ideological news consumption: 1) selective exposure, 2) news repertoires, and 3) incidental exposure.

First, while research on politically motivated selective exposure goes back to the beginnings academic research on political communication (XXX), the phenomenon received renewed attention from scholars with the adoption of cable television and the internet, which, as previously discussed, incentivized the emergence of ideologically slanted news content by the 2000s (Stroud, 2011). After more than a decade of vigorous work on the topic, consensus has developed around two conclusions: 1) people prefer attitude-congruent news when given a choice (Knobloch-Westerwick, XXX), but 2) they do not necessarily avoid counter-attitudinal information (Garrett, XXX). Initially theorized to be a product of cognitive dissonance (XXX), wherein people generally seek to avoid disagreeable information, scholarship has more recently centered psychological explanations on the confirmation bias, or the tendency to search for, interpret, or recall information that supports one’s prior beliefs (KW, XXX). This explanation allows room for the non-avoidance phenomenon—people do not actively avoid dissonant information so much as they seek out consonant information (G, XXX). This dynamic raises the question of the extent to which Americans’ overall news diets are ideologically slanted, and research has found that concerns about the one-sidedness of information habits are largely over-stated, as individual’s news diets do tend to include a fair amount of counter-attitudinal and neutral information (XXX), and audiences on the whole are less fragmented than theory initially predicted they would be (XXX).

One reason why individuals tend to have ideologically mixed media diets is related to news repertoires, which are defined as the strategies people employ and the habits they develop to navigate their information environment (Edgerly et al., 2018; Taneja et al, 2012). Growing out of the “active audience” paradigm with its roots in early “uses and gratifications” research, the repertoires concept was evolved as a way of explaining the mix of media preferences and behaviors that people develop in order to cope with the information abundance resulting from an increasingly large number of channels and an expanding range of devices on which to access them, people tend to develop 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 dictate audience behaviors (Webster, 2011). Whereas selective exposure theory tends to classify news exposure into two (possibly three) categorized based on observations related to the growth and increasing prevalence of partisan news organizations, the repertoires literature shows that individual repertoires tend to be more closely defined by platform/device preference (Kim, 2014), as well as their broad motivations for seeking news media, for example, work, entertainment, and socializing (Taneja et al, 2012). In general, most people tend to avoid political news and public affairs information, and individuals with high political interest and education tend to account for the overwhelming majority of attention to this kind of content (Ksiazek et al., 2010).

While repertoire theory provides a convincing account for how people exercise some autonomy over their news selections. 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).

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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.

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.

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).

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).

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.

However, supply does not account for demand, and we do not have a complete accounting of the demand for ideological news. This is because studies examining macro-level systems by default avoid individual-level factors and often do not code for ideological valence (e.g., Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), while others overlook the network structure of news audiences (Flaxman et al, 2016). In the following sections we propose a hierarchical model that outlines the individual and audience level factors that determine ideological news selection.

The prevalence of ideological news at the macro level has been associated with social fragmentation, as the proliferation of channels allows some people to avoid news altogether (Prior, 2005) while others may be radicalized. Scholars argue that exposure to ideological divergence stimulates affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) because it reenforces in-group sentiment via “outrage” coverage (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014), creates gaps in turnout (Prior, 2007), and makes policy consensus difficult to achieve (Hart & Nisbet, 2012). Alternatively, the plethora of choice in contemporary information environments may in theory lead to fragmentation in the form of information inequality, where the ‘rich get richer’ (Kümpel, 2020). The extent to which these outcomes are caused by information and communication variables alone is debatable (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2019), but we do know that political sectarianism is a growing trend in Western democracies (Finkel et al., 2020) and these trends have coincided with a decline in objectivity journalism and a rise in ideological and hyperpartisan content. Connecting media influence with specific social phenomena is challenging because scholars have only partially accounted for the various socio-technical factors that may, or may not, direct attention to ideological news in the first place.

Niches are different way of characterizing audiences and/or classifying individuals within audiences according to the news media to which they pay attention. Incorporates elements from both the selective exposure approach, which focuses on individual-level motivations and groups exposure into two types (pro- and counter-attitudinal), as well as the audience approach, which looks at shared audience for a given news organization. The niche approach has several advantages. First, rather than assuming news media group together according to their ideologies or partisanship, as selective exposure theory generally does, the niche approach focuses on the self-reported or observed repertoires of news users, which are often medium-based and feature varying levels of pro- and counter-attitudinal media in addition to non-partisan media. Second, rather than merely observing the extent to which news organizations share a common audience, as the audience overlap approach generally does, the niche approach allows researchers to analyze the characteristics of groups of organizations—for example, their average ideology—that are connected via shared audiences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, the niche approach allows researchers to not only assess the extent of shared audiences, but to assess the influence of these audiences on individuals’ partisan exposure within each niche. Thus, the niche approach affords researchers the ability to parse out individual, organizational, and audience influences on the partisanship of individuals’ news exposure.

Employing network analysis, these studies find evidence of significant duplication across media outlets, suggesting that audiences are not as fragmented as intuition would suggest (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

by examining not only the ideologies of individuals and the news organizations to which they pay attention, but also the average ideology of the audience for those organizations

The model is based on a network projection (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) that situates respondents as members of a news niche. We then identify the antecedent factors of ideological news consumption while accounting for a) attention to news, including incidental exposure, b) the ideological valence of the outlets within each news niche, and c) contextual factors of the audience ideology as well as the overall engagement and sentiment of the most popular posts circulating on Facebook. The novel design offers new insights into the layered, complicated composition of contemporary news audienences.

Applying theories of social and political integration (Kim et al., 2006; Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2008) and developing a novel methodological technique derived from audience overlap studies (Barnidge et al., 2021; Majo-Vazquez et al., 2019)