Values of German media users: 1986-2007

Mahrt, M.

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Values have been discussed in connection to the changes brought to the German TV landscape since the introduction of the dual system (e.g., Husmann & Walter, 2006). 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. The systematic analysis of values within genres and among fans of these genres—or even individual programs—could provide a valuable addition to the understanding and anticipation of media use behavior.

This study has looked at the role values play in people’s media choices. I have found suggestions of 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 (content) 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. All in all, people certainly take into account a lot more qualitative traits of mediated offers than I have been able to study in this explorative analysis. But in any case, personal values deserve more than the casual mentioning they sometimes get in theories that model people’s choices of media channels and genre preferences.

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 with a preference for genres that present social values more often 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. People with materialist values 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.
One of the starting points of this study was the considerable expansion of the German media system over the last 25 years. I expected to find that a broader offering enabled 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 stations I examined. 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 more comprehensive study of televised value patterns could help to investigate this finding further.

Some of the relationships between values and genre preference were actually weakening, however. Why? Not necessarily the channels in general, but some of their genres may have changed in profile during the observation time: As mentioned above, maybe some TV programs went beyond whatever gratifications their genre might have traditionally offered; others may have crossed formerly well-established genre boundaries. Of course, with less defined and changing value patterns in certain genres, relations between use of these genres and viewers’ value orientations would become less systematic and, in sum, weaker.

This effect may even be reinforced in an analysis based on self-reported survey data. To take an example, since the end of the 1990s, many new quiz shows emerged, following in the wake of and sometimes clearly emulating the highly popular “Who wants to be a millionaire?” (M. Gerhards, Grajczyk, & Klingler, 2001; Gleich, 2001). This increased offering of quiz shows may have changed people’s understanding of the genre “quiz and game shows.” Thus what was gauged in one combined item may have represented different things for respondents over the years. Similar developments could easily have affected the way values are related to self-reported preference for changing genres.

In any case, genre preferences and TV-channel use interact. Some genres seem to match some channels better than others, at least in the eyes of media users. Thus the weak 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 showed clear differences for most genres, and I illustrated that for some types of content even opposite patterns exist.

For instance, being religious is associated with being interested in arts and culture but avoiding action movies. This relationship reinforces the preference for PSB among religious people as well as their dislike of commercial TV. The resulting correlations reflect the frequency with which these two genres appear on the given stations (Krüger & Zapf-Schramm, 2008). A broader content analysis of what values are typically broadcast within genres would be necessary to provide a more clear-cut picture. Likewise, it would be interesting to see whether value patterns within genres differ across channels. Maybe action films are not as graphic on ZDF—and thus less repugnant to religious people—as they may turn out to be on RTL?

Although values play an admittedly small role, I have found evidence for an effect on channel choice. But it turned out not as clear-cut as expected. Genres seem to play a greater part in the choice of what to watch, but values do add to these selection decisions. Genre preference obviously modifies the relationships between viewers’ values and their use of channels. In other words, selection of channels partly depends on genre preferences and seems to reflect what genres are “typical” of a specific channel.

Regardless of what content and values channels actually broadcast, viewers hold stable expectations about what to find where. So it may matter for individual shows where that content happens to be broadcast. One could expect that sooner or later “channels” or “networks” will no longer play a role for users because television stations closely watch their competitors and imitate successful formats (of which casting shows, court shows, or the above mentioned “Who wants to be a millionaire?” are but a few recent examples). Yet, a specific “channel effect” seems to remain up to today, and it seems unlikely that it will ever completely disappear. The branding of channels will continue to influence viewers in their choices (Lin et al., 2002).

One reason for this phenomenon could be people’s persistent need for “reliable surprises” instead of a wish for absolute autonomy of what to watch, independent from any programming schemes, time of day or availability of channels (about the concept of “reliable surprise,” see Schoenbach, 2007). “Reliable surprises” could actually still be the major function of outlets that bundle and sort programming. Certainly, every member of the audience wants to
watch reliably what seems to closely meet his or her expectations. But the audience also finds surprises pleasant, typically provided by somebody else, e.g., as consecutive programming that one can stay with, but also as a programming philosophy—meaning, for instance: The public-service channel ZDF is not boring, on the one hand, but protects me, on the other hand, from encountering nudity or makes sure that family series always have a happy ending. This could be a way in which a channel works as a brand, furthering channel loyalty.

Yet 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 using media. But as this study has shown, 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. To what extent consuming value-laden media reinforces value orientations already held by users I do not know. My analyses have been conducted and interpreted following the selective exposure paradigm. Yet, the value patterns people expose themselves to probably feeds back to their own value priorities. The model I presented at the outset of this study describes on the one hand how values come to influence decisions and behavior on the individual or micro-level. But it also locates values in a macro-framework of overlapping private and public spheres that influence people in the adoption of values. A feedback process should actually take place between different spheres of influence, in which media contribute to the long-term cultivation or socialization of people's values as a result of their usage. On this aggregated level, the socializing effects of their use underline the media's importance for societal integration. Mass media outlets like the ones studied here are among the institutions that directly reach the largest groups of people. All others have to either seek distribution via the media or remain limited to much smaller arenas. Through their own contents and those provided by others, media contribute to creating social cohesion via offering and thus confirming value patterns for large parts of a population.

Up to this day, media seem important reflectors and providers of common value patterns. People (partly) turn to media to find confirmation for their values. From time to time, they may also encounter challenges that put into question their own priorities. But even when this happens, mass outlets will confront large
audiences with these challenges and again create ties among people who pose themselves the same questions about what is desirable and appropriate or not. Such audiences used to be mostly confined within national borders, since the vast majority of users of a particular medium, as in this study, live in the same country. But more and more individual or special-interest media from around the globe are available today. They can present less mainstream values to their users—or at least values that are not shared by their immediate surroundings. Likewise, people can base their selections on contents rather than channels. In this respect, the closer ties between values and genres (as opposed to channels) may foreshadow future developments. Media use will become more and more specialized and people may encounter fewer contents en passant. In tomorrow’s digitalized and online world, it will be interesting to observe whether media use will lose (at least some of) its importance as a provider of social glue on the national level. Instead media may help create world-wide virtual communities that gather around one common denominator, e.g., a set of values. An extension of the current study could look into this even broader, but also highly fragmented sphere influencing people in their adoption of values and their reasons for turning to media.