Abstract

To what extent are news audiences fragmented across ideological lines? Traditional scholarship has primarily answered this question at two levels of analysis: The selection valence of individuals (e.g., selective exposure research) or the overall patterns of shared attention at the system level (commonly referred to as duplication or studies). Yet, scholarship has not examined the nature of audience-level characteristics and ideological news exposure. This omission represents a major oversight, as the mechanisms of news filtration are increasingly determined not only by individual preferences, but also by the preferences of other people in the network. We argue that information flows across social media platforms, news aggregators, apps, and email are shaped by algorithmic systems which are actuarial, in that they sort people according to shared information repertoires. To capture this phenomenon, we explicate a theoretical rationale for the importance of the *news niche*. We then apply this framework to a novel empirical approach for identifying niches within an audience projection network using survey data (N = 1,965). Results reveal three discrete but overlapping niches: right-leaning elite cable and television, left-leaning prestige press, and local-aggregators. We then examine the nature of ideological heterogeneity at the individual, audience, and organizational levels within and between niches. Finally, hierarchal regression analysis is used to determine the role of audience-level characteristics on one’s selection valence. We find that the ideology of others in the niche is a strong and consistent predictor of news selection. Implications for theorizing audience fragmentation are discussed.