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### Coping with diversity: exposure to public-affairs TV in a changing viewing environment

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Watching the news on TV. What seems to be a simple activity has been extensively studied and debated by scholars in Communication and Political Science. Does news exposure help people to keep up with current-affairs and be involved with politics? Who watches the news and why? Can it still be taken for granted that people follow the news on TV as it could have been perhaps twenty or thirty years ago? This dissertation adds to the ongoing discussion by studying TV news consumption in the Netherlands. The main contributions of this work can be summarized by the following three points:

- A longitudinal perspective: Changes of news exposure over the last two decades in the Netherlands are analyzed and related to changes of TV programming and audience behavior.
- An integrated approach on audience behavior: Individual and situational determinants are combined for a comprehensive understanding of news viewing behavior.
- Use of people-meter data: The studies are based on observational measurements of news exposure and overall viewing behavior.

In this introduction, I describe the overall research goal that motivates and links the individual studies reported in the following chapters. Furthermore, I briefly introduce the Netherlands as a research venue and elaborate on the theoretical assumptions on audience behavior that have been used to study news viewing. This is followed by an introduction to people-meter data that provide measures of news exposure closer to reality than self-reported measures. I will conclude with an outline of the individual chapters and a description of their contribution to the main research question.

### **Television as a Public-Affairs Medium**

A main argument throughout this dissertation is the persisting relevance of television as a medium of public-affairs information. This assumption is based on normative expectations about the societal value of public-affairs information, theoretical assumptions about TV news exposure, and empirical evidence on news

consumption. The relevance of the information function of TV, however, has been threatened by changes of the TV environment; in particular, by increasing choice opportunities.

Typical duties of citizens in democracies are voting, having political or societal knowledge and opinions, and actively participate in societal life beyond elections. Such normative expectations differ depending on the model of democracy that is applied – from a procedural to a participatory or deliberative one (Drale, 2004; Habermas, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005). However, a fundamental requirement for all models of democracy is that citizens hold at least a minimum knowledge about political and societal procedures, processes, issues, and events (Strömbäck, 2005). Thus, obtaining information about ongoing public affairs is a basis for other forms of political participation, from discussing politics with friends to running for a public office.

News programs on TV have long been regarded as being able to reach large audiences across socioeconomic groups and varying degrees of political interest and sophistication. Because they are audiovisual, they are assumed to aid attention and learning of the less interested more easily than other news sources (Grabe, Kamhawi, & Yegiyani, 2009; Graber, 1990; Kwak, 1999; see also: Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). According to the concept of incidental learning, viewers might even obtain information if exposed to news programs accidentally without having an intention or motivation to learn about public affairs (Downs, 1957; Krugman & Hartley, 1970; Prior, 2007).

Indeed, television still is the most important news source in most Western countries. In the U.S., for instance, 58 percent of citizens reported to have watched news on TV yesterday in 2010. Web or mobile news, in contrast, were used by 44 percent. Radio and newspapers rank even lower with 34 and 31 percent, respectively. Moreover, with an average of about 32 minutes per day, people also spent more time on TV news than on other news media (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2010). A similar picture can be found in Western European countries. The Dutch spent on average 47 minutes watching TV news per day in 2007 – and even less time with other news sources compared to the U.S. (Van der Burg, Lauf, & Negenborn, 2011). In Germany about 50 percent of the citizens follow the news on TV on a daily basis, with an average viewing time of 12 minutes per day. As many as 90 percent indicate to like watching the news (Zubayr & Geese, 2009).

Because of this high relevance of TV as a source of current-affairs information, concerns have been raised about viewers who are feared to

systematically drop out from news exposure. With more channels to choose from, public-affairs programs are assumed to be more and more watched by those viewers only who are interested in politics and current-affairs and who actively seek out informational content. Less interested viewers, instead, would turn to alternative programs (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). Increasing selectivity of TV viewers might then lead to widening gaps of political knowledge, interest, and participation. This argument culminates to severe consequences for democracy as stated by Prior (2007): More choice opportunities have led to an imbalance in voting behavior between politically involved partisans and less involved citizens. Hence, in the U.S., with its politically polarized news environment, election outcomes are biased by partisan votes (see also Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Similarly, in Western-European countries, viewing environments have changed tremendously with potential effects on news audiences. The introduction of commercial television in systems that had been restricted to public broadcasting before, as well as digitalization, has led to a growing number of channels to choose from. In addition to increasing alternatives to watch, programs that deal with public affairs have also been diversified and become more entertaining (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Pfetsch, 1996). Infotainment or soft-news formats have widened the notion of public affairs to the coverage of celebrities, human interest issues, politicians as persons, or emotional aspects of news stories.

Have these trends led to changes in TV news consumption in a Western European country such as the Netherlands? Have viewers increasingly turned away from the news, just because they can do so? The main goal of this dissertation is to study how TV is used as a medium of public-affairs in a changing viewing environment. Several studies examine patterns and conditions of exposure to public-affairs TV in the Netherlands. Trends are examined over the last two decades from 1988 to 2010.

## **The Dutch TV Environment**

As one of the last countries in Europe, the Netherlands has introduced national commercial channels in the late 1980s. Since then, Dutch television has been a dual model consisting of public-service and commercial broadcasting. This mix is typical for democratic corporatist media systems of North-Western European countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). During the time of this study, the national TV market as well as the public-affairs programming has become more competitive.

From three public-service channels in 1988, the number of available channels has steadily increased to over 30 analog channels and over 50 digital channels. However, in terms of viewing behavior, the market remained highly concentrated with about 78 percent of the market share distributed among nine channels in 2010 (Stichting KijkOnderzoek [SKO], 2011).

Public-service TV is, for the most part, responsible for public-affairs programming – a task that is also prescribed by the national media law. Specific to the Dutch system is its historical development in a segregated or ‘pillarized’ society. The traditional religious and political affiliations – although retreating – still characterize public-service broadcasting. Current-affairs programming, for instance, is mainly offered by broadcast organizations of different societal backgrounds. The news programming of public-service TV, in contrast, is dominated by the public service NOS (Nederlandse Omroep Stichting). NOS functions as an umbrella organization with the specific task of offering programs of general societal interest. Public-service stations have scheduled more news and current-affairs programs over the last twenty years (Aalberg et al., 2010). But also commercial channels have started their own public-affairs programming. In particular, entertaining information formats became a domain of commercial channels (see Chapters 4 and 5 for a more detailed description of these developments).

Investigating exposure to public-affairs TV in the Netherlands from 1988 to 2010, thus, reveals how Dutch viewers have responded to a number of changes of the viewing environment. Specifically, these are the increase of viewing alternatives with a growing competition between public-service and commercial channels, and the increase, as well as diversification, of public-affairs programming itself.

### **An Integrative Approach on Viewing Behavior**

How viewers deal with more viewing alternatives depends on the ways viewers make their program choices. Therefore, it is not only important to know which viewers watch public-affairs TV but also why they do so. What are viewers’ interests or motivations to watch? And in which kinds of situations are they likely to encounter public-affairs programs – perhaps incidentally? This is why this study looks at the conditions of the consumption of public-affairs TV, and the possible changes of these over time. The theoretical perspective on exposure to public-affairs TV that is developed throughout this dissertation combines an individual and a structural approach on audience behavior. This perspective accounts for

personal characteristics of TV viewers as well as features of viewing situations. Thereby, it is an attempt to integrate a broad range of research traditions from uses-and-gratifications (Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000) and selective exposure research (Levy & Windahl, 1985; Zillman & Bryant, 1985) to audience duplication research (Cooper, 1996; Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2006).

The main assumption of the individual approach on audience behavior is that viewers seek to fulfill their needs by choosing appropriate programs to watch (e.g., Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982; Rubin, 1984). The structural approach, in contrast, regards viewers as strongly influenced by their environment. Particularly, programming characteristics and the composition of audiences determine audience flows between programs (e.g., Rust & Alpert, 1984; Webster, 2006). Typically, this approach studies aggregated audiences of programs or channels while the individual approach focuses on personal characteristics. But structural factors can also be observed on the individual level, as they become manifest in specific viewing situations. Characteristics of specific viewing situations are the structure of programming, a viewer's availability to watch TV, the awareness of available viewing options, and the presence of other people.

An early model of program choice already regards viewing decisions as an outcome of both situational aspects as well as individual needs and preferences (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Theoretically, the interrelation between structural and individual factors has been described as a duality following the ideas of structuration theory (Webster, 2009). Structures that are defined by the media environment are assumed to enable media users to enact choices according to their preferences. But media choices, in turn, have an impact on the structures they rely on. Aggregated user information, for instance, television program ratings or the popularity of websites, directly influence future media content, namely TV program schedules or result lists of online search engines (Webster, 2011).

Such mutual constitutions of cause and effect can also be described as 'dynamic transactions' (Frueh & Schoenbach, 1982, 2005). The idea of dynamic transactions emphasizes that elements of a process can simultaneously influence each other, overcoming the traditional dichotomy of dependent and independent variables. Accordingly, media users are conceptualized as at the same time being autonomous in selecting and processing media content and dependent on structures such as the media environment and learned habits of media use.

The concept of media habits helps to clarify how motivational and situational factors simultaneously shape viewing behavior. Viewing habits have been defined as cognitive structures that allow automatic responses to key stimuli (Koch, 2010;

LaRose, 2010). Thus, key stimuli such as characteristics of place and time can lead to recurring viewing patterns. Once viewing choices have crystallized into habits, they are no longer consciously intentional. Nevertheless, they are the product of what was once a deliberate decision, and thus still reflect viewing interests and preferences. So, habits structure viewing behavior and limit the cognitive work necessary for viewing decisions. While situational cues can activate habitual patterns of media use, the repetitive activity, in turn, can reinforce or alter an existing media habit.

In sum, exposure to public-affairs TV is regarded as influenced by individual and structural factors. Specifically, these factors are individual preferences or motivations and characteristics of the viewing situations. Moreover, these different types of factors also influence each other so that viewing patterns are reinforced or altered over time.

### **People-Meter Data**

Data about news exposure is almost always collected via surveys or interviews. So, respondents are typically asked about their TV viewing behavior. This type of self-reports of media use has often been discussed critically (e.g., Allen & Taylor, 1985; Bartels, 1993; Price & Zaller, 1993). In general, well known problems of self-reported measures are difficulties in interpreting the question equally and of recalling, estimating, and reporting viewing behavior truthfully (e.g., Burton & Blair, 1991; Schwarz, 2007). Using people-meter data instead of self-reports can overcome some of the problems regarding the reliability and validity of measuring exposure to TV news.

The Dutch *Continu KijkOnderzoek* (CKO) was founded as a national audience research foundation in 1987. Its tasks have been assigned to *Stichting KijkOnderzoek* (SKO) in 2002. CKO and later SKO represent national public and commercial broadcasters, advertisers, and media agencies and are responsible for the Dutch people-meter research. The collection of the audience data is conducted by *Intomart GfK*. Data of the programming of the major Dutch channels is collected by *TV Times*, since 2007 *MediaXim Nederland*. The data deliver widely accepted currencies of audience research, such as ratings and market shares of programs or channels.

As a basic principle, people-meters are installed in the participating panel households. Every time panel members watch TV, they register as viewers using a button on a separate remote control. Then, the meters record the channels watched and the exact moments of switching between them. The meter data are

transferred via telephone line and then linked to the programming data so that watching a channel at a particular time is allocated to a specific program. In addition, an annual survey is conducted among all panel members. This allows to relate the viewing data to individual characteristics, such as a viewer's interest in politics and preferences for news and current-affairs programs (see for more detailed and historical overviews SKO, 2008; Webster et al., 2006).

Survey and people-meter data yield self-observations of news exposure, albeit with considerable differences. Survey questions are supposed to reproduce self-observations of one's past behavior. Typically, people are asked for introspection: Do they remember to have watched TV yesterday? But also people-meter measures are self-observations – in the sense that panel members need to log on to the system each time they consider themselves watching TV. So, the difference between the two methods of data gathering is that people-meter data are simultaneous self-observations while survey measures are *ex post* self-observations. The quality of both types of measures depends on the willingness of the participants to co-operate and accurately record their behavior. However, the accuracy of self-reported news exposure additionally depends on the ability of the respondents to correctly remember their viewing behavior. People-meter measures, in contrast, virtually exclude memory as a source of measurement error (see Peeters, Jager, & Kalfs, 2005; SKO, 2008).

A second advantage of people-meter data is related to the complexity of information that is demanded from the participants. After registration as a viewer, the people-meter box electronically registers which channel is watched and for how long. This automatic component of the data collection assures that, once somebody has registered appropriately, all measures from the people meter data are equally accurate. Since survey measures are limited by the cognitive abilities of the respondent, their accuracy is likely to decrease with an increasing complexity of the measures and with time. For instance, telling whether one has watched news on TV yesterday is an easier task than recalling whether one has switched to a different channel to watch or to avoid a news program.

In sum, people-meter data should be more accurate compared to self-reported survey measures. A highly stable manner of data collection yields consistent and comparable measures over time. The precise measurement of viewing behavior in combination with relevant individual characteristics allows an integration of the individual and the structural approach to audience behavior.

## Outline of Dissertation Chapters

The chapters of this dissertation are composed and written as individual studies and can also be read as such. In a consecutive manner, each study provides a contribution to the overall research aim of studying the role of public-affairs TV in a changing viewing environment (see Figure 1 for an overview). The first two chapters offer a theoretical and empirical preparation for the studies conducted in chapters three to five.

Chapter one provides a literature review on models and empirical studies on TV viewing behavior. A sequential model of watching TV is developed that describes viewing situations. Comprehensively, viewing is considered as a process and as influenced by factors stemming from the viewer, TV programming, the social environment, and other contextual aspects. This review results in an extensive research program. The following empirical studies apply this framework on exposure to news and public-affairs television.

In the next chapters, studies on news exposure follow a step-by-step approach to extend our understanding of news exposure as part of overall viewing behavior and its changes over time. The second chapter compares different manners of measuring news exposure with people-meter data. This comparison serves the purpose to evaluate the validity of exposure measures and their utility for the subsequent analyses. The exact duration of news exposure per week appears as the most appropriate measure for the further studies. In addition, the analysis yields insights about the interrelationships between the measures.

Chapter three examines determinants of news exposure. This cross-sectional study compares motivational and situational factors in their influence on news viewing behavior. Thereby, the integrated approach to audience behavior as outlined above is applied. The results show that the viewing situation is more influential than viewing motivations. But also interaction effects between the two types of factors are considered and reveal that motivations can reinforce or reverse situational influences.

In chapter four, the previous analysis is extended to a longitudinal one. The aim of this study is twofold: First, we look at changes of news exposure over time. Second, trends in news exposure are linked to developments in program choice behavior. With increasing choice opportunities, it is argued, news programs might primarily reach viewers who are interested in public affairs while the less interested might escape to alternative programs more often. Surprisingly, we find that Dutch viewers have watched more news over time. Relative to the impact of viewing

motivations, the impact of the viewing context remained influential on a high level over the years.

Finally, chapter five offers a broader look at exposure to public-affairs TV over time. Not only traditional news formats but also more entertaining news programs, as well as various background programs, are considered. We describe changes of public-affairs programming over time. Patterns of information viewing are explored and related to characteristics of viewers and their viewing behavior. Trends of these information viewing patterns over time reveal how viewers have incorporated an increasing variety of program formats into their viewing diets. Instead of a specialization – and thus increasing gaps between information seekers and avoiders – we find a diversification of public-affairs exposure in the Netherlands over the last two decades.

A concluding section, finally, presents an overview of the results obtained in the separate studies. The major conclusions and limitations of this research, as well as implications for future studies, are discussed.

<b>Objectives and setup of the dissertation project</b>
Overall research question: How has the use of TV as a medium of public-affairs information changed in a changing viewing environment?
Chapter 1: Dynamics of individual television viewing behavior
Literature review and development of a sequential model of TV viewing behavior that serves as a framework for the empirical studies.
Chapter 2: Dimensionality of TV-news exposure
Different measures of exposure to news programs from people-meter data are compared and evaluated.
Chapter 3: Why people watch the news
A comparison of the influence of motivational and situational factors on news exposure.
Chapter 4: TV-news audiences in the Netherlands 1988–2010
A longitudinal analysis of determinants of news exposure.
Chapter 5: Watching public-affairs TV in the Netherlands 1988–2010
An analysis of trends and determinants of exposure to serious and light forms of public-affairs programming.

**Figure 1:** Overview of the Research Project

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