

Partisan Agenda Setting in Digital Media World

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Abstract : Previous research on agenda setting effects has often focused on the top-down influence of the media at the aggregate level, while overlooking the capacity of audience members to select media and content to fit their individual dispositions. The decentralized characteristics of online communication and digital news create more choices and greater user control, thereby enabling each audience member to seek out a unique blend of media sources, issues, and elements of messages and to mix them into a coherent individual picture of the world. This study examines how audiences use media differently depending on their prior dispositions, thereby making sense of the world in ways that are congruent with their preferences and cognitions. The current undertaking is informed by theoretical frameworks from two distinct lines of scholarship. According to the ideological migration hypothesis, individuals choose to live in communities with ideologies like their own to satisfy their need to belong. One tends to move away from Zip codes that are incongruent and toward those that are more aligned with one's ideological orientation. This geographical division along ideological lines has been documented in social psychology research. As an extension of agenda setting, the agendamelding hypothesis argues that audiences seek out information in attractive media and blend them into a coherent narrative that fits with a common agenda shared by others, who think as they do and communicate with them about issues of public. In other words, individuals, through their media use, identify themselves with a group/community that they want to join. Accordingly, the present study hypothesizes that because ideology plays a role in pushing people toward a physical community that fits their need to belong, it also leads individuals to receive an idiosyncratic blend of media and be influenced by such selective exposure in deciding what issues are more relevant. Consequently, the individualized focus of media choices impacts how audiences perceive political news coverage and what they know about political issues. The research project utilizes recent data from The American Trends Panel survey conducted by Pew Research Center to explore the nuanced nature of agenda setting at the individual level and amid heightened polarization. Hypothesis testing is performed with both nonparametric and parametric procedures, including regression and path analysis. This research attempts to explore the media-public relationship from a bottom-up approach, considering the ability of active audience members to select among media in a larger process that entails agenda setting. It helps encourage agenda-setting scholars to further examine effects at the individual, rather than aggregate, level. In addition to theoretical contributions, the study's findings are useful for media professionals in building and maintaining relationships with the audience considering changes in market share due to the spread of digital and social media.

Keywords : agenda setting, agendamelding, audience fragmentation, ideological migration, partisanship, polarization

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