Values of German media users: 1986-2007

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Summary
Values of German media users, 1986-2007

Values have been discussed in connection to the changes brought to the German TV landscape since the introduction of the dual system in 1984. Yet, on such occurrences arguments have rarely, if at all, been based on reliable information about differences in televised values. Nor have values of the audience of channels or genres been considered. This study offers a starting point for such an endeavor, focusing on the role values play for people’s media choices.

In a theoretical overview, values are situated in a framework of overlapping spheres that influence people in the adoption of values. Social learning is the main mechanism behind this process of socialization. Values define what is desirable or not and how one should behave in a given situation according to the rules of one’s society. As stable basic traits close to an individual’s personality, values play a part in the building of motives that finally result in behavior. With regard to media, a well-established gratification of media use is the reinforcement of one’s own values and worldviews. Based on the finding that mediated value patterns differ across outlets and types of content, I assume that different values should lead people to prefer different media over others.

In a secondary analysis of large annual surveys representative for the German population, relationships between people’s personal values (social and materialist ones) and their use of print newsmedia, television channels and genres are studied from 1986 to 2007. I have found hints toward correspondence between values presented in media, use of these media and values of the users. I see these consistencies as due to selective exposure, with people turning to media (contents) that would confirm rather than question their personal values. In particular, I have found small, but systematically recurring effects of individual values on TV genre preferences as well as on use of TV channels and print outlets.

Generally speaking, social values tend to lead to reading newspapers and newsmagazines, left-wing ones being a little more preferred than conservative titles. On the other hand, people with strong materialist values favor conservative
outlets and commercial television. Education plays a role in this respect as the highly educated seem to be more media-savvy when it comes to choosing outlets that match their values.

As for genres, social values go along a preference for genres that present these same values more often, such as family series and medical dramas, or that offer information for people who like to be up to date about what is going on in the world and in their society. Materialist people were more interested in entertainment and arousing contents. Some of these relationships actually mirror what value patterns are typical of the respective outlets or genres. So values seem to be part of the clear expectations that the audience holds of media genres.

Another focus of this study is the considerable expansion of the German media system over the last 25 years. One could expect to find that a broader offer enables people to choose contents that fit their needs—and also the underlying values—better than in a more limited media environment. However, hardly any systematic trends over time could be observed. At least use of the outlets and genres studied here has not changed much with regard to viewers' values, although competition increased significantly over the period studied.

A possible explanation is that I focused on general interest TV channels and general news outlets, which may not try to accommodate audience niches with special value priorities. As for the relationships of values and genre preferences, during the twelve years under study, the German TV landscape mainly grew in terms of special-interest channels. These need not have affected the general-appeal offer of the four largest stations examined here. The latter continued to exist next to new stations and probably still offered reliable gratifications to viewers used to them. Consequently, the audience may not have selected those stations more according to their values than before. A comprehensive study of televised value patterns within channels and genres could help to investigate these findings further.

In a final step, interactions between genre preferences and TV-channel use were analyzed. Some genres seem to match some channels better than others, at least in the eyes of media users. Thus the relationships between channel use and personal values can be reinforced for people who like genres that are specific to a given channel. I have documented the indirect relationships between values, preference for genres and channel use through path analysis. Here, public-service versus commercial channels were differently related to most genres, and I have illustrated that for some types of content (action/adventure versus arts/culture) even opposite patterns exist.
Use of channels partly depends on genre preferences and seems to reflect what genres are “typical” of a specific channel. But regardless of what content and values channels actually broadcast, viewers hold stable expectations about what to find where. Of course, decisions about exposing oneself to media take place in a variety of settings, moods and for very different reasons. Thus personal values need not be strong determinants of every instance of media use. However, they are still reflected in the audience’s decision to use or to avoid contents. More than situational gratifications, a channel’s value pattern could be the key to explain brand loyalty of TV viewers. And in order to attract specific audiences—and retain them over time—systematic analysis of value patterns within programs could contribute to creating unique channel profiles.

I have found evidence for people selecting media according to, among other factors, their values. In how far consuming value-carrying media reinforces value orientations already held by users remains an open question. In this study, values have been analyzed in terms of their influence on individual behavior. But they are also the result of long-term socialization to which media contribute as a result of people’s usage. A feedback process should actually take place between exposure to media and the received contents. Future studies should investigate these interactions in order to clarify how exactly and to what degree media contribute to creating social cohesion via offering and thus confirming value patterns that are shared by a mass audience.