

Article

The Citizen as Issue Specialists in a Changing Media Environment

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Abstract: Although recent research suggests that the selective nature of new media helps foster issue specialists, little empirical evidence has been documented, mostly due to theoretical and methodological limitations. Extending the concept of issue publics, the present study proposes a method to estimate the degree to which an individual is a specialist- or a generalist-type citizen. Applying the method to the 2008 American National Election Studies data, the study reveals various characteristics of specialists and generalists. The results indicate that specialist-type citizens are positively associated with online news use, but negatively associated with conventional news media, such as television, newspaper, and radio. The implications of the growth of specialists as well as the validity of the proposed method are discussed.

Keywords: specialist; generalist; new media; traditional media; issue publics; issue importance

1. Introduction

The question of whether the American public consists mostly of specialists or generalists in public affairs has never been effectively resolved. Although the dominant view in the literature posits that citizens tend to be generalists who are relatively evenly interested in a wide range of public affairs, others have supported an alternative view that citizens tend to be specialists, who care only about a few

particular issues and are generally indifferent to all others [1–5]. While the debate is still under way, several media scholars have recently begun to highlight the possibility of the growth of specialists in conjunction with the changing media environment [6,7]. The premise is that since new media allow users to selectively seek information of interest, and avoid media content of little interest efficiently, individuals tend to become specialist-type citizens than generalist-type citizens [8,9].

Although widely circulated, the idea has not been fully tested empirically. The lack of empirical support is mostly due to inadequate instrumentation of the concept of the specialist and generalist. Since Krosnick's [1] series of co-authored studies in the early 1990s, researchers have employed personal issue importance as a proxy measure of issue specialists (*i.e.*, issue publics). That is, those who think an issue is important to them are treated as specialists within the domain. However, this operationalization can be problematic because the measure of personal issue importance is unable to distinguish those who think the issue is *especially* important to them (*i.e.*, specialists) from those who think the issue is *also* important to them (*i.e.*, attentive generalists).

To redress this limitation of the current measure of specialists and generalists, this paper proposes an alternative way of measuring the concept of the specialist and generalist. Further, using the proposed method, the paper examines the antecedent characteristics of specialist- and generalist-type citizens. In particular, the focus of the present study is on the relationship between specialists and the changing media environment.

2. Theoretical Considerations

2.1. Specialists and Generalists

The concept of *issue publics* provides theoretical reasons to believe that citizens tend to be specialists than generalists. Converse [10] invoked the issue publics to offer a realistic explanation of how citizens can respond to public policy in a rational manner, despite their low level of general political interest and knowledge. For most people, once having managed their more pressing matters of family, job, and leisure, they have few resources and little energy left to study every social and political issue. As the cost of becoming well informed in general is substantial, people are expected to focus on only a handful of issues at best. Thus, the theory of issue publics suggests that citizens tend to be specialists, who are experts in a particular domain though lacking interests in other domains.

However, empirical research has not met theoretical expectations. The evidence has been mixed. Neuman [4] found that educated individuals are more familiar with political issues and more knowledgeable about political events in general. Delli Carpini and Keeter [3] were also skeptical about the existence of a multitude of distinct specialists, showing that knowledge about the United Nations was a good predictor of knowledge about racial issues. These researchers concluded that, if citizens are informed about a certain topic, they tend to be informed about other issues as well. Such studies suggested that some general characteristics of individuals (e.g., education) are significant predictors of interest or knowledge across issues—a view that rests on the assumption that the more educated are presumably equipped with greater sophisticated cognitive ability that enables them to organize abstract ideas to understand complex political matters [11].

Yet, several studies [1,12–14] have reported that people are interested in only a few issues and attach varying degrees of attitude importance to each issue. Analyzing the American National Election Study (ANES) data, Krosnick [1] found no strong correlations among the perceived importance of various issues. For example, respondents perceiving foreign policy to be important were not necessarily to think that domestic social issues were also important.

Although both sides have gained empirical support in their own right and attracted some scholarly attention, the literature has not fully flourished yet. In particular, since Delli Carpini and Keeter [3] did not find much indication of information specialists in their extensive project, research has not been fully flourished in this area. One reason is that much research has framed the question at the aggregate level and examined whether specialists or generalist prevail in the society. In contrast, little is known about who are likely to become specialists and what characteristics each type of citizen has. The individual-level approach that examines various factors contributing to a specialist or generalist will generate empirical evidence that has been lacking in this debate. Henceforth, this study puts forth to refine a measure for the individual tendency to be specialists or generalists and examines the characteristics of specialists and generalists.

2.2. Previous Measures of the Issue Publics

Most previous literature related to issue publics has employed demographic variables and personal issue importance as individual measures to identify issue publics [1]. Older people were assumed to be members of the issue publics on health care issues, and women were treated as issue publics on abortion or breast cancer issues [15]. However, this demographic-based approach is problematic because it may overrepresent or underrepresent the issue publics on social issues. Other studies used personal issue importance as a measure of issue specialists. For example, those considering an abortion issue to be important are assumed to be abortion issue publics [9]. Previous research showed that those who perceive an issue to be personally important show stable opinions and become cognitively and behaviorally involved in the issue [9,16,17]. However, this measure tends to overlook the core aspect of issue publics. By definition, issue publics are different from attentive publics who are generally interested in a wide range of issues. Rather, issue publics should be (1) passionately interested in a particular issue, but (2) uninterested in other issues in general due to their limited cognitive capacity. However, the issue importance measure does not capture the second part of the definition. An individual perceiving the environmental issue to be personally important can be either an environmental specialist or a generally attentive citizen who perceives the environment to be also important like all other issues.

2.3. An Alternative Measure

Based on this theoretical definition of the issue publics, generalists and specialists could be best differentiated by the measurement of how equally or unequally individuals assign their personal issue importance across various domains. While specialists weigh their focus differently across issues depending on their personal issue importance, generalists tend to distribute their focus relatively evenly across issues. Therefore, this study concentrates on dispersion in personal issue importance within an individual.

Personal issue importance can be measured by asking people how they think an issue is important personally. Thus, the distribution of personal issue importance in an individual manifests in the variation of her or his responses across issues within the individual and can be captured by the standard deviation. As a measure of inequality, the standard deviation has been widely employed in the fields of sociology and economics to compare social inequality across nations, cities, and other social groups [18]. Accordingly, the current study proposes to measure the tendency to be a specialist or generalist by the standard deviation of personal issue importance. Below, we will see that this statistical index fits the above-mentioned demands for reconceptualizing the specialist-type citizen and testing the proposition that the changing media environment relates to the rise of issue specialists.

First, the proposed indicator that measures the dispersion of issue importance is to capture the key concept of issue publics, which assumes that individuals are interested in only a few issues and indifferent to all others due to few resources and little motivation. The greater the variation of personal importance across issues, which can be measured by a higher standard deviation, the greater tendency to be a specialist. Second, the indicator is comparable across individuals. Since the standard deviation estimates the relative dispersion of personal issue importance within each individual rather than the average level in an absolute sense, the indicator has much comparability. Third, as estimated at the individual level, the standard deviation allows us to examine the relationship between a myriad of individual characteristics and the tendency to be a specialist or generalist.

2.4. Specialists in the Changing Media Environment

Media scholars have recently begun to explore the possibility that the changing information environment tends to foster one type of citizen more than the other [8,19,20]. These scholars have posited that technological features of new media help individuals become specialists while traditional media, such as network television, radio, and newspaper shape generalists.

Two characteristics of traditional media environment deserve particular attention in relation to generalists. First, the political information supplied by traditional media, especially before a recent burst of partisan media, is relatively homogeneous and standardized [21]. To seek a larger audience and maximize profits, media corporations want to appeal to as many viewers as possible while—more importantly—disturbing as few as possible. The media outlets produce the media content that is ideologically moderate, non-controversial, and popular [22].

Another feature of the traditional media environment is that the media exposure offers audiences not only an active but also a passive learning process [23,24]. Robinson [25] indicated that television news reaches two types of viewers: the advertents, who follow the news because they enjoy politics, and the inadvertents, who fall into the news accidentally. Using rational choice theory, Downs [23] explained that people who do not enjoy news and politics are still informed on public affairs through incidental learning. Prior [26] noted that political learning depends on this technological inefficiency.

Contrary to traditional media, the emerging media technologies allow for more diversity in media content and more selectivity in media use [27–29]. Amateurs are capable of creating and distributing their ideas more freely, resulting in long-tail diversity [30]. In addition, the new media induce audiences' selective exposure and selective learning. Information is not given linearly, but is sought selectively through the technological functions, such as menu options or a Google search.

Here, a crucial juncture is reached where these technological affordances fit specialists' tendency to look for information in only a few domains in which they are interested [9,31,32]. As long as individuals have interests in a particular topic, they can obtain relevant information and further develop their interests with more ease and efficiency. For example, Kim [9] has indicated that those who perceive an issue to be important tend to engage in selective information-seeking behavior on the Web, thereby obtaining a higher level of issue-specific knowledge. However, this study adopted personal issue importance as a proxy measure of the issue publics, making it difficult to distinguish between specialists and attentive generalists. Another caveat is that the study did not examine how the pattern of information-seeking behavior differs across different media. To bridge this gap in the literature, the current study takes four different media into account and investigates how each medium is associated with the type of citizen.

3. Hypotheses

As the Internet provides users with greater control and choice over media content than traditional media, we expect the obtaining of information online to relate positively with the tendency to be a specialist but attention to news from traditional media to contribute to being a generalist. This study steps forth to test this and to examine how different media use relates to the type of citizen.

Hypothesis 1: the standard deviation of personal issue importance is positively associated with obtaining information on the Web.

Hypothesis 2: the standard deviation of personal issue importance is negatively associated with watching television news.

Hypothesis 3: the standard deviation of personal issue importance is negatively associated with listening to the radio news.

Hypothesis 4: the standard deviation of personal issue importance is negatively associated with reading the newspaper.

4. Method

Data came from the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) survey ($n = 2323$). Face-to-face interviews were conducted between September and December in 2008. The sampling frame involved all U.S. adult citizens. The selection of individuals within the sampling frame employed a multi-stage area probability design. First, counties or congressional districts were chosen, then housing clusters were chosen within the first stage, then households, and finally, respondents within households were selected. The sampling process was random at all levels. The response rate (AAPOR's RR3) was 63.7%. Two versions of the questionnaire were used, varying question wordings of some items. Each administered to half of the respondents. Descriptive statistics for the demographic information included gender (57% female), age ($M = 46.47$, $SD = 17.97$), and race (62.1% White).

4.1. Media Variables

Television, newspaper, and radio use were measured by asking how much participants paid attention to national television news, newspaper articles, and radio news, respectively. The responses

varied from 5 = *not at all* to 1 = *a lot*. The responses were then reverse-coded from one to five (television, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.33$; newspaper, $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.33$; radio, $M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.39$). Depending on the version of the questionnaire, online use was measured by asking participants to report the number of days they read a daily online newspaper in the past week or they review news on internet in a typical week. Two versions of responses were merged and treated as a single measure ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 2.53$).

4.2. Standard Deviation of Personal Issue Importance (SDI)

The SDI was constructed based on personal issue importance on nine issues that the ANES Board has carefully considered and included as one of the most important social problems in the U.S. Personal issue importance was measured according to the extent to which an issue is important to a respondent (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *extremely important*). Two versions of the survey included similar issues although several issues are entirely different. The first version involved spending and services, defense spending, government medical health insurance, guaranteed job and income, aid to the blacks, environment vs. job tradeoff, gun access, abortion, and the role of women. The other half included spending and services, defense spending, prescription drug coverage for seniors, universal health coverage, illegal immigrant work period, citizenship process, aid to blacks, lower emission standards, and gun access. The SDI for each respondent was calculated based on these nine issue importance items. Missing data on each issue were handled with a pairwise method, but this does not create any concern since each issue item has less than two percent missing information.

4.3. Control Variables

Control variables included age, gender, race, education, political ideology, general political interest, and survey version. Education was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = *less than eighth grade* to 7 = *post-bachelor's degree* ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.78$). Respondents were asked to report their political ideology on a 3-point scale, ranging from 1 = *liberal* to 3 = *conservative* ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.91$). Finally, depending on the version of the questionnaire, general political interest was measured by asking either how much they were interested in politics and elections (1 = *most of the time* to 4 = *hardly at all*) or how closely they followed politics and elections (1 = *extremely closely* to 5 = *not closely at all*). Both versions were reverse-coded from zero to one with higher values indicating greater interest. Then, they were combined into a single measure ($M = 0.49$, $SD = 0.33$).

5. Results

The hypotheses investigated the claim that the changing media environment relates to the citizen type. Specifically, the study hypothesized that new media relate with specialists while traditional media (television, newspaper, and radio) relate with generalists. To test these hypotheses, the SDI was regressed on various demographics, political interest, and four medium variables. Table 1 summarizes the results of the ordinary least squares hierarchical regression.

The first block included control variables. Among demographics, the young and males showed a higher level of SDI than their counterparts, indicating they tend to perceive a few issues to be

particularly important to them and pay little attention to other issues. This analysis allowed us to assess the construct validity of the proposed measure. The construct validity is generally established either when the target measure correlates with what it is theoretically predicted to correlate with (*i.e.*, convergent validity), or when it is uncorrelated with other measures with which it should not be associated (*i.e.*, discriminant validity). The regression results added to both the convergent and discriminant validity of the SDI. First, general political interest related strongly and negatively with the SDI. This demonstrates the convergent validity of the SDI because the SDI is supposed to represent specialists whose general political interest is limited. Second, the SDI is independent of education, which corroborates the discriminant validity. This suggests that the SDI is neither a certain tautological measure nor statistical artifact but instead taps onto a unique dimension of individual characteristics.

Table 1. Predicting standard deviation of personal issue importance (SDI) ($N = 2323$).

Variables		Model 1	Model 2
Control variables	Age	−0.051 *	−0.028
	Gender (Male = 1)	0.043 *	0.044 *
	Race (White = 1)	0.011	0.002
	Education	0.031	0.029
	Ideology	−0.009	−0.003
	General political interest	−0.138 ***	−0.106 ***
Media variables	Online	-	0.074 ***
	Television	-	−0.051 *
	Newspaper	-	−0.042 #
	Radio	-	−0.060 **
	Total adjusted R^2	0.024	0.037

Notes: Entries are standardized beta coefficients. # $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The regression results of the full model yielded support for H1, H2, H3, and H4. Not only did all four medium variables relate with the SDI, but there was a striking difference between online use and traditional media use in relation to the SDI. When people pay attention to online news, their SDI values also grow, indicating that their perceived issue importance varies significantly across issues. On the other hand, as people use traditional media such as television, newspaper, and radio, they distribute their perceived importance evenly among various issues. Although these results do not demonstrate causal relationships between the type of medium and the citizen type, the findings confirm the recent speculation that the Web use relates to the growth of specialists, while traditional broadcasts are associated with generalists [6,8,9].

6. Discussion

Although the categorization of specialists and generalists are theorized in the original issue publics literature, the concept has not been firmly grounded in empirical research. The dearth of evidence is partly because most research in the area has focused on whether specialists or generalists prevail in the society, without viewing the question as a matter of degree. Another reason is that the previous measure such as personal issue importance did not fully capture the theoretical concept of issue publics. As argued previously, with personal issue importance, we cannot distinguish a specialist from

an attentive generalist. Although the notion of being indifferent to other general issues constitutes the essential feature of issue publics and specialists, it has been largely overlooked, especially in the course of operationalization.

The current paper responded to these two limitations by assessing the possibilities of the alternative method that captures the individual's tendency to be a specialist. Our analyses suggested the standard deviation of personal issue importance serves as a valid measure that quantified the concept of specialists. Not only did the indicator touch on the core aspect of specialists theoretically, but it also established convergent and discriminant validity. Further, using this proposed measure, the study have found that specialist-type citizens are significantly associated with Internet use.

The distinctive role of each medium depends on the technological efficiency through which audiences can gather what they want from the media [26]. By virtue of diverse media content and greater user controllability, individuals can arrive at information in the particular domain in which they want to specialize [33]. The positive relationship between specialists and Internet use is consistent with the trend of personalized politics. According to Bennett [34], we have recently witnessed more diverse mobilizations in which citizens are mobilized based on their personal lifestyle values, and this large-scale collective action is often organized through digital media. Selective information gathering leads members of latent issue publics to be activated in the areas that are personally relevant to them [32].

Although our findings highlight affordances of new media for selective exposure to issue-specific information, it should be noted that emerging media do not entirely preclude incidental exposure to general information entirely. Previous studies have suggested that Internet users also have ample opportunities for exposure to a wide range of information as a byproduct of their other information-seeking behaviors [35–37]. For example, users often stumble across information that they do not necessarily perceive to be important to them but that is related to what is happening in the world [38]. This may be particularly relevant for social networking site users, because they may have limited control over their exposure to information that is posted by other social media users [39]. Future work needs to examine the extent to which specific online activities are related to incidental exposure.

The current findings must be qualified by several limitations. The first limitation stems from the characteristics of the data. As the data are cross-sectional in nature, all of the presented relationships must be regarded as correlational. We are unable to infer whether media use actually influences the type of citizenry, or whether the causal arrow flows in the opposite direction. Second, although nine policy issues employed in the ANES serve to represent various social and political domains to a certain extent, we may have little confidence in generalizing the findings beyond these issues. Third, the relatively-small effect size suggests that the reality may be more complex than indicated by the present analysis. Future works should demonstrate the complex paths from media use to the individual's tendency to be a specialist or generalist.

7. Conclusions

Given that people increasingly rely on the new media rather than the conventional media, the findings clearly suggest that the proportion of specialist-type citizens will grow in the society. Then, one important question may be whether specialist-type citizens make democratic society healthier or more vulnerable.

However, it is not so simple to answer the question. Many political communication scholars have expressed concern that with the increased emergence of specialists, the society will become more fragmented. Tsfaty [40] indicated that publics should agree on what are important issues in the community to facilitate a meaningful discourse on public affairs. Particularly, traditional news media have long served this role by providing citizens with information journalistic institutions deem relatively important. However, if specialists seek information only in a certain domain of their interest and avoid all other issues, the society will lose common agendas that should be shared by all public members [32]. Another concern about the rise of specialists is that public opinion will grow polarized [41]. As the current findings indicated, specialists tend to engage in selective exposure through new media, which in turn reinforce their issue attitudes, resulting in a more polarized public opinion at an aggregate level.

Others, however, especially supporters of a pluralistic model of democracy, have argued that generalists are not necessary for democracy to work and that specialists would achieve the same or even better outcomes. In favor of this perspective, numerous studies have indicated that people who perceive an issue as relevant to them also tend to be behaviorally engaged in the issue [5,12]. Krosnick and Telhami [12] described them as players in the arena of influence, who exert pressure on government and vote based on their issue positions. Considering that most citizens are notoriously indifferent to public affairs in general, it is commendable that citizens care about at least a few issues of interest rather than none. This rise of issue specialists may moderate the traditional deficiencies of political participation among those who are less attentive to public affairs in general but who care about specific issues [42]. In fact, some argue that protestors in Arab Spring or occupy movements become issue specialists by obtaining mobilizing information and coordinating collective actions through emerging technologies [34].

The present study attempted to reassess the concept of specialist and generalist, especially in conjunction with the changing media environment. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the present study is that it demonstrated that the type of citizenry could be measured at the individual level and linked to other individual characteristics. Here, we have seen only a few key characteristics of specialists, in terms of individuals' media use, issue-specific knowledge, and attitude extremity. Other theorized features of specialists await more empirical support. For example, the question of whether specialists actually engage in diverse social and political activities at least within a domain of their interest is still unanswered.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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