

# The Agenda-Setting Function of Social Media



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**Social media can influence *what issues*  
we think are **important** in the news,  
and *how* we think about these issues.**

# “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972)

## THE AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION OF MASS MEDIA\*

BY MAXWELL E. MCCOMBS AND DONALD L. SHAW

In choosing and displaying news, editors, newroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the “agenda” of the campaign.

The authors are associate professors of journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

IN OUR DAY, more than ever before, candidates go before the people through the mass media rather than in person.<sup>1</sup> The information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics. The pledges, promises, and rhetoric encapsulated in news stories, columns, and editorials constitute much of the information upon which a voting decision has to be made. Most of what people know comes to them “second” or “third” hand from the mass media or from other people.<sup>2</sup>

Although the evidence that mass media deeply change attitudes in a campaign is far from conclusive,<sup>3</sup> the evidence is much stronger that voters learn from the immense quantity of information available during each campaign.<sup>4</sup> People, of course, vary greatly in their attention to mass media political information. Some, normally the better educated and most politically interested (and those least likely to change

\*This study was partially supported by a grant from the National Association of Broadcasters. Additional support was provided by the UNC Institute for Research in Social Science and the School of Journalism Foundation of North Carolina.

<sup>1</sup> See Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. M. Plesser, *Fighting Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 254. Of course to some degree candidates have always depended upon the mass media, but radio and television brought a new intimacy into politics.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, “The Mass Media and Voting,” in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, eds., *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, 2d ed., New York, Free Press, 1966, p. 466.

<sup>3</sup> See Berelson *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 252; Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1948, p. xx; and Joseph T. Brennan and Denis McQuail, *Television and the Political Image*, London, Methuen and Co., 1961, pp. 147, 151.

<sup>4</sup> See Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 120.

The news that the mass media chooses to cover or not cover can influence the political agenda, since mass media becomes the only way people have contact with politics.

This paper opened a whole new area called *agenda-setting theory* in communications studies, and has been cited ~20k times.

**Agenda-Setting:** what *issues* are covered / not covered.

**Framing / Second-Level Agenda-Setting:** what *aspects of a certain issue* are emphasized / not emphasized.

# In our day, a similar sentiment could be expressed about **social media**.

## The Agenda-Setting Function of **Social Media**

BY MAXWELL E. McCOMBS AND DONALD L. SHAW

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Social media is an increasing part of people’s information ecosystems.

- In 2024, 72% of Americans used social media as a news source.

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Previous studies on agenda-setting and framing on social media platforms are limited in scope to a...

- Single issue (Demszky et al., 2019; Field et al., 2018; Mendelsohn et al., 2021)
- Subset of issues (Mendelsohn et al., 2021, Russell Neuman et al., 2014)
- Single news source (Kwak et al., 2020).

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- Single news source (Kwak et al., 2020).

Past research on potential exposure, actual exposure, and user engagement with news articles on social media platforms has primarily analyzed news articles at the...

- Domain-level (Bakshy et al., 2015; Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2023)
- News-story level (Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2023).

We ask: How does the **online social media environment** influence **user perception of news** via **agenda-setting** and **framing effects**?



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## News

Trump pardons Nevada politician who paid for her plastic surgery with funds to honor a slain officer



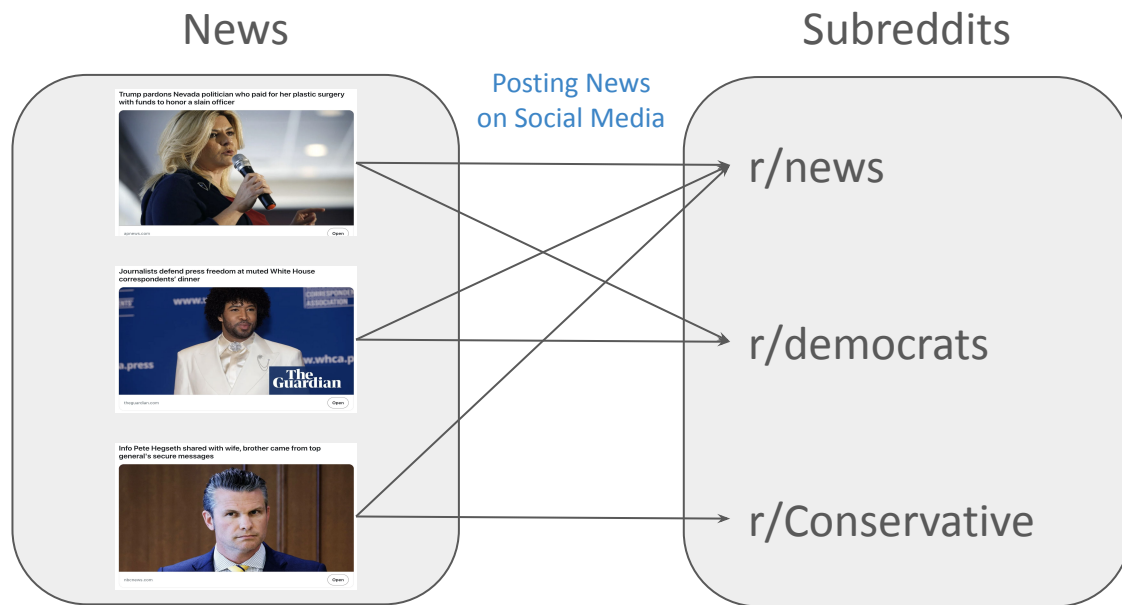
Journalists defend press freedom at muted White House correspondents' dinner



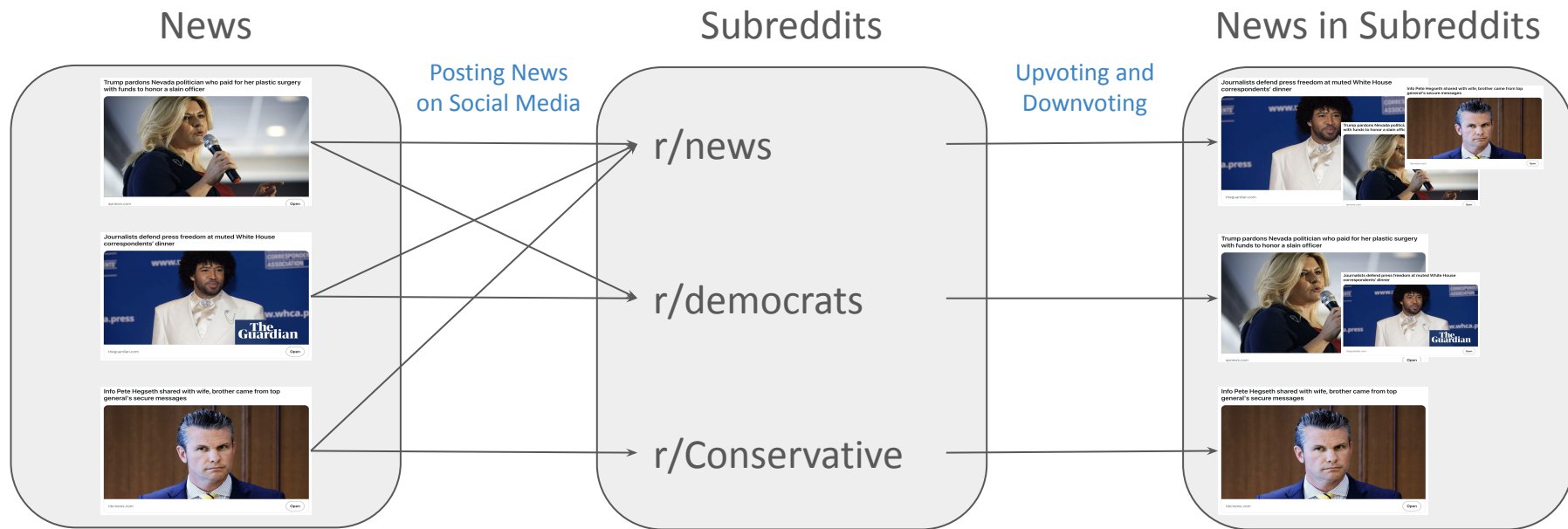
Info Pete Hegseth shared with wife, brother came from top general's secure messages



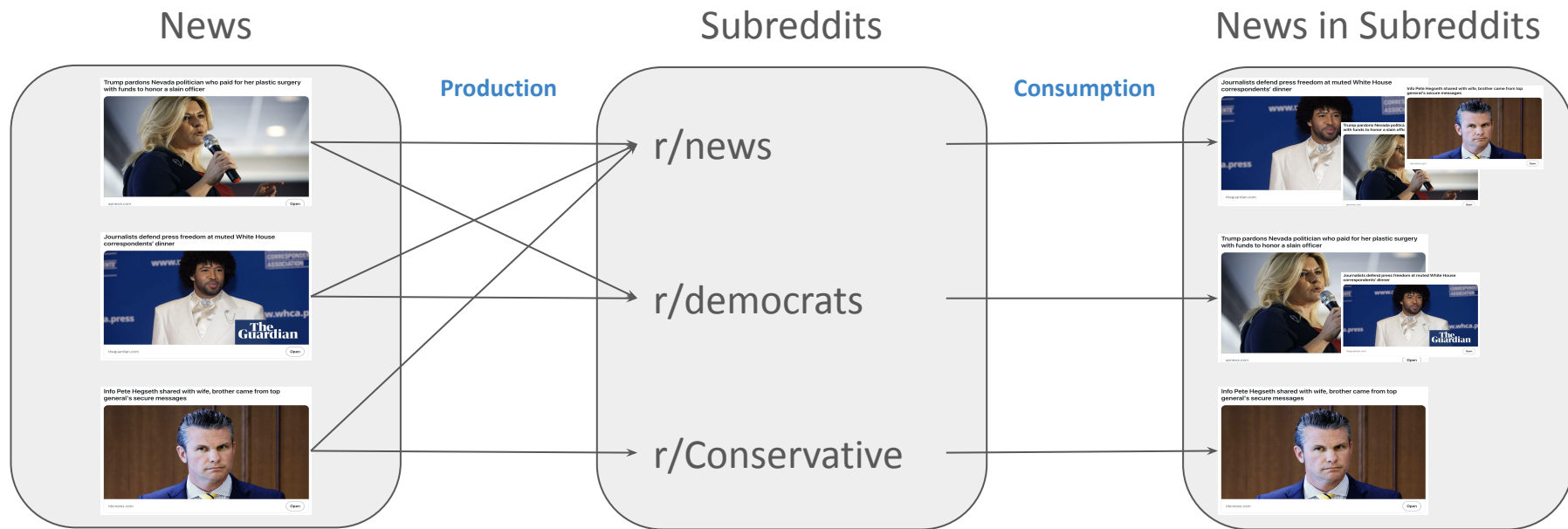
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We define the **production** and **consumption** of news articles on **Reddit**.

**Production** is the news articles that were shared on Reddit. This consists of *what* news articles were shared, and *where*.

**Consumption** is a **score-weighted measure of user engagement** with the news articles that were shared on Reddit.

$$\text{score} = \# \text{ upvotes} - \# \text{ downvotes}$$

A higher score means that more users have signalled support for the article, and the article appears higher on a Reddit user's feed.

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The **primary topic / issue** was determined by creating a **topic model** using a **BERTopic-like workflow** on the news articles in our dataset.

We used INSTRUCTOR-LARGE embeddings, performed dimensionality reduction, and using soft HDBSCAN clustering.

## Traditional media

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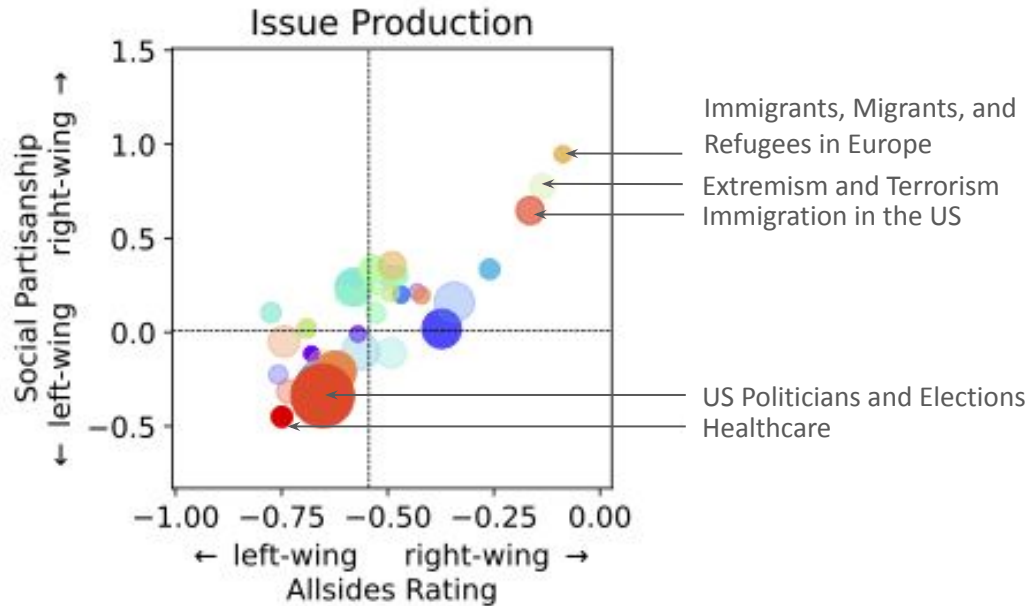


The **primary topic / issue** was determined by creating a **topic model** using a **BERTopic-like workflow** on the news articles in our dataset.

The **primary frame** was one of the **15 issue-general frames** outlined in the **Policy Frames Codebook** (Boydston, 2014).

The primary frame was determined by **fine-tuning a roberta-large model** on the **Media Frames Corpus** (Card, 2015). The accuracy was 72.3% and the macro-F1 was 64.2%.

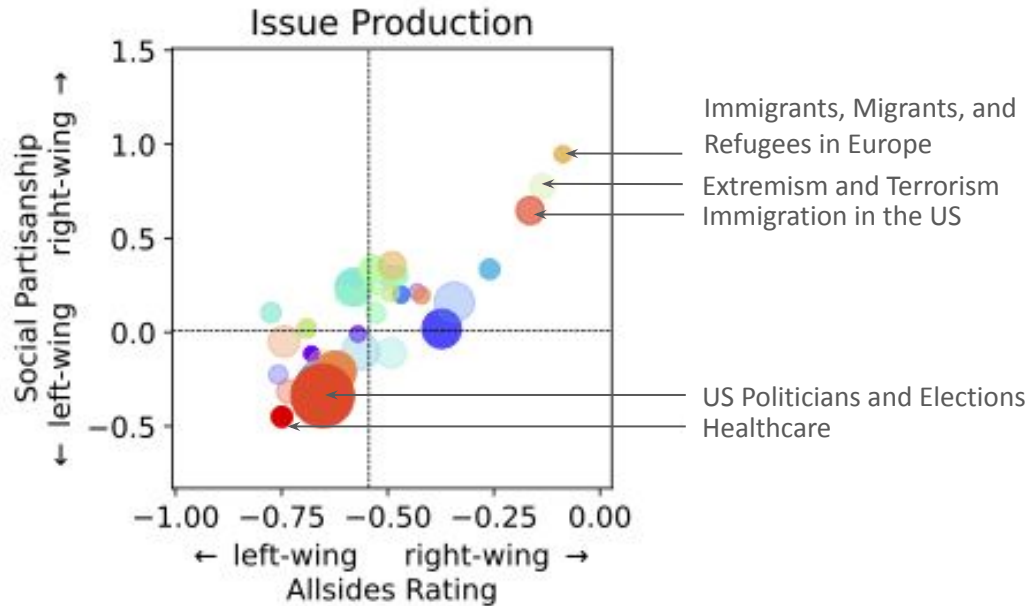
# Issues are more polarized in social media than in traditional media.



We take the **interquartile range (IQR)** of the issues' Allsides rating (traditional media) and social partisanship scores (social media).

To enable comparison, we convert the Allsides ratings into z-scores.

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Traditional Media

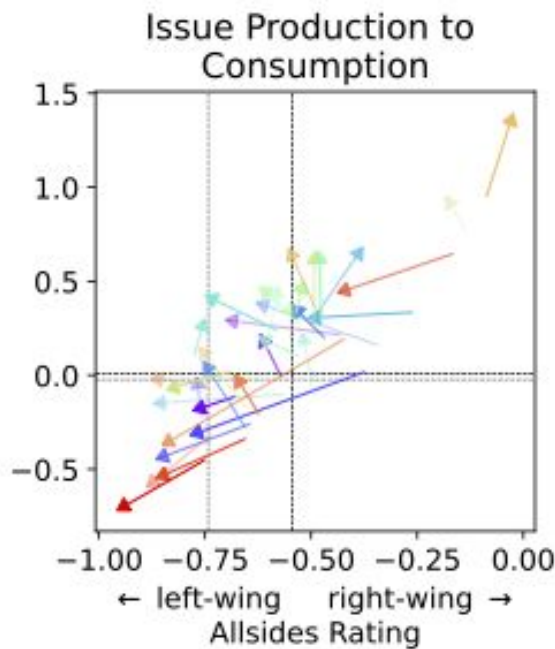
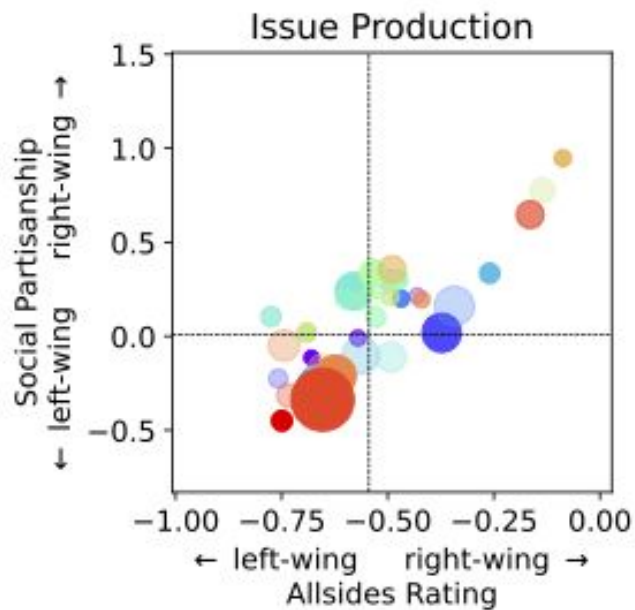
IQR: 0.162

Social Media IQR:

0.380

⇒ The act of *sharing news on social media* contributes to **issue polarization**.

# Issues are more polarized in consumption than in production.

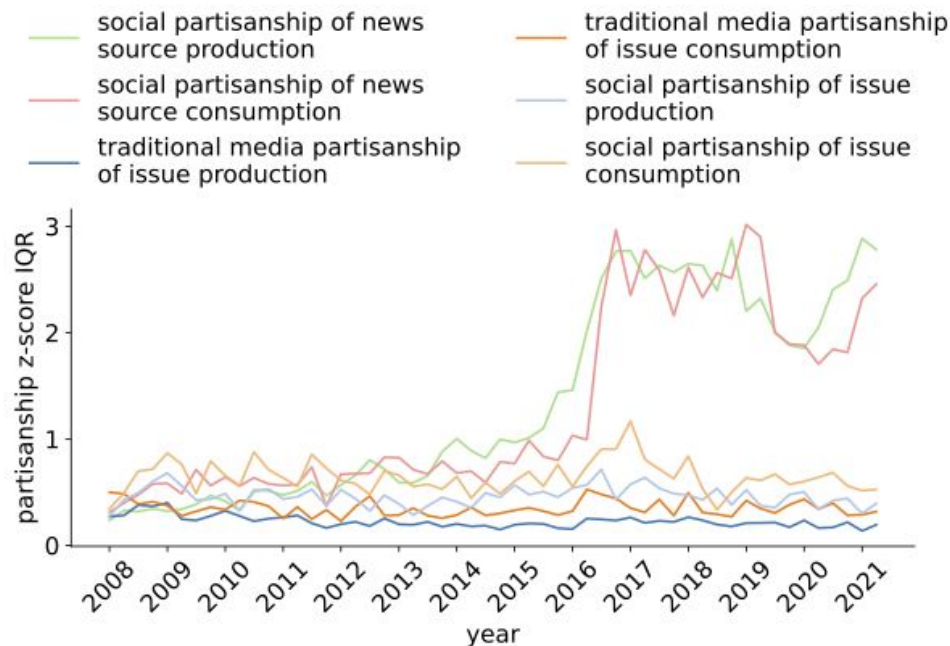


Traditional Media  
IQR: 0.162  $\rightarrow$  0.227

Social Media IQR:  
0.380  $\rightarrow$  0.533

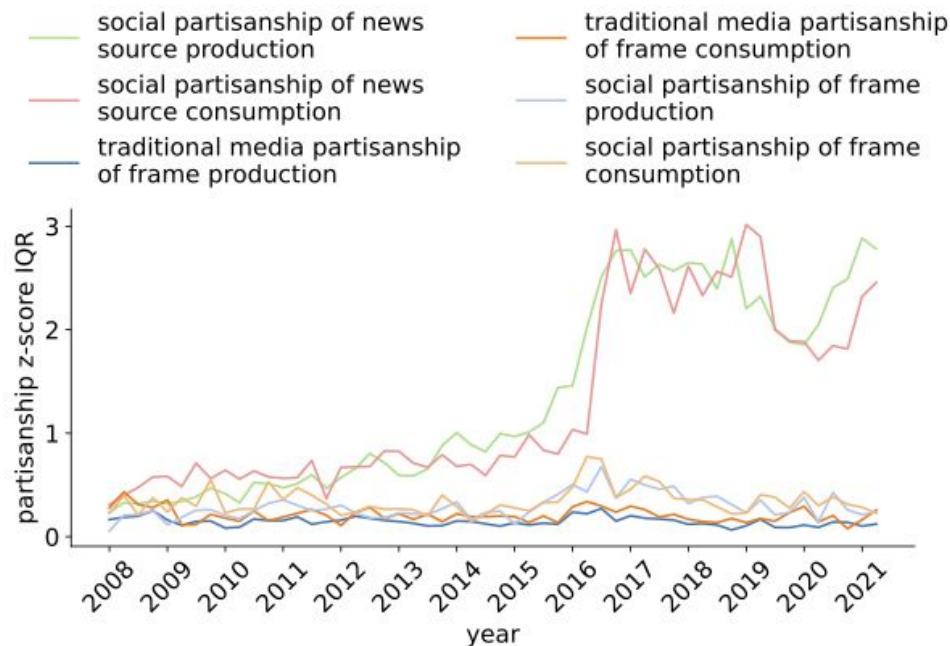
$\Rightarrow$  Along with the act of sharing news, *the selective exposure effects of Reddit* further contribute to **issue polarization**.

In contrast to the significant polarization of news outlets on Reddit in 2016, **issues do not polarize over time.**



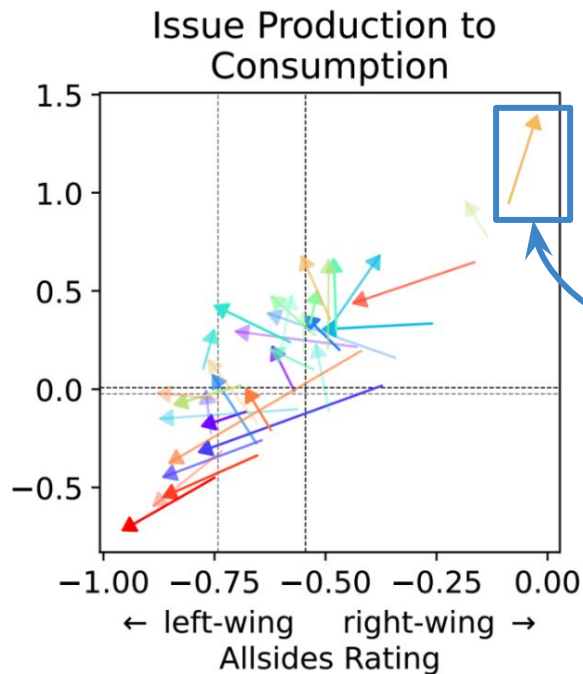
⇒ While left- and right-wing communities have become increasingly segregated in the news articles sources that are produced and consumed, the news articles are *not* becoming as segregated in the *issues that they discuss*.

In contrast to the significant polarization of news outlets on Reddit in 2016, **frames do not polarize over time.**



⇒ While left- and right-wing communities have become increasingly segregated in the news articles sources that are produced and consumed, the news articles are **not** becoming as segregated in the **frames** that they discuss.

# How do frames **within specific issues** change from production to consumption on traditional and social partisanship lines?

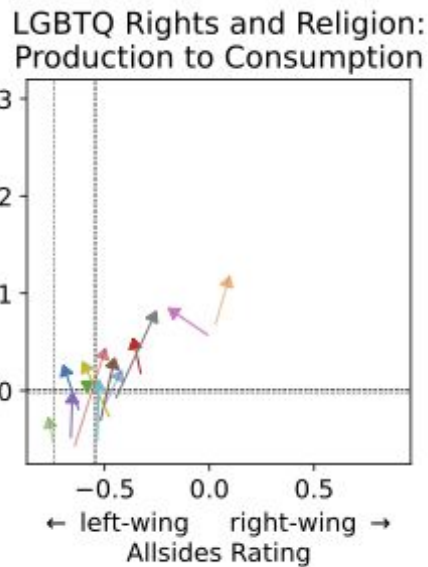
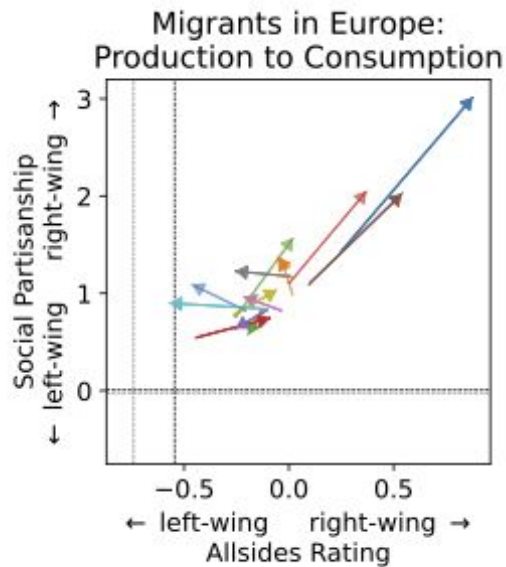


“Immigrants, Migrants, and Refugees in Europe” overall moves to the right from production to consumption along both traditional and social media lines.

But do all the *frames* within this issue move right from production to consumption along both traditional and social media lines?



When disaggregated into frames, an issue's shift from production to consumption could be explained in many different ways.



**Migrants in Europe:** *frames polarize* along traditional media lines.

**LGBTQ Rights and Religion:** most *frames move to the right* along social media lines.

We studied **3.8M hard news articles** shared on **Reddit** to understand social media's agenda-setting and framing effects.

We found that...

- (1) Issues are more polarized in social media than traditional media.
- (2) Issues are more polarized in consumption than production.
- (3) In contrast to the significant polarization of news outlets on Reddit in 2016, neither issues nor frames polarize over time.
- (4) When disaggregated into frames, an issue's shift from production to consumption could be explained in many different ways.

We studied **3.8M hard news articles** shared on **Reddit** to understand social media's agenda-setting and framing effects.

Our work gives insight into **how user selection behaviours on social media platforms can affect news articles' shift from production to consumption**, adding to the growing body of work on selective exposure, political polarization, and echo chambers.

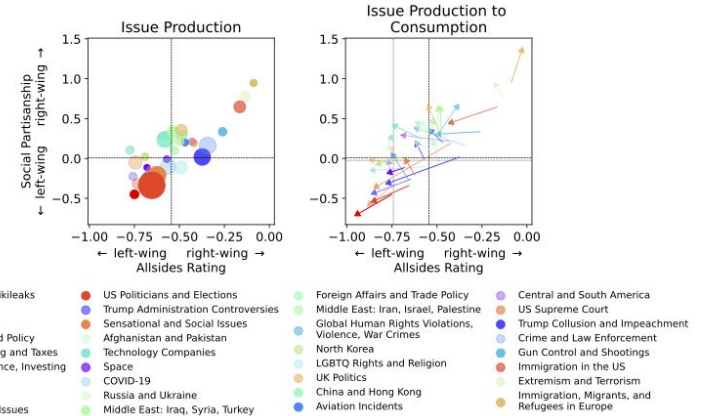
Our work illustrates **the importance of studying the media effects of news sharing on social media**, and how **these analyses can complement existing knowledge on the news shared and read on social media**.

Future work could explore why news sources polarize in 2016, but issues and frames do not, for example.

# Thank You!

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QR Code to Paper

Poster: May 2 (tomorrow),  
12pm – 1pm.

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