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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Multiple issue publics in the high-choice media environment: media use, online activity, and political knowledge

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This study examines the role of membership in multiple issue publics by understanding its relationship to media use, online activity, and political knowledge. Using data from Taiwan's 2008 Social Change Survey, the study shows that members of multiple issue publics was positively associated with television watching, political talk show watching, and online news reading. In addition, they were found to engage in specific online activities, including information browsing, information exchanging, information gathering, taking part in forum discussions, and blogging. Therefore, members of multiple issue publics tend to use media with a high level of selectivity and engage in online activities that allow them to express opinions, gain knowledge, or discuss issues with others. A curvilinear relationship was explored and found between multiple issue-public membership and general political knowledge. This demonstrates that individuals' ability to process information may not extend beyond certain boundaries, no matter how many issue publics individuals are involved in.

Keywords: issue publics; selectivity; high-choice media; political knowledge

Introduction

The concept of issue publics refers to individuals who are concerned about issues that involve their personal interests and that they think are important to them while paying little attention to others (Converse, 1964). This concept has received more attention as the new media environment has provided individuals with a wealth of information and diversified content from decentralized media outlets. Prior (2005) indicated a shift from a low-choice traditional media environment to the present high-choice media environment. He first considered cable television a high-choice medium because 'choice is the primary feature of cable television that increased the efficiency of the media environment over what it was in the broadcast era' (Prior, 2007, p. 34). The Internet was regarded as another high-choice medium due to the increasing availability of information which allows people to exercise greater control over the information they consume by weighting competing personal preferences for different types of content (Prior, 2005, 2007). However, the selectivity provided by high-choice media may increase people's attention to entertainment content, thus diverting it away from news and political information, or enhance political polarization among voters because they can selectively expose themselves to more partisan opinions with likeminded information (Prior, 2005, 2007).

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Other scholars, from a more optimistic perspective, have indicated that individuals who are interested in specific issues may be motivated to use high-choice media to selectively expose themselves to relevant information, thereby increasing their domain-specific knowledge and issue voting (e.g., Kim, 2009). In addition, these scholars assumed that issue public members' selectivity is issue-based and different from the traditional assumption of selective exposure based on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005; Kim, 2009). It is worth noting that this school of thought sees the 'systematic differences' among individuals in the public by separating individuals into different issue publics, instead of dichotomizing them into either the attentive public or the general public (Kim, 2009, p. 256).

In Taiwan, individuals have high selectivity in choosing media content because of the prosperous cable industry and the prevalent use of the Internet. Taiwan has one of the highest Internet penetrations in Asia. As of March 2011, 80% of the households have Internet connections (TWNIC, 2011). In addition, 17 million people in Taiwan use the Internet, which is 74% of the island population (TWNIC, 2011). The cable television system offers more than 200 channels with diverse genres and cheap subscription. In 2009, two-thirds of the households in Taiwan subscribed to cable television (Government Information Office, 2009). People's preferences for cable television programming therefore became a prominent factor in influencing their information selection and facilitating the formation of issue public membership. In other words, Taiwan has a developed high-choice media environment that provides a good opportunity to examine the concept of issue publics in the Asian context.

In addition to the media environment, the Taiwan political scene has also experienced important changes that provide another advantage to examine issue public membership. Since the termination of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has been through active political reforms and has developed into a democratic society in the past two decades. Nowadays, there are about 200 political parties registered in Taiwan, compared with the political monopoly of Kuomintang (KMT) before it ended 20 years ago (Ministry of the Interior, 2011). Also, two alliances have been formed: the Pan-Blue coalition, which represents the right wing and includes the KMT, the People's First Party, and the New Party; and the Pan-Green coalition, which has a left-wing ideology and is composed of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Taiwan Solidarity Union, and the Taiwan Independence Party. These two alliances have dominated politics and elections. They conducted the major arguments about national identity (Taiwanese vs. Chinese identity) and relationship with China—whether Taiwan should be independent from or unified with China (Wang, 2007). Therefore, with the public debate and the democratic political system, Taiwan has one of the most politically active publics in Asia, as reflected in the 80% voting rate in the 2004 presidential election and 76% voting rate in the 2008 presidential election (Central Election Commission, 2004, 2008). In light of the rise of the high-choice media environment and the democratic political environment in Taiwan, citizens have high selectivity and autonomy to develop their own issue importance and be involved in diversified issues.

Previous literature on issue publics has focused primarily on testing individuals who are members of single issue publics and examining the relationships between these issues and media usage. It has also probed the cognitive, affective, and

behavioral aspects of domain-specificity (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2007, 2009; Price, David, Goldthorpe, Roth, & Cappella, 2006). However, individuals may be concerned about more than one issue that they think important to them. This study aims to tap into individuals' involvement in different issues by constructing them with multiple issue-public membership, which is when an individual considers more than one issue important. It fills gaps in extant research by examining the relationship between individuals' multiple issue public membership and media usage, and explores the influence of multiple issue-public membership on general political knowledge, with the aim of developing a more well-rounded understanding of how multiple issue-public membership influences individuals' information acquisition on public affairs. Furthermore, it adds to the body of research in issue publics from outside the Western/US context by focusing on an Asian/Taiwan media and political setting.

Literature review

Issue publics and selectivity in high-choice media

Scholars have considered that the majority of American citizens have become uninterested in politics and have shown decreasing levels of political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). They have been worried that citizens cannot base their political decisions on crystallized attitudes (e.g., Converse, 1964, 1970). Although new media technologies provide access to a wealth of information, some research has argued that the increased control over communication on the new media, particularly high-choice media, such as cable television and the Internet, will generate a tendency toward selective information exposure (Bagdikian, 2000; Bennett, 1998; Bimber, 2003; Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Prior, 2005, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). In other words, new media technologies allow people to consume media content catering to their individual interests and needs (Sunstein, 2001; Tewksbury, 2005). Therefore, while the political information available on the Internet has increased dramatically, individuals' awareness of public affairs has not increased noticeably (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Graber, 1996; Johnson, Braima, & Sothirajah, 1999; Norris, 2001).

Departing from the argument that citizens appear to be apathetic to politics and have decreasing political knowledge, another school of thought proposed the concept of the issue publics, which refers to pluralistic groups comprised of individuals who have an interest in specific issues and develop attitudes of personal importance to them (Almond, 1950; Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Price, 1992). Issue public members are 'passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude,' and they 'view linkage between an attitude and values, needs, and goals as one possible cause of importance' (Krosnick, 1990, p. 60). Unlike those who support the information generalist argument that people with basic political knowledge also tend to know many other facts across a wide range of topics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Price & Zaller, 1993), this school of thought contends that citizens have few resources to attend to public affairs in a variety of areas and do not need highly sophisticated cognitive abilities to form important attitudes (Krosnick, 1990). In addition, becoming well-informed about an issue entails substantial information costs (Downs, 1957). Hence, citizens tend to employ strategies to minimize the

cognitive effort required to acquire information, while maximizing the expected utility of such information (Krosnick, 1990). In other words, issue public members are information specialists (Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990). They cannot acquire information and be well-informed about a wide range of issues they are not attentive to in the political environment without being overloaded with information.

The operationalization of issue public membership has been controversial. Several measurement strategies have been used to identify whether an individual is an issue public member. Some research identified issue publics based on individuals' demographics (e.g., Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Price & Zaller, 1993). For example, people who have school-age children belong to the education issue, and those who are elderly or have elderly parents are members of the health care issue. However, this operationalization may overestimate or underestimate the size of issue public membership (Kim, 2009). Opinionation was used as another indicator. Some research identified issue public members as those who have opinions on particular issues (e.g., Page & Shapiro, 1992). However, the positive relationship between opinionation and issue involvement has been questioned (e.g., Zaller & Feldman, 1992). To capture subjective concerns and interests that reveal individuals' cognitive and behavioral involvement in issues, personal issue importance was considered a better indicator than demographics and personal opinion (e.g., Petty & Krosnick, 1995). It has been one of the most commonly used indicators to differentiate issue public members from non-members (e.g., Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990; Krosnick & Telhami, 1995). The higher the personal issue importance people have, the more specialized they are in that issue. In light of this, the present study adopts personal issue importance as an indicator of membership in issue publics, meaning that if individuals consider specific issues important to them, they are members of those issue publics.

The rise of the high-choice media environment sheds light on the concept of issue publics. High-choice media provide more opportunities for issue public members who are particularly attentive to specific issues and highly motivated to consume information about them to choose specified media content from diversified media outlets (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Bennett, 1998; Tewksbury, 2003, 2005). Scholars have examined differences in citizens' motivations for using the Internet, with particular regard to how the Internet's interactivity and specialization affect the news agenda (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). In addition, they have raised questions about citizens' political learning and behavior, noting that the Internet offers conditions more conducive to selective exposure than traditional media (Bimber, 2003). People tend to go online because they can access information not available anywhere else and because they can search many different news sources for information on particular topics (Pew Research Center, 1999). Therefore, individuals who are particularly interested in specific issues, such as issue public members, can actively seek out relevant information about and gain more in-depth knowledge of such issues online. Johnson and Kaye (2000) found that people who are politically interested are more likely to rely on the Internet for political information. Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) indicated that, compared with readers of print newspapers, readers of the online version of the *New York Times* are more likely to select news articles that they want to read, because they are more likely to pay attention to personally relevant news stories than to the 'most important'

news stories. Kim (2009) also found that issue public members are more likely than non-members to use media that allow a high level of selective exposure.

Previous research on issue publics has focused primarily on examining the relationship of membership in a single issue public, meaning individuals who are involved in a particular issue, such as abortion, education, health care, or the environment, with the selectivity of media use and domain-specific knowledge (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2009). In previous research, individuals tend to be separated into only two groups, issue publics members and non-members, which ignores the possibility that, in real life, people may be concerned about more than one issue. Price et al. (2006) have described issue publics as groups with partial overlap of the type seen in Venn diagrams (p. 35). Mass public is a large circle, within which are a series of smaller circles, each representing an issue public. Therefore, individuals can be in the portions of two or more circles that intersect, involved in more than one issue. Kim's (2009) study also reveals the possibility of overlap between issue public membership. Thus, this study aims to identify individuals' multiple issue-public membership. That is, individuals involved in more issue publics consider more issues personally important to them than do individuals involved in fewer issue publics.

To date, little if any research has taken multiple issue-public membership into consideration, with the aim of further exploring the role of issue publics in the political environment and their selectivity in media. Nor have studies examined the specific online activities of issue public members. This study, therefore, proposes the following hypothesis and research question:

H1: Individuals who have higher levels of involvement in multiple issue publics tend to use media that allow a high level of selectivity.

RQ1: What are members of multiple issue publics' activities on the Internet?

Multiple issue-public membership, political knowledge, and issue capacity

Before discussing members of multiple issue publics' political knowledge, it is necessary to first acknowledge the two different traits of political knowledge: general and domain-specific knowledge. The differences between the two can be traced to the schools of thought arguing whether individuals are information generalists or specialists. The two schools of thought have debated whether people who are well-informed on some parts of a subject also tend to acquire information and gain knowledge across a variety of different subjects, or they are actually only well-informed on a few subjects they are interested in and do not necessarily pay attention to other subjects (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Zaller, 1986).

The argument for information specialists links to the concept of issue publics. Issue public members exhibit a higher level of domain-specific knowledge (Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2009). They tend to selectively attend to information in domains about which they are already relatively well-informed (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995; Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2007). In addition to the issue-based selectivity in gathering information, they attach personal importance to subject-matter domains, leading them to desire more information on these domains and to engage in intensive and effortful information-processing activity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Since issue public members are more likely than non-members to expose themselves to relevant information and perform exhaustive

information-gathering activities in specific subject-matter domains, it is generally easier for them to access and retrieve information constructed in those domains (Iyengar, 1990). Therefore, the aggregation of contribution from issue public members—the information specialists, who have high domain-specific knowledge—can produce the same public good as the contribution from information generalists (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), especially when they maintain consistent and stable attitudes by being knowledgeable about certain issues (Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990). In other words, ‘the collective interests of citizens will be protected by the potential actions of specialists’ (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 137).

In terms of information generalists, it resonates to the concept of attentive public. This school of thought contends that a small number of elites in society are attentive to a wide range of issues in politics, and they can supervise government’s policy making and facilitate the functioning of the democratic society (e.g., Krosnick & Telhami, 1995; Price, 1992). This small number of elites have general political knowledge mainly obtained from mass media, such as television and newspaper, or from education, so that they can keep up with what is happening in the world and get in touch with a wide variety of issues (Zaller, 1986). However, this argument has also raised an important concern about a systematical knowledge gap (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The debate between these two schools of thought has not reached a conclusion. While considering the distinction between information generalists and information specialists, and the differences between general political knowledge and domain-specific knowledge, the gap between these two schools of thought should not be ignored. Arbitrarily dichotomizing people into information specialists or generalists might miss some important elements in the society that exist in the continuum between the two extremes. In addition, previous research factor-analyzed all of the issues or knowledge items and found that the subdomains are intercorrelated to some extent (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1986). For this reason, the present study emphasizes the role of multiple issue publics and its relationship with general political knowledge to fill in the gap.

As mentioned, previous research has focused on the relationship between individuals’ involvement in a single issue, such as abortion, and domain-specific knowledge of that issue (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Kim, 2009). However, people may be concerned and involved with more than one issue that is important to them. In light of this, when individuals are members of multiple issue publics, they may increase their domain-specific knowledge in several different subject-matter domains. While previous research has found that domain-specific knowledge is intercorrelated with the one-dimensional political knowledge construct (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Zaller, 1986), it indicates a possibility that the increases of domain-specific knowledge in different subject-matter domains could increase general political knowledge. To conclude, the more domain-specific knowledge people have in different areas, the greater the possibility that the knowledge in different areas could ‘construct or relate’ to the general political knowledge.

The concept of schema, which is widely used in cognitive psychology, has been adopted in political communication studies to understand how citizens organize their cognition of politics. Its definition can shed light on the relationship between domain-specific knowledge and general political knowledge: ‘a cognitive structure that represents organized knowledge about given concept or type of stimulus. A

schema contains both the attributes of the concept and the relationships among the attributes' (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 140). Therefore, a schema is domain-specific. More importantly, schemata are not only highly clustered but also likely connected to one another. Accordingly, it is possible that some citizens, when involved in different issue publics, possess multiple, linked schemata. It is worth noting that this study does not assume general political knowledge is equal to the sum of domain-specific knowledge in various subject-matter domains. Instead, it highlights the connection between schemata and how people can make use of these linked schemata to interpret and understand public affairs. In this sense, the more issue publics people belong to, the greater their ability to apply different schemata to the interpretation of political events (Hamill & Lodge, 1986; Hamill, Lodge, & Blake, 1985).

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that the more issues in which people are involved and to which they attach personal importance, the more general political knowledge they have:

H2a: Individuals' levels of involvement in multiple issue publics will be positively associated with their general political knowledge.

However, as stated earlier, the concept of issue publics assumes that individuals are information specialists, rather than information generalists. Because of the information overload in the current political environment and the substantial information costs associated with becoming well-informed about any given issue (Downs, 1957), there may be limits to the ability of members of multiple issue publics to acquire information about the issues that personally concern them or to retrieve information from their memories.

From an aggregate level of perspective, public agenda is limited by different constraints, including memory, because the cognitive dimension involved in the construction of perceptions of issue importance involves the weighing of competing issues (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Zhu, 1992; Zhu & He, 2002). This concept which is called issue capacity was adopted to explain the process of competition in media and public issues (McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Zhu, 1992; Zhu & He, 2002). McCombs and Zhu (1995) assumed a linear increase in the issue capacity over time. However, what they identified was an inverse-U-shaped trend in the carrying capacity of the public agenda that increase from 1954 to 1973 and then decrease from 1973 to 1994. In addition, agenda-setting research has adopted the concept of issue capacity and measured the cognitive functions involved in agenda-setting by measuring the amount of issue an individual considers before making a final decision about what is most important issue (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Smith, 1980; Zhu, 1992).

While previous studies have focused mainly on testing the concept of issue capacity at the aggregate level, and found that there is a limited capacity in the public to carry a certain amount of issue, no research to date has employed this concept at an individual level to examine personal importance that individuals place on issues and the limitation of individuals' information acquisition and processing due to the capacity. Therefore, it is worthwhile to apply this concept to understand the relationship between levels of political knowledge and members of multiple issue publics' cognitive capacity when several issues are competing with each other for accessibility during the information-processing phase. In addition to the linear

relationship between the levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and the general political knowledge, this study hypothesizes that general political knowledge should increase as the levels of involvement in multiple issue publics increase, but, at some level, general political knowledge should start decreasing as the levels of involvement increase more:

H2b: There is a curvilinear, inverted-U shaped relationship between individuals' levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and their general political knowledge.

Method

The data for this study comes from Taiwan's 2008 Social Change Survey, which was administered using a three-stage proportional stratified household sampling technique and face-to-face interviewing. The population was first divided into seven strata, and then systematic sampling was used to sample cities, streets, and households, with the census as the sampling frame. The gender, age, and education of the sampled participants after weighting were close to those of the general population, with no significant differences (see Table 1). Of the 4604 samples, 1980 interviews were completed; 50.1% of participants were male and 49.9% were female, and the response rate was 43.0%.

Operationalization

Measurements

Multiple issue-public membership. The questionnaires asked respondents to rate the importance of 10 issues: economics, relationship with China, education, health care, national security, environment, legislation, social ethics and values, local construction, and national identity. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they considered each issue '*very important*' (5), '*important*' (4), '*neutral*' (3), '*not important*' (2), or '*not very important*' (1) ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.37$, $SD = 4.70$). Following Kim's (2009) method of identifying issue public members, individuals who gave an issue a score higher than the mean (i.e. rated the issue as more important than most participants) belonged to that issue public. Thus, in the present study, the members of each issue public are defined as those who rate that issue higher than the mean on that issue's importance scale. To obtain levels of multiple issue-public membership, the scores of 10 issue publics were summed to see how many issue publics people belonged to ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 5.51$, $SD = 3.23$). Thus, a score of 1 would indicate that an individual thought that one of the 10 issues was important to him or her and would mean that this person was a member of that one issue public. Similarly, a score of 10 would indicate that a participant found all 10 issues important and was a member of the 10 issue publics.

Internet use. Internet use was measured by asking about the frequency of general Internet use within the last year. Answers ranged from *once or more than once in a day* (9) to *never* (1) ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 3.80$). Online news reading was also included by asking how many days each week respondents read online news ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 2.95$).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the sample and population.

	Taiwan's 2008 Social Change Survey		Population %	χ^2	<i>p</i> -value
	<i>n</i>	%			
Gender					
Male	992	50.11	50.10	0.00004	<i>p</i> > .05
Female	988	49.89	49.90		
Age					
18–29	479	24.20	24.18	0.00065	<i>p</i> > .05
30–39	410	20.69	20.68		
40–49	416	20.99	20.98		
50–59	331	16.72	16.73		
≥ 60	345	17.41	17.43		
Education					
No Education	49	2.49	2.49	0.00000	<i>p</i> > .05
Self-study/Elementary school	335	16.93	16.93		
Middle school/High school	281	14.18	14.18		
Professional school	598	30.19	30.19		
University or college/Master degree/Doctoral degree	717	36.21	36.21		

Other Internet activities. Respondents were asked to what extent the following types of activities they usually perform on the Internet. These included emailing, information browsing, taking part in forum discussions, information exchanging, information gathering, blogging, gaming, chatting and friending, shopping, and banking. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they engaged in each activity *very often* (4), *sometimes* (3), *rarely* (2), or *never* (1) ($M_{\text{emailing}} = 3.13$, $SD_{\text{emailing}} = 1.10$; $M_{\text{information browsing}} = 3.47$, $SD_{\text{information browsing}} = .73$; $M_{\text{forum discussing}} = 1.67$, $SD_{\text{forum discussing}} = .84$; $M_{\text{information exchanging}} = 2.81$, $SD_{\text{information exchanging}} = 1.13$; $M_{\text{information gathering}} = 3.23$, $SD_{\text{information gathering}} = .93$; $M_{\text{blogging}} = 2.41$, $SD_{\text{blogging}} = 1.15$; $M_{\text{gaming}} = 1.92$, $SD_{\text{gaming}} = 1.15$; $M_{\text{chatting and friending}} = 1.83$, $SD_{\text{chatting and friending}} = 1.05$; $M_{\text{shopping}} = 2.04$, $SD_{\text{shopping}} = .97$; $M_{\text{banking}} = 2.03$, $SD_{\text{banking}} = 1.17$).

Other media uses. Television viewing, newspaper reading, radio listening, and magazine reading were measured by asking about the frequency of use within the last year. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they engaged in each type of activity from *once or more than once in a day* (9) to *never* (1) ($M_{TV} = 8.79$, $SD_{TV} = .91$; $M_{\text{newspaper}} = 6.31$, $SD_{\text{newspaper}} = 3.07$; $M_{\text{radio}} = 5.26$, $SD_{\text{radio}} = .3.32$; $M_{\text{magazine}} = 4.29$, $SD_{\text{magazine}} = 2.63$). In addition to general television viewing, television news viewing was included. Respondents were asked to indicate how many days each week they watched television news ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 2.06$). Exposure to political talk shows was also measured by asking about how often respondents watched such shows, from *very often* (5) to *never* (1) ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.46$).

Political knowledge. Respondents' political knowledge was assessed by adding the scores of four questions about political facts that emphasize factual political knowledge from a long-term political setting instead of testing temporary political knowledge of candidates, parties, or issues based on a political campaign. Those questions included: 'According to Taiwan's Constitution, what is the term length for Taiwan's president?' 'Who is the leader of Mainland China?' 'Which country has foreign relations with Taiwan?' and 'Who is the current Chief Executive and Head of the Government of Hong Kong?' Respondents received one point for each correct answer, with the number of correct answers summed to construct the variable of political knowledge ($\alpha = .45$, $M = 2.06$, $SD = .96$). Some previous literature used similar questions to measure general political knowledge, including the identification of foreign political offices, knowledge of foreign affairs, and knowledge about governmental policies and Constitution (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Valentino, Hutchings, & Williams, 2004; Zaller, 1986).

Due to the different degree of difficulty for each of the items, the reliability of the general political knowledge measurement is somewhat low. For example, while 95% of respondents answered correctly to the question about the term length for Taiwan's president, only one-fifth could answer the question on the head of the government of Hong Kong. The Pearson's correlation between these two items is also low ($r = .10$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the magnitude of reliability for the general political knowledge measurement can be understandable. Previous research also adopted a low but understandable reliability of political knowledge measure considering that each item varies in the degree of difficulty (e.g., Jung et al., 2011).

Control variables

Demographics. A variety of demographic variables were included for control purposes. Survey respondents' age ($M = 48.20$, $SD = 17.32$) and gender (Male = 50.1%, Female = 49.9%) were collected. Survey respondents were also asked about their education level ($M = 9.18$, $SD = 6.30$, Mdn = high school degree) and personal income ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 3.06$, Mdn = NT\$20,000 to NT\$30,000).

Strength of partisanship. The strength of respondents' party identification was measured by asking about their attitudes toward different coalitions; answers included *strongly favorable to Pan-Blue* (1), *favorable to Pan-Blue* (2), *neutral* (3), *favorable to Pan-Green* (4), and *strongly favorable to Pan-Green* (5) ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.00$).

Political efficacy. Eight questions about respondents' personal political effectiveness and their beliefs about the responsiveness of government and public officials were combined into a single index of political efficacy. The questions included 'Although politics is so complicated, people like me can still understand it', 'People like me can influence government's decision-making', 'Government cares about people like me', 'Public officials care much about what people like me think', 'Government does things that benefit citizens the most', 'Government considers its citizens first when making important decisions', and 'I trust what public officials say on television or in newspapers'. Respondents indicated their degree of identification with each

statement on a range from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1) ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 2.83$, $SD = .61$).

Results

Only 4.9% ($n = 97$) of the sample reported that none of the 10 issues was important to them. Of the remaining 1883 respondents, 48.1% ($n = 906$) were female and 51.9% ($n = 977$) were male. Table 2 shows the percentage of the issues respondents considered important to them. Regression analysis was used to identify the contributions of demographics, strength of partisanship, and political efficacy, which are the control variables, to multiple issue-public membership. The total variance of multiple issue-public membership explained by all variables was 0.6% ($R^2 = .006$, $p = .064$). The results reveal that demographics, including age ($\beta = -.006$, $p = .826$), gender ($\beta = -.029$, $p = .210$), education ($\beta = .053$, $p = .063$), and income ($\beta = .025$, $p = .278$), did not significantly relate to multiple issue-public membership. With regards to political predispositions, strength of partisanship ($\beta = -.012$, $p = .602$) and political efficacy ($\beta = .037$, $p = .124$) did not emerge as significant predictors of multiple issue-public membership either.

Multiple issue-public membership, media use, and online activity

To examine the relationship between multiple issue-public membership and individual media usage (H1), a matrix of partial correlations, controlling for such demographic variables as age, gender, education, and personal income, and political predispositions, which included strength of partisanship and political efficacy, is presented in Table 3. The results indicate a significant positive relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and general television watching ($r = .070$, $p < .05$). Levels of involvement in multiple issue publics also exhibited a significant and positive relationship with political talk show watching ($r = .096$, $p < .01$) and online news reading ($r = .076$, $p < .05$), which means that people concerned about more issues are more likely to watch television and political talk shows, and they also are more likely to read online news, than people who are

Table 2. The percentage of issue importance by the number of issue.

Number of Issue	Percentage
None	4.9
One	11.5
Two	7.5
Three	7.6
Four	7.4
Five	9.2
Six	9.6
Seven	9.3
Eight	7.8
Nine	9.7
Ten	15.3

Note: $n = 1980$

involved in fewer issue publics. However, levels of involvement in multiple issue publics did not significantly relate to other media uses, such as newspaper reading, radio listening, television news watching, and Internet use.

RQ1 asked about the relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and Internet activities. Table 4 reports the results of the partial correlation matrix, which indicates that levels of involvement in multiple issue publics, had a significant positive relationship with five Internet activities, including taking part in forum discussions ($r = .088$, $p < .01$), information browsing ($r = .066$, $p < .05$), information exchanging ($r = .123$, $p < .001$), information gathering ($r = .127$, $p < .001$), and blogging ($r = .153$, $p < .001$). The results yield non-significant relationships between levels of multiple issue publics and other Internet activities. Taking all findings into consideration, people who are engaged in more issue publics are more likely to have information-related activities than non-information-related activities on the Internet than those concerned about fewer issues.

Multiple issue-public membership and political knowledge

A hierarchical regression was conducted to examine H2a and H2b, about the relationship between multiple issue-public membership and political knowledge (see Table 5). Both hypotheses were supported. The control variables, including demographics and political predispositions, were separately entered in the first two blocks. After the control, multiple issue-public membership and the quadratic term of multiple issue-public membership were entered as the last block, which significantly accounted for 3.6% of the variance in political knowledge. As shown in Table 5, the results show a significant and positive relationship between multiple issue-public membership and individuals' political knowledge, after all the controls ($\beta = .512$, $p < .001$). This indicates a linear relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and individual political knowledge, which demonstrates that when individuals consider more issues personally important, they are more knowledgeable about public affairs. At the same time, the results also show a significant quadratic effect on the relationship of multiple issue-public membership to individuals' general political knowledge, after all the controls ($\beta = -.353$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Partial correlations between multiple issue-public membership and media uses.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Multiple issue-public membership	—							
2. Newspapers	.027	—						
3. Radio	.061	.093**	—					
4. Television	.070*	.041	-.044	—				
5. Television news	.053	.107***	-.018	.647***	—			
6. Political talk shows	.096**	.093**	.056	.149***	.201***	—		
7. Internet	.014	-.002	.054	.062	.044	.026	—	
8. Online news	.076*	.003	.052	-.002	.077*	.058	.435***	—

Note: Cell entries are partial correlation coefficients, controlling for age, gender, education, income, strength of partisanship, and political efficacy ($n = 1980$); two-tailed.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Partial correlations between multiple issue-public membership and internet activities.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Multiple issue-public membership	—										
2. Emailing	.046	—									
3. Taking part in forum discussion	.088**	.149***	—								
4. Information browsing	.066*	.314***	.170***	—							
5. Information exchanging	.123***	.522***	.235***	.313***	—						
6. Information gathering	.127***	.418***	.209***	.496***	.535***	—					
7. Blogging	.153***	.267***	.345***	.290***	.362***	.314***	—				
8. Gaming	-.009	-.012	.082**	-.051	.005	-.084**	.055	—			
9. Chatting and friending	.040	.122***	.252***	.016	.164***	.063*	.252***	.221***	—		
10. Shopping	.047	.251***	.167***	.208***	.218***	.192***	.193***	.044	.137***	—	
11. Banking	.024	.168***	.040	.228***	.139***	.175***	.058	-.069*	.019	.234***	—

Note: Cell entries are partial correlation coefficients, controlling for age, gender, education, income, strength of partisanship, and political efficacy ($n = 1980$); two-tailed.
 * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Regression analysis predicting political knowledge.

Predictor Variables	β
<i>Block 1: Demographic</i>	
Age	.062*
Gender	.182***
Education	.346***
Income	.059**
<i>Incremental Block R² (%)</i>	16.4***
<i>Block 2: Political predispositions</i>	
Strength of partisanship	−.009
Political efficacy	.029
<i>Incremental Block R² (%)</i>	0.1
<i>Block 3:</i>	
Multiple issue-public membership	.512***
(Multiple issue-public membership) ²	−.353***
<i>Incremental R² (%)</i>	3.6***
<i>Total R² (%)</i>	20.1

Note: Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. $n = 1980$

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

This reveals that there is a curvilinear inverted U-shaped relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and general political knowledge (see Figure 1). Specifically, the curvilinear relationship has its slope zero at 8.1, which means that individuals involved in about eight issue publics are among the most knowledgeable in general public affairs. In other words, as the number of issues considered personally important increases from zero to eight, individuals' general political knowledge also increases, but from that point on, individuals' general political knowledge decreases as the number of issues considered important increases.

Discussion

With the increasing popularity of high-choice media and the rising concept of issue publics, this study taps into individuals' real lives, noting that people can be members of multiple issue publics, rather than being restricted to single issue-public membership, because they can consider more than one issue important to them. As a result, the first aim of the study was to examine the relationship between multiple issue-public membership, general media use, and online activities in order to explore the role of multiple issue-public membership and understand members' selectivity of media use in today's high-choice media environment.

Prior's (2007) concept of the high-choice media environment indicates that greater media choice allows people who prefer entertainment content to escape from news. Those entertainment-seekers are 'more moderate or politically indifferent' than other non-entertainment-seekers (Prior, 2007, p. 244). However, at the same time, the rise of the high-choice media environment makes those who are interested in news and political information more partisan, in that it increases opportunities for people

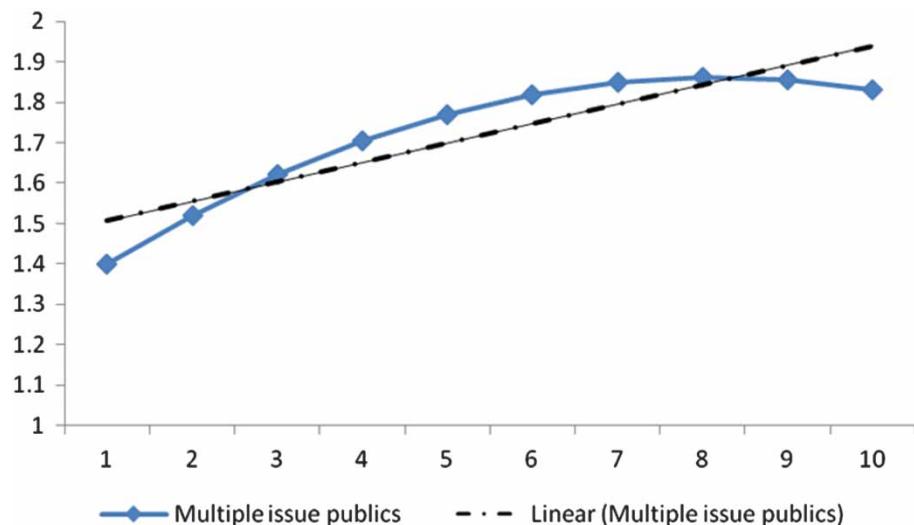


Figure 1. The relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and general political knowledge.

to avoid counter-attitudinal information and selectively expose themselves to likeminded political views, which becomes an important cause of partisan polarization in the society (Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). The present study examines the public from an alternative perspective by emphasizing the role of issue publics. Issue publics should be considered differently from the general public perspective because issue public members are involved in the issues they are concerned about so that they are the ‘issue-information haves’ compared to those not in issue publics. In addition, they actively seek out issue-relevant information and understand the issues by exposing themselves to multiple perspectives and gauging more in-depth information. As a result, the form of their information selection is issue-based, which is assumed to be unbiased (Holbrook et al., 2005). When they are offered the selectivity and opportunities to shape their information environment in the high-choice environment, they tend to expose themselves to different sides of the information (e.g., both liberal and conservative political views).

Supporting the issue-based selectivity, the findings show that multiple issue-public membership was positively associated with political talk show watching. It indicates that the more issues individuals are involved in, the more often they watch political talk shows from which they can gain more information on specific issues than what they can get from traditional media. Chang and Lo (2007) content-analyzed political talk shows in Taiwan and found that they provide a great deal of information by focusing on the discussion of public affairs or specific issues and inviting political commentators and journalists rather than reporting short, fragmented, and decontextualized news segments.

In addition, in Taiwan, most people surveyed said that their primary motivation for watching political talk shows was obtaining information about public affairs and political issues (Chang & Lo, 2007). Although the positive relationship between multiple issue public members’ political talk show watching and the political

information acquisition may be questioned because of the politicized political talk shows provided by different cable channels in Taiwan, the assumption of issue-based selectivity among issue public members were further supported by an additional analysis. A partial correlation revealed that members of multiple issue publics not only watch more political talk shows but also tend to watch political talk shows with different political backgrounds, including those leaning to Pan-Blue coalition, and those supporting the Pan-Green coalition.¹ To conclude, although the general publics' political acquisition from political talk shows may be biased because of the politicized programs, this study provides evidence that issue public members seek information about different political views from political talk shows which may lead them to obtain more balanced political information.

Furthermore, those who consider more issues important to them are likely to read online news. As Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) argued, online readers have greater ability than the readers of traditional newspapers to select the news articles that they want to read. In this sense, the high selectivity afforded by online news, which provides diversified information about important events and current issues in the society, allows issue public members to actively and selectively choose what information they want to obtain and have a greater chance to seek out information that they think is related to issues that interest them.

It is also interesting that general television-watching was found to have a significant relationship with levels of involvement in multiple issue publics, while general Internet use was not. However, several specific activities on the Internet, including information browsing, information exchanging, information gathering, taking part in forum discussions, and blogging were found to be significantly related to levels of involvement in multiple issue publics. This may come about because the Internet makes selective exposure even more prevalent than cable televisions. Although the Internet may lead to greater preference for entertainment content and the avoidance of news, resulting in decreased awareness of public affairs (Prior, 2005, 2007), members of multiple issue publics are different from the general public. With high involvement in the issues they concern about, they are less likely to engage in general use on the Internet. Instead, the more issues they are involved in, the more goal-oriented they are, as they tend to select information and be involved in specific activities on the Internet that allow them to obtain, express, or discuss information. In addition, they are less likely to be distracted by entertainment content or other non-news activities—such as gaming, shopping, banking, and social networking, which did not exhibit a significant relationship with multiple issue-public membership—in the online environment.

Another aim of the study is to examine the relationship between multiple issue-public membership and general political knowledge. This study seeks to understand the impact of taking into account several issues, rather than a single issue, on individual ability to process relevant information. Although previous research indicates a positive linear relationship between membership in a single issue public and domain-specific knowledge on that subject, the relationship between membership and domain-specific knowledge might be different when individuals belong to multiple issue publics (e.g., Kim, 2009). The results indicate not only a significant linear relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and general political knowledge, but also a significant quadratic effect of levels of involvement in multiple issue publics on general political knowledge. It demonstrates that when

individuals consider more than one issue important to them, the links that connect their political schemata, i.e. the intercorrelations between clusters of knowledge in different subject-matter domains, prompt them to generate general political knowledge. However, the effects of multiple issue-public membership on general political knowledge may not extend beyond certain boundaries. At an individual level, although people may consider certain issues equally important, a competitive weighing process occurs when they gain knowledge about these issues. That is to say, when members of multiple issue publics consider more issues important to them, this does not necessarily mean that they can digest all of the relevant information that they expose themselves to. Thus, to a point, general political knowledge decreases as the number of issues that members of multiple issue publics consider important increases.

Previous research on the relationship between media and public issues in Taiwan has mostly taken the perspective of agenda setting theory by emphasizing the idea that media are the agenda-setters influencing the salience of issues among people (e.g., Chen, 2004; Chiu, 2006; King, 1997). However, this research tends to examine the four most widely circulated newspapers or the four broadcast television news in Taiwan during political campaigns (e.g., Chen, 2004; Chiu, 2006; Dzwo, 2008; King, 1997). Definite evidence as to the relationship between the high-choice media and public issues in Taiwan has not been gathered. At the same time, researchers in the United States have already called for attention to the new media environment which promotes specialization in terms of media outlets and individuals' content consumption (e.g., Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Tewksbury, 2005). Therefore, this study is important by adopting the alternative view focusing on citizens' own responsibility for their media consumption and addressing the way they use new media rather than emphasizing the role of the mass media as the agenda-setters or the disseminators of public affairs and political information. More importantly, this study is significant in terms of its Taiwanese context since most research on issue publics has been conducted in the Western/US context. It identifies members of multiple issue publics in Taiwan, and provides empirical evidence of their media uses, online activities, and political knowledge in Taiwanese political and media environment.

Finally, the results should be interpreted with caution due to this study's limitations. The first limitation lies in the measurement of general political knowledge in the national 2008 Social Change Survey in Taiwan. Since previous literature demonstrates that there are several groups of political knowledge indicators, such as current event knowledge, candidates' issue stance knowledge, ideological knowledge, and general knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000), the national survey could be improved by including a greater variety of dimensions of political knowledge.

Future research can develop better methods for measuring the concept of multiple issue-public membership. The methods used in this study basically followed the methods used in previous research on issue publics. After individuals were separated into issue or non-issue publics for each of the issues surveyed, with reference to mean scores, all of the issues were combined to understand how many issues individuals were involved in. This approach brings a couple of possible problems. First, the 10 issues might be too general and might not include all of the issues that individuals are concerned with. It would be better if questions about

personal issue importance also include open-ended answers, so that different issues could be coded and the complexity of an issue, whether it was too broad or too narrow, could be taken into account. Second, although previous research has made use of personal issue importance as an indicator for issue publics (e.g. Kim, 2009; Krosnick, 1990; Krosnick & Telhami, 1995), it might be better to take other issue-specific interests and motivations into consideration, so that individuals are not starkly dichotomized into issue or non-issue public membership using mean scores of personal issue importance.

In conclusion, this study has several limitations that should be addressed by future research; nevertheless, it substantially contributes to existent literature on issue publics. It highlights the gap between the arguments for information generalists and information specialists by enhancing the understanding of members of multiple issue publics, and their selectivity in the media usage and online activity. It also demonstrates the potential limitations of individuals' ability to process information related to issues in which they are involved and to apply their knowledge in subject-matter domains to general public affairs.

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Note

1. In order to explore political talk show watching with different political orientation, as an anonymous reviewer suggested, an additional partial correlation analysis was conducted. With the control of demographic variables, strength of partisanship, and political efficacy, the results reveal a significant and positive relationship between levels of involvement in multiple issue publics and watching political talk shows with Pan-Green political orientation ($r=.088$, $p < .01$). Levels of involvement in multiple issue publics also had a significant positive relationship with watching political talk shows with Pan-Blue political leaning ($r=.074$, $p < .01$). Political talk show watching with Pan-Blue or Pan-Green political orientation was measured by asking to what extent the political talk shows respondents watch criticize Pan-Blue or Pan-Green politicians with two items separately. Answers ranged from *often criticize* (4) to *almost never criticize* (1) ($M_{Criticize\ Pan-Blue} = 2.68$, $SD_{Criticize\ Pan-Blue} = .95$; $M_{Criticize\ Pan-Green} = 2.71$, $SD_{Criticize\ Pan-Green} = .93$).

Notes on contributor

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