A MAP OF WORRIES – HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS IMPACTING THE PERCEIVED URGENCY OF ISSUES IN THE CURRENT COLLEGE GENERATION

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Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of digital communication platforms on how current college students perceive political and social issues. In a polarized social and political scenario, issues are used as ideological flags. Conservative and liberal parties grab an issue, wrap it in their own rhetorical code until they "own" it. Conservative and liberal media instrumentally use those issues giving them weight and relevance in their coverage. This study's starting point is the curiosity about how the penetration of new digital media may be affecting the agenda setting effect of the mass media in the current college generation. Our study shows that close to 90% of the sampled students spend more than 2 hours daily in their social media accounts. This development correlates with the decline of the use of traditional media, such as newspapers. The study analyzes the media consumption habits of our participants, their political inclination and the perceived urgency of social and political issues. We establish a hierarchy or priorities, from climate change, to domestic or Islamic terrorism, to immigration. The study provides a map of the worries of our student population. Finally, we explore how the media usage, with particular focus on social networks, may correlate with political inclinations and perceived urgency of issues.

Keywords: Social Media, Agenda Setting Media Consumption, Political Polarization, Social Issues, Media Contents.

1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of how mass media may influence the issues we worry about has been since the 1960s one of the columns of mass media effects research. It was Walter Lippmann, in his prophetic book "Public Opinion" (1922) who stated that the main function of media – he talked about newspapers in the book – was to put us in contact with those aspect and areas or the world to which we do not have direct contact. Thus, we rely entirely on media contents to know what is going on in the world and to weigh the historical relevance of the happenings and events of our time. He talked about the newspapers, which, by the way, were celebrated at that time as the panacea for democracy, because they were the only mass medium in the early 1920s. Nowadays, the media landscape has become awfully complicated with the explosion of digital communication technology and the invasion of a plethora of online platforms that makes more difficult than ever to track the sources of the information we are getting about the world.

Walter Lippman was also aware that the power of the media to influence us was limited. Media consumers judge the newspapers, even if their function is to inform us about the parts of the reality, we do not have direct contact to, by the fashion the treat those aspect of the reality we know first-hand. So, our media choice will depend on the extent to which they offer us a vision of the events that does not trouble us. Thus, he anticipated the selective exposure (Lippmann, pp. 320-328) theory several decades before it was explicitly formulated.

The original study of the agenda setting effect of mass media in Chapel Hill published by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 has been replicated in countless of studies. It was an important shift in the conception of mass media effects research. For decades, communication researchers had focused on the persuasive effects of media contents, to which extent media could have the power to influence our opinion, attitudes, or behaviors. The agenda setting study initiated the shift from the persuasion to the so-called cognitive paradigm (Quote). It was a key moment in what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1973) called the return to the concept of powerful mass media. McCombs and associates have been adding layers of agenda setting effects – and have reached the third Level applying social network analysis (2011). The paradigm shift appears to be subtle, since it does not imply that media directly influence our opinion or behaviors, but rather our perception of the reality. Still, this effect on our perceptual categories may be extremely powerful and can pervade practically all the areas of what we call our identity. Georg Gerbner and associates took the perceptual effect one step forward with the concept of cultivation (1994). He collected solid evidence that the media consumption (with special focus on TV) may determine the way

we make sense of the world. The cultivation effect of mass media is at the bottom of what he called the "mean world syndrome". Heavy media (TV) users tend to believe that the world is a worse place to live than it is in actuality because bad news (violence, crime, natural or human caused disasters) are overrepresented in news and other TV shows.

Political actors and organizations learned those lessons rapidly. They realized that there are issues that support their political goals and tried to push them into the media agenda – which will become the public agenda. The German media scholar Hans-Matthias Kepplinger (1992) describes this development as Instrumental Reporting or Instrumental use of news (*Instrumentelle Aktualisierung*). He gathered solid empirical evidence that journalists decide which are the events that will become news based on their conscious or subconscious ideological biases. Such biases also play a role in the weight that the news may receive in the different media outlets. Again, the decision on the relevance will be directly proportional to the potential benefit or harm that those events or stories may have for a particular ideological or political position. The decision whether to highlight an event or issue, to publish it in the front page, or to play it down and hide it in the inner section of the newspaper, is determined by the political capital that media professionals expect to extract from its publication.

The contemporary media landscape has been evolving in ways that nobody could have anticipated in the golden era of mass media effects research. Still, they remain the main tool to help us make sense of the world. What is not in the media does not exist. And what is in the media might exist even though it never had a real existence. We are living now in the age of *fake* news. There are expanded frameworks for the "production, dissemination and consumption of deceptive content" (R. Salavarría et al, 2022). The growing worry about this rapidly spreading phenomenon is considered by some authors (S. Morgan, 2018) as the main threat for the democracy. The U.S. 2016 presidential election campaign became a landmark for both the dissemination of fake news and the scientific study of the phenomenon. The pandemic exacerbated the proliferation of misinformation creating awareness in the scientific community. It was urgent to study how mis- and disinformation may be accepted or rejected by the different audiences (R. Das, 2022).

Fake news, misinformation, or disinformation are now used by political actors and partisan media to discredit media contents that could be considered detrimental for their political agendas. It is an epiphenomenon of the growing political polarization. And the political polarization, the radicalization of ideological standpoints always occurred at the expenses of complexity. Issues are complex. In some cases, the very nature of the issue is an irresoluble conflict in its nature. Let's take abortion as an example. This is a classic instance of a conflict of fundamental rights. We have the right of an individual to decide what to do with her body on the one hand, and on the other hand the right to live of a human creature. The political polarization affects issues that are awfully complex, like climate change, systemic racism, immigration, or health systems. The radicalization is breeding ground for populism, which is frequently defined as offering simple, ideological solutions for complex problems. Populism is on the rise in Western societies on every side of the political spectrum (Ch. Schemmer et al, 2017).

With this uncertain media and social scenario as background, this study tries to explore how ideology may influence media usage. Furthermore, it explores to what extent this combination of media usage and ideology influence the worries of our target audience, the perception of what at the issues that deserve immediate attention by the authorities.

2   METHODOLOGY

For methodological reasons that will be explained below, the scope of this study is limited to college students at the public state system of higher education in the state of Connecticut. The system encompasses, in addition to the universities that conform the system (Western, Southern, Easter and Central Connecticut State University), the University of Connecticut and the 12 public community colleges. We explored the ideological predisposition of the participants, their media consumption habits and how they perceive a number of common issues covered by mainstream media, such as climate change, Islamic or domestic terrorism, vaccine mandates, systemic racism, police brutality or the war in Ukraine.

2.1   Participants

We recruited 258 students. In the first stage of the data gathering process, we used the data base of the Connecticut Labor Department to send the link via email to all the students who are active as student workers in any of the educational institutions that belong to the public higher education system in the

state of Connecticut. When analyzed the resulting sample, we found out that minority students, particularly Latinos and African American were underrepresented in the sample. In the second phase of the project, we complemented the sample approaching those two groups of the student population.

2.2   Materials

The first step in our model was to determine the ideological background of our students. In addition to directly asking about their identification with the established political categories (democrats, republicans, independents, or none of them), we used a 10 points semantic differential scale to measure whether they leaned to the liberal or the conservative standpoint (1 being hard core liberal and 10 hard core conservative).

The media consumption habits were explored with a Likert like frequency scale. We asked our participants how often they used following channels to get information about current issues: national newspapers, regional newspapers, national TV news, political blogs, online video platforms (YouTube, mostly), podcasts, Talk Radio, and social media. In previous studies (del Ama et Al, 2021). we had verified the penetration of social media in the life of our students' population. Thus, we added questions measuring both time and frequency of use of social media.

We also used 10 points semantic differential scales to measure the perceived urgency of a variety of issues. They used to scale to measure how urgently the government should address following issues: climate change, Islamic terrorism, gender violence, gender income gap, educational gap, systemic racism, domestic terrorism, gender neutral bathrooms, firearm regulations, police brutality, vaccines mandates, minimum wage, and the war in Ukraine (1 being not urgent at all and 10 extremely urgent). After stating the perceive urgency of the issues, participants were asked to self-assess their level of information. Using another 10 points semantic differential scale, students rated the level of information the possess about those issues (1 would be not having any information at all, and 10 being perfectly well informed).

3   RESULTS

This is an explorative study. There is no ambition to establish any model that would allow us to predict any type of attitude or behavior. We will use only descriptive statistics to draw a picture of the ideological background of our audience and its most significant worries and media habits. Furthermore, we will look for significant correlations between our participants ideology, their media consumption and the weight they put on the issues at hand. We will also study whether their media habits may significantly correlate with their stated ideological stand.

3.1   Frequencies

It should not surprise, when exploring the ideological predisposition of our target audience, that the numbers are clearly skewed toward the liberal side of the scale, or that the majority identify themselves as democrats. Young audiences show similar tendencies across the country and regardless of other demographic variables. The majority of the participants in our survey, 38.8%, identify themselves as democrats, while only 10.1% do as republicans. An important number, 27.5%, consider themselves to be independent, and 23.6% do not feel represented by any of those categories.
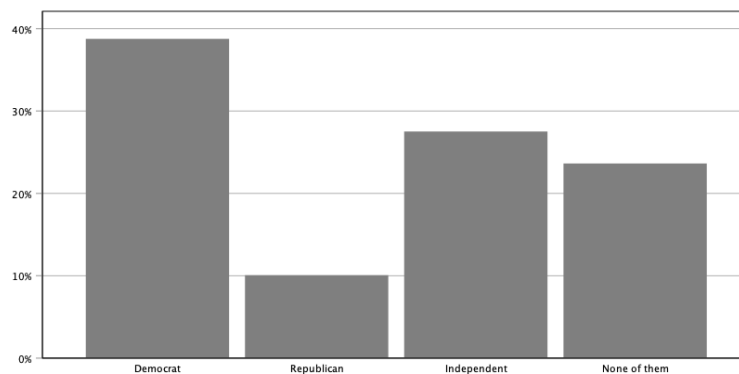

Figure 1. Identification with Political Parties

The semantic differential scale use to measure if the participants feel liberal or conservative was even clearer. Even if the mean only tends slightly toward the liberal (4.16), over 40% of the respondents chose the three first options of the scale, while just 5% placed themselves in the last three options on the conservative side of the scale.
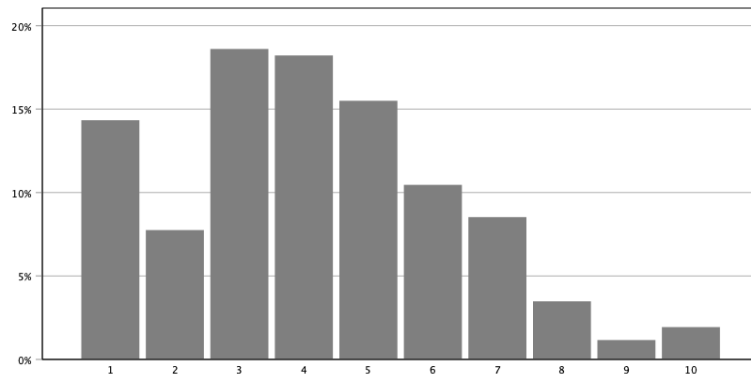

Figure 2. Ideological Predisposition (1 hard core liberal, 10 hard core conservative)

When asked about the sources they resort to for their news, the participants in the study confirm a national trend: traditional media are fading away. The vast majority of them never or rarely read national and regional newspapers or listen to radio news shows. Only TV seems to keep some degree of attention, although hardly 15% consume TV news on a daily basis.
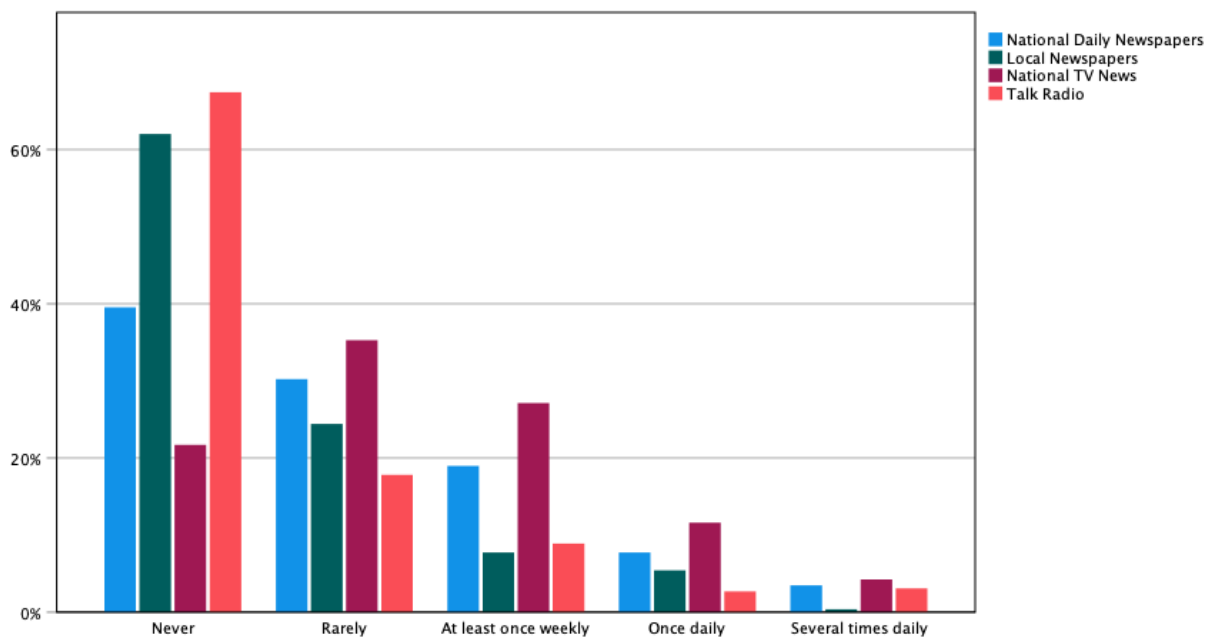

Figure 3. Sources: Mainstream Media

New online platforms, such as political blogs and podcasts do not enjoy more popularity. As a matter of fact, we can confirm a very similar dynamic. Over 80% of the participants never or rarely resort to political blogs. The use of podcast is a little intenser. Still over 60% of our students never or rarely use them. In common with traditional print media, such platforms demand a higher degree of ego-involvement. Users need to be more active. They must know the different platforms, which require some degree of research, and actively pull the information.
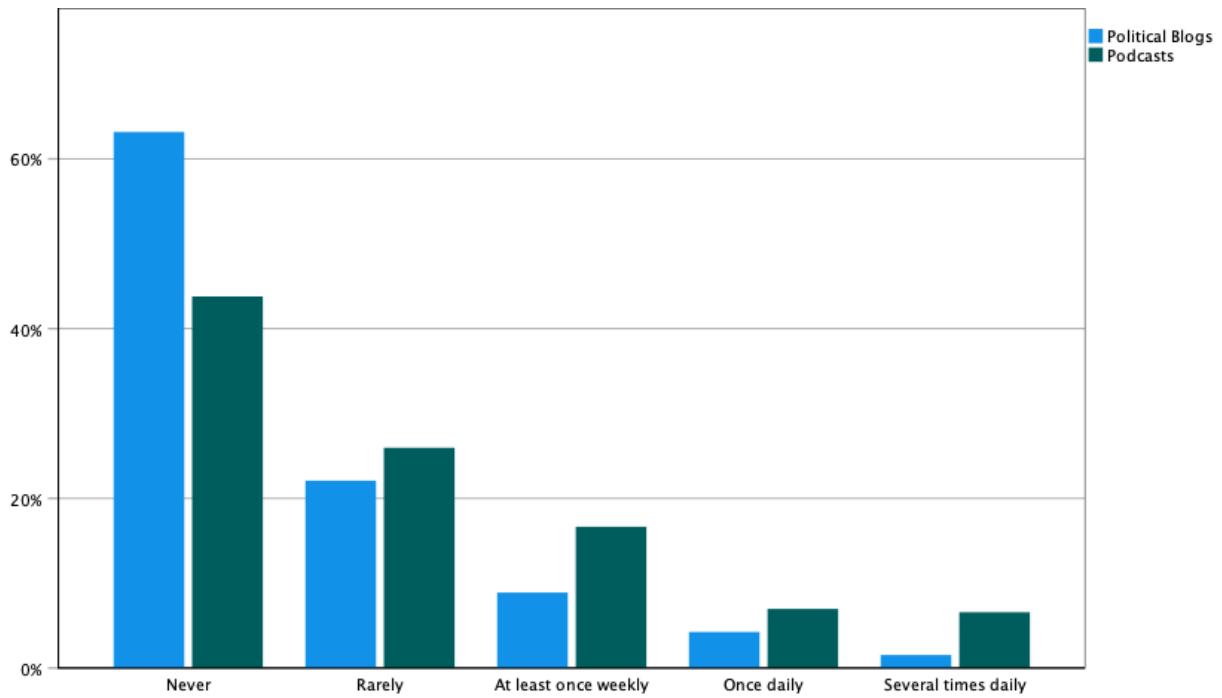
Figure 4. Sources: High Ego Involvement New Channels

The opposite seems to be the case with video platforms, such as YouTube, and most importantly with social media news feeds. Usually, those feeds do not require any conscious action on the side of the users. Social media platforms include news feeds. The news contained on those feeds are the result of obscure algorithms that may depend on the browsing history of the users – or more obscure political or economics agendas of the platforms. Shoshana Zuboff studies in her imposing book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019, pp. 63-97) how media giants are using the behavioral surplus generated by out online activity to penetrate into our private sphere. We can now affirm that they know more about ourselves than even we do. This deep knowledge is used to push goods or ideas for our personal consumption.
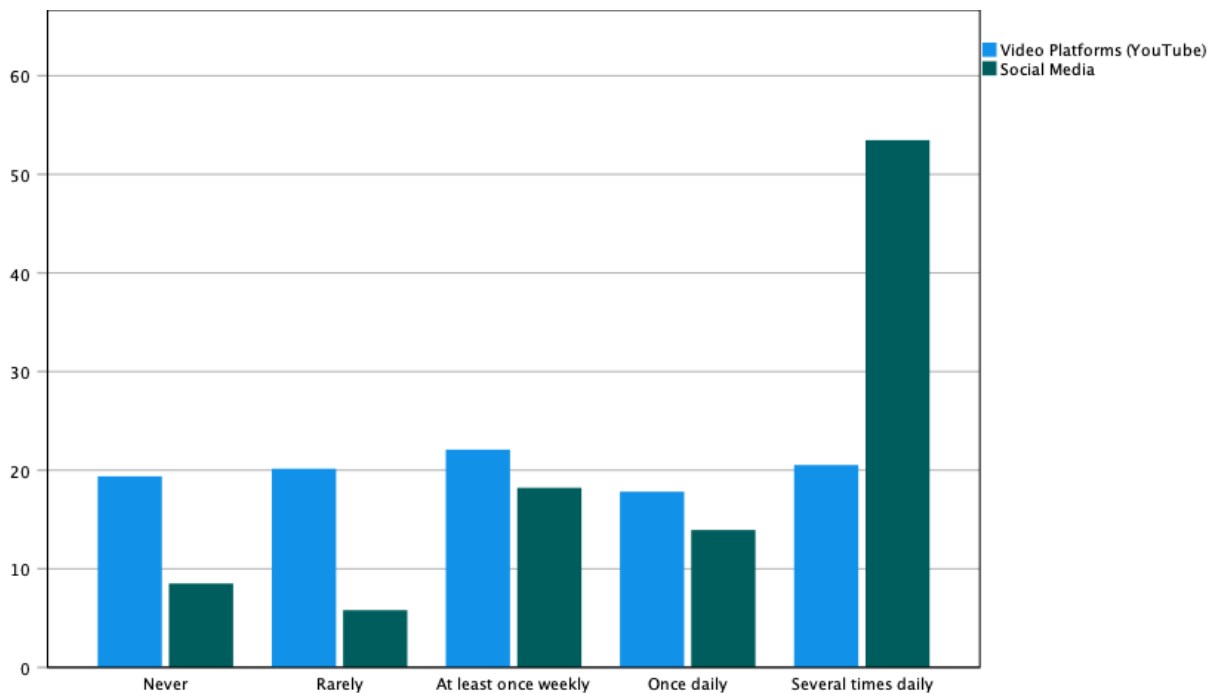

Figure 5. Sources: Video Platforms and Social Media

We expected a broad radius of social media permeation in the life of our audience. In other studies (del Ama et all, p. 3799), we found that the most popular ones seem to be Facebook, (90%), Instagram (89.5%), and Snapchat (89.5%). Twitter comes at some distance (68.6%). We assessed the penetration of social media based on the amount of time spent with the different accounts daily and how frequently they check them. Over 48% of our students check their social media accounts at least every hour. 8% of students log into their accounts every 15 minutes. In general, over 90% of our students connect with their profiles at least 2-3 times a day. In terms of amount of time, over 36% of the participants state that they spend at least 4 hours active in their accounts. The figure nears 90% when we extend the amount of time to two hours or longer.
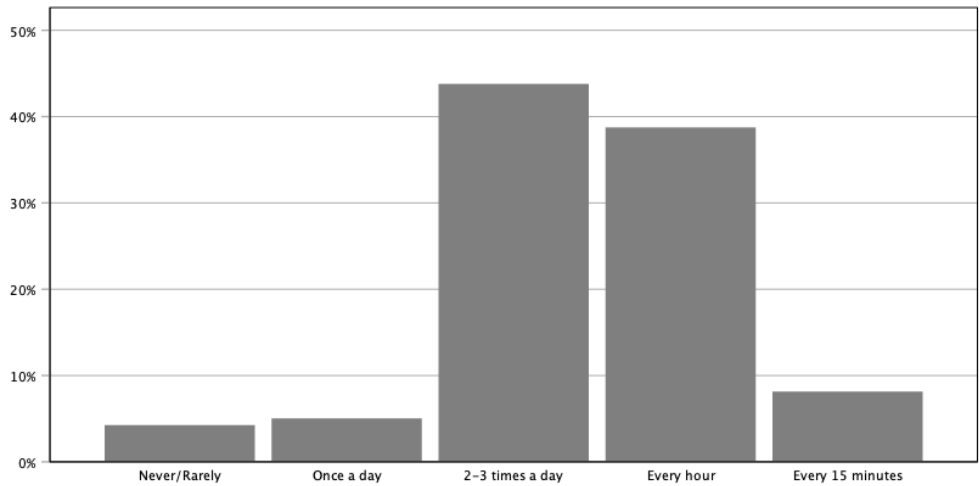

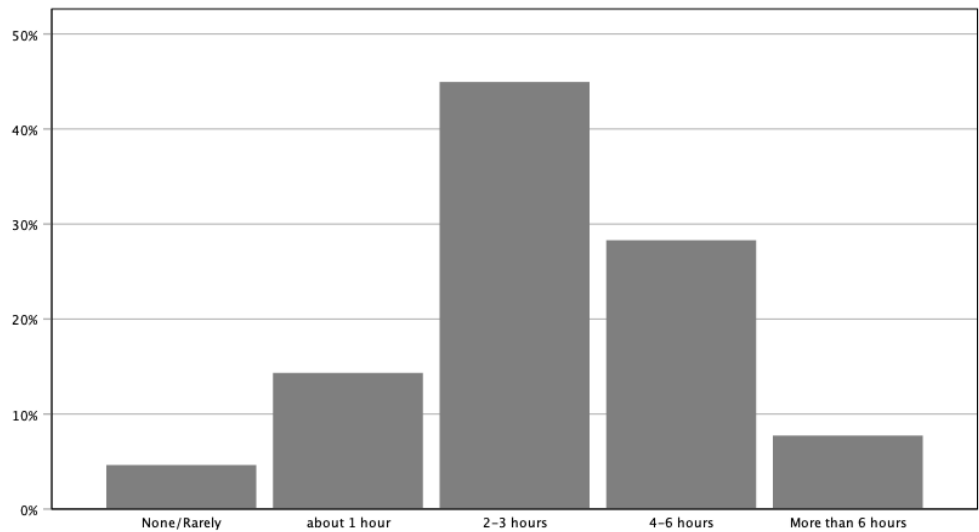*Figure 6. Social Media: Frequency of Use*

Figure 7. Social Media: Amount of Time Spent Daily

3.1.1 Map of Worries

In general, most of the issues included the questionnaire scored rather high in the 10-point semantical differential scale. None of the issues had an average rating lower than 5. At the very top in this map of worries are climate change, police brutality and systemic racism (the two first items had an average score close to 8.4; police brutality, slightly over 8). In the second group (mean of 7 to 8) we found a group of diverse issues, such as educational gap (7.8), firearms regulation (7.8), minimum Wage, (7.69), Gender Violence (7.3), Domestic Terrorism (7.5), Gender Violence (7.3), and gender income gap (7.1). In the 6 to 7 range, we found two issues that had enjoyed a significant media relevance, the war in Ukraine (6.8) and the vaccine mandates (6.2). Under 6, only two issues appear: Immigration (5.7) and Islamic Terrorism (5.6).
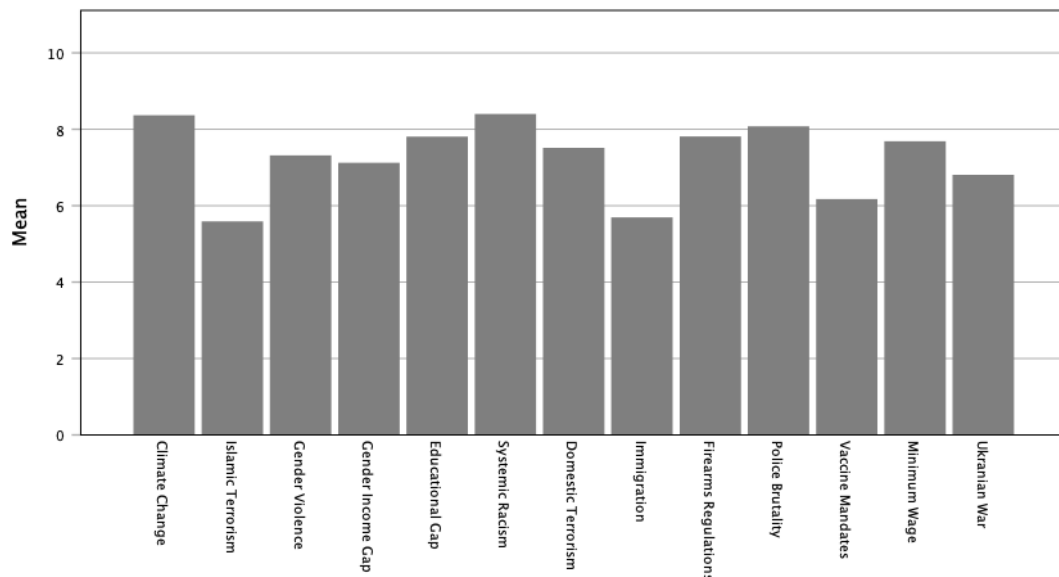
Figure 8. Perceived Sense of Urgency

3.2 Correlations

The ideological background strongly correlates with the perceived urgency of issues. We attested that, depending how the participants score in the ideology semantic differential scale, they tend to differently weigh the importance of addressing a particular issue. The issues included in the questionnaire were the result of a genuine but informal search of relevant issues in the mainstream media. I did not engage in any systematic contents analysis of which the topics are mainstream media are covering. It may surprise that the more liberal participants seem to assess the majority of those issues, 10 out of 12, as more urgent to be addressed by the government than the conservative participants. As mentioned in the methodological section of the paper, we used a 10-point scale to assess the ideological inclinations of the target audience, 1 being hard core republican and 10 hard core conservative. Thus, a negative correlation between the ideology scale and the perceived urgency of the issue means that the more liberal the participants rate themselves, the more weigh they put on the issue. A more liberal mindset correlates with stronger worries about climate change ($r(256) = -.52$, $p < .001$), Gender violence ($r(256) = -.46$, $p < .001$), gender income gap ($r(256) = -.89$, $p < .001$), educational gap ($r(256) = -.42$, $p < .001$), systemic racism ($r(256) = -.48$, $p < .001$), domestic terrorism ($r(256) = -.19$, $p < .001$), firearms regulation ($r(256) = -.42$, $p < .001$), police brutality ($r(256) = -.52$, $p < .001$), vaccines mandates ($r(256) = -.34$, $p < .001$) and the war in Ukraine ($r(256) = -.24$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Priorities

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*
1.Ideology											
2. Climate Change	-.52**										
3. Gender Violence	-.46**	.27**									
4. Gender Income	-.89**	.25**	.73**								
5. Educational Gap	-.42**	.14*	.63**	.67**							
6. Systemic Racism	-.48**	.19**	.72**	.68**	.69**						
7. Domestic Terrorism	-.19**	.36**	.50**	.48**	.44**	.55**					
8. Firearms	-.42**	.40**	.54**	.55**	.46**	.64**	.35**				
9. Police Brutality	-.50**	.48**	.63**	.58**	.61**	.77**	.43**	.67**			
10.Vaccine mandates	-.34**	.36**	.48**	.50**	.42**	.54**	.34**	.46**	.55**		
11. Ukrainian War	-.24**	.22**	.40**	.41**	.34**	.40**	.36**	.35**	.32**	.40**	

*Note. N = 311. *p<.05; **p<.01 (2-tailed)*

Only two issues seem to be more urgent to be addressed for conservative participants: Islamic terrorism (r(256) = .17, p = .008) and immigration (r(256) = -.24, p < .001).

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Priorities

	1	*2*	*3*
1. Ideology			
2. Islamic Terrorism	.15**		
3. Immigration	.20**	.29**	

*Note. N = 258. *p<.05; **p<.01 (2-tailed)*

The correlation between the sources used by our participants to get information about current issues and their ideological inclination does not seem to be that clear. The data show a slight tendency, though. More conservative participants seem to be more prone to use local newspapers (r(256) = -.17, p = .006), as well as online video platforms (r(256) = -.14, p = .023), podcasts (r(256) = -.14, p = .023) and political blogs (r(256) = -.15, p = .008). The rest of the media outlets does not provide significant findings, not even marginally. Common to all these sources, including the online video platforms, is the fact that they presuppose a higher degree of ego involvement. Users must be interested in certain topics and actively look for information in channels they know may satisfy their curiosity or interest. Internet was at the beginning a pull medium (as opposed to a push one), which require a higher level of content awareness and more active approach on the side of the media contents consumer. The development of Internet, with the irruption of social media and the popularization of news feeds may be changing this paradigm.

Table 3. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Media Usage

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*
1. Ideology				
2. Local Newspapers	.17**			
3. Political Blogs	.15**	.22**		
4. Video Platforms	.14*	.24**	.24**	
5. Podcasts	.14*	.15**	.31**	.49**

*Note. N = 311. *p<.05; **p<.01 (2-tailed)*

Just as there seems to be some slight correlation between a conservative mindset and the use of high ego-involvement media, the relationship between ideology and the activity in social media also offers some clues. In both cases, frequency of use and amount of time spent daily with the accounts, we perceive a negative correlation with the score in the ideology scale. The more liberal they perceive themselves to be, the more frequently they check their accounts (r(256) = -.14, p = .023), and the more time they spent with them (r(256) = -.15, p = .008).

Table 4. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients: Ideology and Social Media Usage

	1	*2*	*3*
1. Ideology			
2. Frequency of Use	.14*		
3. Amount of Time	.17**	.67**	

*Note. N = 311. *p<.05; **p<.01 (2-tailed)*

4 CONCLUSIONS

The first and most obvious conclusion of our study is that there seems to be a strong correlation between the ideological inclination and the perceive urgency of issues. Of the twelve issues included in the questionnaire, ten of them were perceived as more urgent by the more liberal participants, and only two

of them by the more conservative ones: Islamic terrorism and immigration. It is no surprise, then, that those two issues were the ones that scored lower in the total number since most of our participants inclined to the liberal side of the scale. This unbalance should be explored and explained. A possible reason is the instrumental use of news by the media, the theory developed by Hans-Matthias Kepplinger. Media professionals may favor news that they believe might support their own political agenda. That would imply that most of the media channels tend to support liberal ideological agendas. Another possible explanation is that the current college generation uses as source of information news feeds that have a clear idea of their political bias based on their browsing history. Thus, students will more likely get information about issues that are in consonance with their ideological preferences. Finally, the hypothesis that this unbalance may be the consequence of the own unconscious bias of the author of this paper should not be dismissed, either. In any case, the study should be validated with a systematic content analysis that identify the actual salience of issues in the media.

The study also reveals some slight correlation between ideology and the sources chosen for information. Higher scores in the ideological scales, which corresponds to a more conservative stand, correlate with more interest in media platforms that require a higher degree of ego-involvement (local newspapers, podcasts, political blogs and online video platforms). More liberal participants tend to check their social media accounts more frequently and stay more time engaged with them.

Finally, the study confirms what this author has highlighted in other pieces and can be validated in the abundant literature. The penetration of social media in the life of the current students' generation is brutal, and it happens at the expense of traditional, mainstream media, which seem to be in an unstoppable decline. The vast majority of the participants in the study rarely or never use national or regional newspapers, news tv or radio to look for information about current issues. The consequences of the development need to be studied in depth. We are not witnessing just a change of media consumption habits and of channels to get information. It is a radically new phenomenon that affects the attitude toward what we call "news". The numbers of students who use online platforms that demand a higher degree of ego-involvement, such as political blogs or podcasts, is similar to the number of those who use traditional news channels. The real difference is the use of social media. News consumption through social media is much more passive, since normally it happens through feeds that offer us news based on our browsing history. We get on the screen news that some algorithms decide may be interesting for us. To rely on that news really might open the door to the proliferation of campaigns of dis- and misinformation. Accurate and reliable information is necessary to create a solid and functional citizenship. Without that, the democratic process may hobble.

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