All things considered? Investigating the diversity of public affairs issues that individuals think about in the Internet age

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates factors that have influence on the diversity of public affairs issues considered by individuals in the new media environment, exemplified by the Internet. By analyzing two data sets of the 2004 and 2008 American National Election Studies (ANES), we found that individuals are likely to consider more issues, as they are exposed to the Internet, even after controlling for key variables, such as socio-economic status, political interest, and traditional media use in 2008 study. Further, specific exposure to campaign was found significantly associated with agenda diversity in 2008 study. When both of Internet use and specific exposure were taken into account, the effects of Internet use vanished, indicating that specific exposure plays a mediating role. We also found that education and interest in public affairs are significant predictors of agenda diversity. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The consideration of diverse issues regarding public affairs is crucial for the functioning of democracy. Particularly, from the perspective of democratic theory of republicanism, consideration of such "common interests" above their "self-interest" is the normative expectations for the public because, by including such issues on their agendas, people are able to engage in the democratic process by both deliberating upon those problems and developing a discourse about them (Baker, 2002). Thus, the process will no longer be healthy, if the agenda is too limited and the public is thus dominated by only a few issues that they are personally concerned about. Furthermore, the prevalence of online communication in recent years has brought greater attention to the breadth of issues the public considers, thereby raising questions about how the media influence the breadth of public issues in the changing environment.

It has been documented that the media significantly impact the diversity of those issues which individuals take into consideration in their political lives (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; De Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Peter & de Vreese, 2003). So far, the literature has identified three groups of variables that affect

agenda diversity[1]: variables of socio-economic status, individual involvement in public affairs, and the richness of the media environment.

While the discovery of these variables expands our understanding of agenda diversity, there still are gaps in the literature that remain to be filled. The first gap stems from environmental changes in the media. Environmental shifts, such as sharp increase in the number of media outlets and formats, fundamentally challenge traditional thoughts about mass communication and put them to the test (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Thus, the present study attempts to fill the gap by testing the roles played by the Internet as a medium (as compared to the traditional media) in terms of agenda diversity, which still remain largely unknown. In addition to that, the known effects of the predictor variables will be tested in the new information environment. The second gap concerns the effects of media exposure. Although studies have theorized the positive effects of general media use on agenda diversity, the relationship is not always consistent across data sets. One possible explanation is a weak measurement validity of the media use items, and many have questioned the accuracy of general media use items in capturing media effects (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Price & Zaller, 1993; Prior, 2009). Thus, the present study also

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[1] The diversity of the issues people consider has been labeled differently in each study. They include agenda diversity (De Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; Peter & de Vreese, 2003), issue diversity (Wanta, King, & McCombs, 1995), public opinion diversity (Lasorsa, 1991), and agenda-holding diversity (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977). We will use agenda diversity throughout this paper, but sometimes other terms are used interchangeably.

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attempts to test the robustness of an alternative measure of media exposure, i.e., specific exposure to campaign information, in investigating the relationship between media use and agenda diversity. By exploring the effects of our alternative measure, as compared with those with more conventional measure (general exposure), the study seeks to reveal a more detailed role of media in building citizens' understanding of public issues.

We address these questions testing the hypotheses using two data sets from the American National Election Studies [ANES] in 2004 and 2008. We will first test the known predictors of socio-economic status and interest to determine if they are still effective variables in explaining agenda diversity in the new media environment. Next we introduce the specific exposure to campaign information as alternative measures of the media exposure, and test their effects on agenda diversity. If the mixed findings are due to the lack of specificity in the measurement of exposure, the alternative measure should show more robust effects than the general media use items. Finally, we explore how the Internet influence the span of public affairs issues an individual considers. If the online media environment indeed helps the public to develop broader consideration of public affairs, agenda diversity should also increase by the Internet use on the individual level.

This study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between the media and agenda diversity by testing individual-level predictors in the new media environment. Specifically, this project aims to provide a better understanding of how the Internet influences the span of public affairs issues in election campaigns. This research additionally sheds increased light on the relationship between news media exposure and agenda diversity. The current project also attempts methodological advance for the measurement of agenda diversity. Unlike previous research, this study uses a set of questions inquiring about respondents' positions on issues in order to capture the variance of agenda diversity on the individual level. This departure from reliance on the open-ended "most important problem (MIP)" item may provide an alternative approach to the measurement of agenda diversity.

2. Literature review

The democratic ideal entails a marketplace of ideas wherein a variety of thoughts are freely communicated and evaluated by a rational public, and one of the social functions of the media is to facilitate the creation of this forum of critical exchange. In this sense, media effects can be conceptualized as how effectively the news media promote the diversity of public opinion. Diversity "manifests itself first in the number and variety of issues" that people consider (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977, p.467). Hence, agenda diversity may work as an indicator for evaluating the performance of the news media in relation to its basic role in a democratic society.

Agenda diversity is in general defined as how diverse importantly considered issues are and how the issues are distributed in a community (Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; Lasorsa, 1991). It is, however, difficult to measure because there is no full consensus on (1) how to gauge issue salience of the public and (2) how to operationalize the diversity of those salient issues that an individual has. The majority of studies have employed responses to the classic MIP question, which asks respondents to name the most important problem facing the country. Research on the aggregate level tends to code responses into several issue categories and examine the level of agenda diversity with the concept of entropy (e.g., Chaffee & Wilson, 1977; McCombs & Zhu, 1995). In research on an individual level, the total number of issues answered to the MIP question has been used as an indicator of agenda diversity (e.g., Allen & Izcaray, 1988; De Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; Peter & de Vreese, 2003; Schoenbach, de Waal, & Lauf, 2005; Wanta et al., 1995). The studies

often used a "probing" strategy when asking the MIP question. Our goal here is to investigate the effects of individual-level predictors on agenda diversity, and thus we use the number of issues under consideration as the dependent variable.

It has been frequently noted that responses to the open-ended MIP question may not adequately capture the salience (i.e., the perceived importance) of issues as well as the agenda diversity. Most of all, the MIP question "confuses at least two very different characteristics of issues—the 'importance' of issues and the degree to which they are a 'problem'" (Wlezien, 2005, p. 556). As a result, MIP responses are more likely to reflect respondents' assessments of problem status of certain issues rather than the perceived issue importance (Jennings & Wlezien, 2011; Wlezien, 2005). The MIP question may produce further confusion because the responses may be interpreted as indicating either (1) personal issue importance or (2) contextual importance of issues as considered to be top national agenda (Johns, 2010).

To better capture the variances in the public agenda and agenda diversity, several alternative methods have been suggested and tested. As to the measurement of public issue salience, some suggest that whether to hold any preference for proposed solutions to an issue is another valid indicator of issue salience. The rationale is that having solid attitude or opinion on an issue is a natural consequence or outcome of agenda-setting effects. For example, Kiousis and McCombs (2004), citing Benton and Frazier (1976) notes that "agenda setting not only shapes the salience of broad issues but also the salience of proposed solutions to those issues and the rationales behind those solutions" (p. 39). Indeed, previous studies have revealed the positive associations among the increase in media coverage of an issue or political figure, the rise in public salience, and the greater likelihood of opinion holding about the issue or the public figure (e.g., Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; Weaver, 1991; Zaller, 1991). Thus, it is very likely that no opinion is an indicator of the low issue salience (Kiousis, 2000).

Question format is another issue. Some studies have noted that the standard, open-ended MIP question has inherent limitations in capturing full scope of the issues that are perceived to be important to respondents, since it prompts spontaneous responses. For example, the mean number of issues ranged merely between 1.43 (SD = .76) to 2.14 (SD = 1.00) in a cross-national study about agenda diversity among five European countries (Peter & de Vreese, 2003). This suggests that the open-ended MIP question may not yield a noticeable and meaningful variability of agenda diversity. It should be noted that the European study also used the "probing" strategy to obtain answers up to six issues. Thus, several studies have chosen an alternative approach: closed-ended questions. Those studies first offered a set of issues and then asked respondents to evaluate the relative importance of those issues with closed-ended questions (Schuman, Ludwig, & Krosnick, 1986; Wang, 2000). Because the closed-ended questions are considered to require lower cognitive burden in answering survey questions than open-ended, it may produce higher-quality data, such as fewer non-valid responses or item nonresponses (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, & Vehovar, 2003). Thus, we adopted the alternative approach in measuring agenda diversity; we utilized the opinion holding for certain issues as an indicator of issue salience and employed a set of closed-ended questions to measure it.

Since Chaffee and Wilson (1977), research has investigated and discovered factors that determine the variance of agenda diversity. In general, the known factors are grouped into three categories: socio-economic status, individual involvement in public affairs, and media richness. The effects of socio-economic status (SES) are well grounded in the literature concerning agenda diversity. People with higher SES are more likely to enjoy a richer media life because they have more resources and a higher level of motivation, and they are thus more likely to be exposed to a variety of issues in