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

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CHAPTER 3

Interest in News and Politics or Situational Determinants? Why People Watch the News

Abstract

This study compared and integrated the influence of motivational and situational determinants on news viewing behavior. Individual people-meter data allowed the unobtrusive study of news viewing situations. The finding is that the viewing context is much more important than motivations. However, interest in the news and politics can reinforce or reverse situational influences. For interested viewers, watching more TV in general mainly explains news viewing, while for less interested viewers, lead-out effects and social viewing are more relevant.

Citizens' use of information about political issues and events is regarded as a basic requirement for democracy. All sorts of political participation, from discussing politics with friends to running for an office, require a minimum knowledge of ongoing public affairs (e.g., Strömbäck, 2005). In many Western countries, TV newscasts are still the most widely used source of political information (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Lewis, 2008; Tenscher, 2008). In the United States and Germany, for instance, about 70 percent of the citizens use television as their main source of national and international information (Köcher, 2008; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press [Pew], 2009). However, TV not only reaches many people, but also is said to attract the attention particularly of those who are less politically interested more easily than other news sources (see overview in Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). Watching the news does not require much effort, and can even be entertaining or relaxing.

But is this the only reason why so many viewers watch news programs? If so, why has news watching decreased? Over the last two decades, news audiences in the United States dropped by about 10% (Pew, 2009). News viewing also declined in Europe, for example in the United Kingdom and Germany (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Zubayr & Gerhard, 2009). The aim of this study was to establish the determinants of news viewing behavior. Dutch people-meter data on the level of individual viewers allowed the unobtrusive study of news viewing situations. News viewing also can be embedded in an individual's overall viewing behavior, because the latter is measured too. The Netherlands is very similar to most other Western countries as far as news programs and viewing behavior are concerned. The national news programming consists of a mix of public service and commercial programs. As in other Western countries, TV news is the most important news source for the majority of Dutch people (Newton, 2002; Peeters, 2002). Compared to the other 26 countries of the European Union, levels of exposure to TV news and newspapers in the Netherlands are relatively high (Tenscher, 2008).

Possible answers to the question why people watch the news often are offered in the explanations for its decline. A constant argument attributes decrease in news watching to the abundance of program alternatives (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2002). Viewers who are not interested in news about political issues and current affairs might simply switch to more interesting content. Here, watching TV is considered primarily a deliberate behavior, as described by the uses and gratifications approach to media use (e.g., Rubin, 1981), where the focus is on motivational factors, such as viewers' interests, needs, or gratifications sought and

obtained. From this perspective, news viewers simply are people interested in the news and in politics.

More program choice also might lead to shrinking news audiences, because unintentional or accidental encounters with news programs become less likely (Prior, 2007). While watching, viewers might not choose every program they watch intentionally (e.g., Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Further, audience duplication suggests that viewing is a more passive, lean-back behavior that is strongly influenced by the viewing context – for instance, by the structure of programming or the amount of time that people watch TV in general (Cooper, 1996; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Such situational factors might cause viewers to watch news programs even though they are not interested in them.

It is plausible that both motivational and situational factors may be in play (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2009), which is why audience activity should be regarded as a continuum (e.g., Adams, 2000; Rubin, 1984). TV exposure is also considered habitual or unintentional, rather than completely rational or intentional (Koch, 2010; Rubin, 1984). In turn, situational factors are not simply regarded as determinants of passive viewing behavior. They may facilitate and modify conscious viewing activities, both intentional and less intentional ones (Webster, 2009). Assuming that both motivational and situational factors shape program choices, the focus of interest shifts to, first, the proportional strength of each of the two types of factors and, second, to the nature of possible interrelations between them. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ: Do motivational or situational factors have a stronger influence on news exposure?

And subsequently:

RQ$_a$: Which specific factors within the two types are particularly important?

RQ$_b$: How do motivational and situational factors relate to each other in their influence on news exposure?

Viewing Motivations

Models of program choice describe motivational viewing decisions as based on content-related aspects. Viewers are assumed to choose programs according to their preferences for specific programs or genres (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Regarding news programs, a viewer's interest in politics is a crucial motivational factor since it is often assumed to trigger political learning (e.g., Prior, 2007), which

is why political interest is often used as an indicator of news preference. However, news preferences might also be related to motives other than the desire for political information. The news might be interesting for social reasons, because, for instance, it supplies topics for conversations (Scheufele, 2000). Viewers may watch news stories as entertainment, because they contain conflict, surprise, or emotions (Hoffner, Fujioka, Ye, & Ibrahim, 2009). Thus, viewer interests can be divided into content-related interest in political information, and general interest in the news genre, which may also represent other motivations, such as suspense, curiosity, or material to talk about.

As mentioned, viewers may not always pay attention to their program choices or habitually watch a channel at specific times. They might even deliberately neglect their choice opportunities in favor of the reliable surprise offered by the composition of pre-scheduled programs (Schoenbach, 2007). Therefore, watching programs that match one's preferences requires a certain level of viewing activity as a personal trait. Consciously switching between channels can be regarded as an indicator of a viewer's willingness to seek out the most interesting program available. Appointment viewing is a special case of active program selection. Especially in the evening, viewers might start watching TV because they do not want to miss the day's news (Levy, 1978). Programmers therefore often consider main newscasts as lead-ins to their prime-time programming (Eick, 2007).

The following hypotheses summarize the study's expectations concerning the influences of motivational factors on news viewing:

H_1:   Viewers spend more time watching news programs a) the more politically interested they are, b) the stronger their news preference is, c) the more often they switch channels, and d) the more often they only start watching just before a newscast begins.

Situational Influences

A considerable number of news viewers watch newscasts unintentionally or accidentally, rather than based on purposeful program choices that accord with their viewing interests (Levy, 1978; Robinson, 1971; van den Bulck, 2006). Aspects of the viewing situation might enable viewers to encounter news programs, even though they do not necessarily intend to watch the news.

Viewer availability – namely the time that people spend watching TV – is regarded as a crucial precondition of program choices (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). Since viewers spend quite a lot of time watching TV, there is a chance that

they will stumble upon political content. Older people, for instance, were found to watch news programs more often. However, in general, this group watches more TV (e.g., Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Köcher, 2008).

Co-viewing takes into account the social aspects of watching TV. Watching the news can be an integral part of family life, and for some family members the time spend together can be more relevant than the content they watch. In other cases, viewers who do not like newscasts might be outvoted by co-viewers (Webster & Wakshlag, 1982).

Viewing choices can also be influenced by programming strategies (Webster, 2006). News audiences are influenced by both preceding and subsequent programs (Cooper, 1996). Preceding programs can have lead-in effects. Uninterested viewers might watch news programs because they have just watched the preceding program on the same channel and are too lazy to switch to another one (Boemer, 1987). Subsequent programs, in contrast, can have lead-out effects. Viewers might watch the news because they do not want to miss the start of a movie or show that comes on immediately after the news (Marcinkowski, 2010). Program planners try to exploit inheritance effects by applying transitional techniques to keep viewers from switching to another channel (Eastman, Newton, & Riggs, 1997). News teasers, for instance, are used to arouse viewer interest in upcoming news stories (e.g., Chang, 1998).

Situational factors can be linked to general viewing motivations that are not directly related to news programs. Availability, for instance, relates to the motivation to watch TV, while co-viewing relates to social reasons. Here, however, no content-related intentions to watch news programs are involved. In sum, the following relationships between news exposure and situational factors are expected:

H_2:   Viewers spend more time watching news programs a) the longer they are available watching TV, b) if they watch the news with co-viewers, and if they watch c) preceding (lead-in) or d) succeeding (lead-out) programs on the same channel.

An Integrative Approach

So far, motivational and situational determinants of news exposure as separate research traditions were discussed. They are important elements of possible determinants that are described in a comprehensive model of individual viewing behavior (Wonneberger et al., 2009). The model relates program choices to both

individual motives and situational factors, such as the program structure, the social environment, and other contextual factors. Moreover, these spheres of influence are assumed to interact with each other, and applying this framework to news exposure accounts for a simultaneous influence of news viewing intentions and viewing context. For instance, a viewer might have a pronounced interest in watching a specific newscast. While this viewer is searching or waiting for that program, alternative programs might arouse his or her interest and the viewer might end up watching a program s/he had not planned to watch initially. The same process can have the opposite outcome. The motivation of a viewer, who initially had no interest in the news, might be generated by a news item that s/he stumbled upon. Thus, viewers who differ in their interest in politics and in news programs might react differently to the same situational conditions.

As noted, political content on TV is assumed to be more accessible than political information in other media, because of the former's audio-visual and entertaining forms of presentation (Grabe, Kamhawi, & Yegiyan, 2009; Graber, 1990). The interrelation between viewer interests and situational factors might explain why news programs reach both the interested and the uninterested viewers, albeit for different purposes. While people who want to watch the news know how to find it, those who are not interested might be stimulated especially by the viewing context. The study expects that conditions that enhance news viewing – such as viewer availability or lead-in – might have a stronger impact on viewers who are not interested in either the news genre or political information:

H_3:   News exposure of politically interested viewers is influenced by situational factors to a lesser extent than news exposure of viewers who are less politically interested.

H_4:   News exposure of viewers with a preference for news programs is influenced by situational factors to a lesser extent than news exposure of viewers who are less interested in news programs.

Data

For the analysis, the study used Dutch people-meter data published by Stichting KijkOnderzoek (SKO; the Dutch audience research foundation) since 2002. SKO is a joint venture of the public broadcasting foundation, commercial channels, advertisers, and media agencies responsible for conducting national television audience research. The audience data collected by Intomart GfK from a panel consisting of about 2,900 persons (ages 3 and over) are representative of the Dutch

population. They are selected from an establishment survey according to their representation of 100 subgroups whose distribution is provided by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (SKO, 2008a). In addition, an annual survey is held among all panel members. People-meters are installed in the participating households. Every time a panel member watches TV, s/he uses a separate remote control to register as a viewer. The person's viewing behavior, which includes the channels watched and the exact moments of switching between channels, is recorded electronically. Although these data are not prone to the problems associated with self-reported measures of news exposure, they have validity and reliability issues. The quality of the measures mainly depends on the willingness of the participants to accurately register every time they watch TV. Coincidental checks – that is, comparing people-meter data with self-reports via the telephone – yielded a high equivalence of both sources (SKO, 2008a).

The programming of the 17 major Dutch channels is analyzed by MediaXim Nederland, so that watching a channel at a particular time can be allocated to a specific program. The analysis combined survey, viewing, and program data from the people-meter system for one week in the fall of 2007 (November 19 – November 25). During fall, levels of television exposure are relatively normal, in contrast to low levels during the summer and peaks during the winter holidays. Also in terms of news and current affairs events, it was not an exceptional week. Since previous research shows well developed news viewing routines among adolescents (Van den Bulck, 2006), all panel members aged 13 and over were included. This resulted in a sample size of 2,405.

Dutch News Programs

The focus was on serious political information or "hard news" characterized by explicit references to political actors, debates, decisions, and major events of public interest. The Dutch TV landscape is regarded as typical of Western European countries (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; De Waal & Schoenbach 2010). It is dominated by 3 public and 7 commercial channels, serving about 16 million inhabitants. There are also various special interest, regional, and foreign sources, adding up to 35 channels that could be received in an average household in 2007. Although as in other Western countries, the market faces trends of commercialization and digitalization, the offer of serious news programs is not affected.

Despite the diversity of channels, most of the national news programming is still offered by the public service stations. Although RTL Nieuws (a commercial

TV news service) is increasingly popular since its launch in 1989, the public service equivalent (NOS Journaal) still attracts a larger audience (SKO, 2008b). These two main news programs are similar in presentational style and selection of issues (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). The evening newscasts have an airtime of about 20–30 minutes, and are not interrupted by advertising. They contain about 10 to 15 news and current affairs items, 1 or 2 human interest stories, and the weather forecast. Shorter bulletins of about 10 to 15 minutes are broadcast throughout the day. Since the programs of regional and foreign channels are not coded, their newscasts were not included in the analysis. However, these channels are of only minor importance regarding their market shares (SKO, 2008b). Furthermore, regional newscasts in the Netherlands are not substitutes for national news programs, since they cover only regional issues and events. Table 3.1 shows the audience ratings of the news programs that were included in the analysis.

Table 3.1: Maximum Rating per Program during Sample Week

Program Title	Channel	Rating
Journaal 20 Uur	Nederland 1	12.5
Journaal op 3	Nederland 3	3.3
Half Acht Nieuws	RTL4	7.3
RTL Z Nieuws	RTL7	1.7

Note: November 19–25, 2007, 6 years and older incl. guests, source: SKO/Intomart GfK.

Measures

News Viewing Measures. A viewer was considered exposed to the news if s/he watched at least 5 minutes of a news program. Three measures used in previous research were employed, each gauging news exposure at a different level of precision. On the most elementary level, "news viewing at all" distinguished viewers who watched at least one news program during the sample week, from those who were not exposed to the news at all (Robinson 1971; van den Bulck, 2006). The second measure took exposure frequency into account. Most studies that assessed the effects of news exposure draw on the number of days on which newscasts were watched in the past or in a typical week. Because the number of exposure days does not distinguish viewers who watch the news for only a few

minutes from those who watch entire news programs or several such programs a day, duration measures were developed (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2007; Newton, 2002). The news viewing duration was operationalized as the sum of the minutes that a viewer watched the news during the week.

Motivational Factors. Panel members were asked to indicate their political interest on a 3-point scale.[1] Accordingly, the preference for news and current affairs programs was measured on a 3-point scale.[2] A viewer's switching rate was defined as the number of changes between channels divided by the total number of programs watched. Appointment viewing was coded as a dummy variable, because a viewer may consciously decide either to start watching TV directly before the beginning of a news program or to not do so. A viewer's appointment viewing score was calculated by dividing the frequency of starting to watch TV within 5 minutes prior to watching a news program, by the total number of news programs that were watched by that viewer.

Situational Factors. In audience duplication studies, viewer availability was commonly defined as the number of viewers who watch TV at a specific moment (e.g., Cooper, 1996). Applied to the individual level, a viewer's availability was the number of minutes that s/he spent watching TV during the sample week. The news viewing duration was excluded to avoid confounding with the dependent variables. Co-viewers were defined as the average number of people who were present when a news program was watched. Lead-in effects were commonly defined by the number or proportion of viewers who watch two successive programs on the same channel (e.g., Webster, 2006). This measure was applied at the individual level by assuming a lead-in effect if a viewer had watched a program for a minimum of 5 minutes prior to watching a news program on the same channel. Lead-in is regarded as an inertia effect that should increase with the length of time a viewer did not change channels. Therefore, the viewed proportion of a lead-in program that a viewer had watched was taken as a measure of a viewer's lead-in effect. The average lead-in score for the whole week was calculated per viewer. The average lead-out effect was calculated in the same manner, based on the viewed proportions of programs on the same channel that had been broadcast just after the news.

Viewer Characteristics. Since viewer groups were found to differ in their news viewing behavior, we also controlled for socio-demographics, namely for age, gender, and education.[3] Self-reported use of alternative news sources, that is, newspaper, free daily paper, and the Internet, each measured on a scale from 0 to 3, also was controlled.

Statistical Analysis

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the influence of motivational and situational factors on news viewing at all, news viewing days, and news viewing duration. Since news viewing at all was a dichotomous variable, a logistic model was estimated. The number of news viewing days was normally distributed and thus applicable for OLS regression. Negative binomial regression was employed for news viewing duration since its distribution was right-skewed. Changes in R-square indicated the degree of model improvement reached by motivational and situational variables.

Statistical simulation was used to test whether the predictors actually had a substantial influence on news viewing (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). Expected changes in news viewing behavior were calculated for a predictor change from half a standard deviation below to half a standard deviation above its mean, while holding all other predictors constant at their means. The calculations yielded specific and comparable quantities for the influence of each predictor.

Finally, interaction effects were analyzed to answer RQ_b about the interrelations between viewer interests and situational factors. For this, the interaction terms of the situational predictors with political interest and news preference in a second model of the news viewing duration (the conditional model) were included.

Results

The majority of the sample watched at least one news program during the sample week; about 19% did not watch any news during that week. On average, the viewers watched the news on 3 days per week (SD = 2.3) and spent a total of about 79 minutes watching news programs (SD = 95.1). All three exposure measures were positively correlated. But since they were not perfectly related, it was assumed that they reflected different aspects of news exposure. Watching the news at all and time spent watching the news had the weakest correlation (r = .41), followed by watching at all and the news viewing days (r = .63). The number of days and viewing duration were the most strongly correlated (r = .79).

Compared to the situational factors, the motivational factors played a minor role for the three types of news viewing behavior. Especially for the models explaining the number of days and news viewing duration, there was a pronounced difference between the two types of factors. With changes in R-square of .07 and

.04, respectively, the motivational factors were of marginal importance even if the study did not control for the situational variables. The latter, in contrast, contributed a pseudo R-square of .19 and .30. Thus, the answer to the first research question is that the influence of the situational factors is as much as seven times stronger than that of the motivational factors (Table 3.2).

Viewers spent more time watching news programs the more politically interested they were ($H1_a$), the stronger their news preference ($H1_b$), the more often they switched channels ($H1_c$), and the more often they turned on the TV only just before a newscast ($H1_d$). All of the situational factors also led to higher levels of news exposure. Viewers spent more time watching news programs the more time they were available watching TV ($H2_a$), if they watched the news with co-viewers ($H2_b$), and if they watched preceding ($H2_c$) or successive programs ($H2_d$) on the same channel. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 are confirmed (see Table 3.A1).

The question is, which of these factors were the most influential? The chance that a viewer watched at least one news program during the week was most strongly influenced by the time that s/he spent watching TV (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.2: Multivariate Regression Models on News Exposure: Improvement by Motivational and Situational Factors

Blocks of Predictors	News Viewing at All[a]		News Viewing Days[b]		News Viewing Duration[a]			
					Unconditional		Conditional	
	R^2	ΔR^2	R^2	ΔR^2	R^2	ΔR^2	R^2	ΔR^2
Individual characteristics	0.187		0.271		0.160		0.160	
Motivational factors	0.245	0.058	0.338	0.067	0.201	0.041	0.202	0.042
Situational factors	0.327	0.082	0.523	0.185	0.504	0.303	0.550	0.348
Total R^2	0.351		0.564		0.598		0.610	

Note: Individual characteristics: sociodemographics and media use. Motivational factors: political interest, news preference, switching, appointment viewing. Situational factors: availability, co-viewing, lead-in, lead-out. Changes in R-squares denote model improvement relative to individual characteristics. The conditional model of news-viewing duration also contains interactions terms of political interest and news preference with situational factors. Sample size is 2,405.
[a]Cragg-Uhler & Nagelkerke's pseudo R-square (Cragg & Uhler, 1970; Nagelkerke, 1991).
[b]Adjusted R-square.

Table 3.3: Changes of Expected Values of News Viewing Measures [and 95% Confidence Intervals] for Predictor Changes from ½ Standard Deviation below to ½ Standard Deviation above the Mean

Predictors (Scale, Mean, Standard Deviation)	Change in Probability of Watching News	Change in News Viewing Days	Change in Minutes of News Exposure
Age	0.06	0.63	15.03
(in years: M = 45.5, SD = 17.6)	[0.04, 0.08]	[0.55, 0.72]	[13.05, 17.11]
Education			2.81
(scale 1 to 6: M = 3.4, SD = 1.6)			[1.23, 4.53]
Reading newspaper			-2.10
(index 0 to 3: M = 1.4, SD = 0.3)			[-3.76, -0.34]
Political interest	0.02	0.13	4.33
(scale 1 to 3: M = 1.5, SD = 0.7)	[0.01, 0.03]	[0.06, 0.20]	[2.48, 6.24]
News preference	0.03	0.20	6.54
(scale 1 to 3: M = 2.6, SD = 0.6)	[0.02, 0.04]	[0.12, 0.27]	[4.81, 8.35]
Switching	0.02	0.11	4.41
(proportion: M = 0.7, SD = 0.2)	[0.01, 0.03]	[0.04, 0.18]	[2.61, 6.35]
Appointment viewing		0.39	18.05
(proportion: M = 0.3, SD = 0.3)		[0.32, 0.46]	[16.07, 20.01]
Availability	0.13	0.67	13.79
(in hours: M = 20.4, SD = 15.2)	[0.11, 0.15]	[0.60, 0.75]	[11.62, 15.95]
Co-viewers		0.44	33.82
(average no.: M = 1.2, SD = 0.8)		[0.37, 0.52]	[30.91, 36.60]
Lead-in		0.51	25.01
(proportion: M = 0.2, SD = 0.2)		[0.44, 0.59]	[22.73, 27.62]
Lead-out			7.50
(proportion: M = 0.3, SD = 0.3)			[5.44, 9.53]
Expected value of dependent	0.89	2.96	37.98
variable if all predictors are	[0.87, 0.91]	[2.90, 3.02]	[36.46, 39.55]
set to their mean			

Note: Statistical simulation was used to calculate average changes of expected values and associated confidence intervals (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). Only significant changes are displayed (p < .05).

Watching TV for 15 hours more per week (which corresponds to a change of one standard deviation of availability) increased the chance of news watching by about 13%. In contrast, stronger viewer interests and switching more actively between channels led to an increase of about 2–3%.
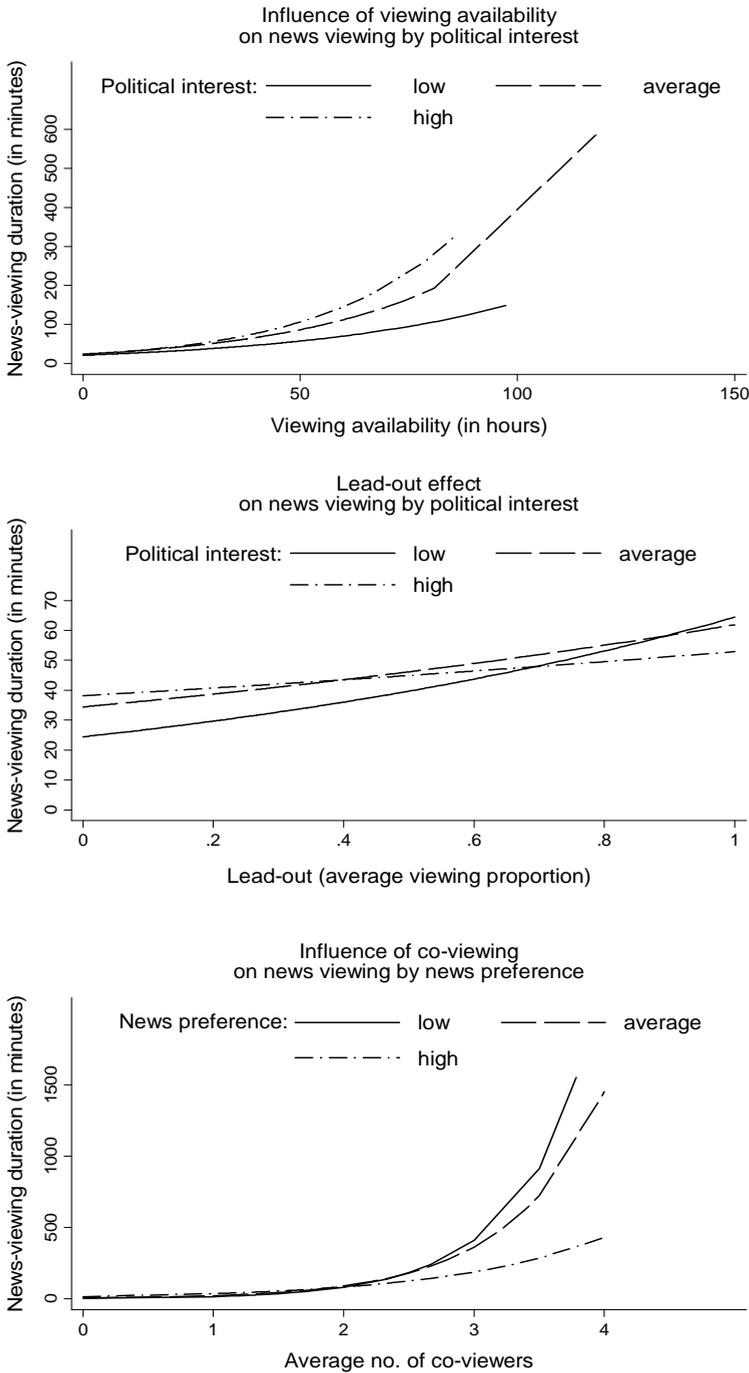
Situational factors were shown to cause the strongest differences for the frequency and amount of news watching. Viewers who spent more time watching TV in general also watched the news on more days. Also watching the news together and having watched higher proportions of programs on the same channel prior to newscasts had a stronger impact than the motivational factors. Of the motivational factors, appointment viewing was the most important, followed by the preference for news programs. Being interested in politics and switching activity also increased the number of news viewing days, albeit to a smaller extent.

The presence of co-viewers had the strongest influence on the duration of news viewing. Watching the news with another person increased the time that a viewer spent watching the news by about 34 minutes. The second strongest was the lead-in effect. Watching about 20% more of preceding programs increased the news viewing time by about 25 minutes. Availability and watching subsequent programs also produced considerable differences. Of the motivational factors, appointment viewing was again the most important factor, causing an 18-minute increase in viewing. Viewer interests were less relevant. Having a preference for the news led to an increase of about 7 viewing minutes. Political interest was related to a difference of only 4 minutes – the same as switching more actively. The effects of the motivational factors were not related to each other. Although appointment viewing was positively correlated with political interest ($r = .14$) and preference for the news ($r = .17$), the regression coefficients of these viewing interests did not change when appointment viewing was removed from the model.

RQ_a concluded that appointment viewing was the most relevant motivational factor. Of the generally more influential situational factors, viewer availability showed the strongest impact on the frequency of news viewing, while co-viewing exerted the strongest influence on the time that viewers spend watching the news.

The second aim of the study was to examine interrelations between situational factors and a viewer's level of interest in the news and in politics, respectively. For this, the focus was on the conditional model on news viewing duration. The model improved only marginally when the interaction effects were added (Table 3.2). Three significant interactions were found among viewer interests and situational factors (see Table 3.A1). The plots of these effects further explain the nature of these interrelations (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Interaction Effects between Structural and Motivational Factors on the Expected News Viewing Duration

Influence of viewing availability
on news viewing by political interest

Lead-out effect
on news viewing by political interest

Influence of co-viewing
on news viewing by news preference

The lead-out effect and co-viewing had the expected effects on viewers who were less interested in the news. Viewers who were less interested in politics spent more time watching news programs if they wanted to watch a program that came on immediately after the news. Viewers who were not interested in news programs watched the news more often with others. Their news viewing duration increased more than that of other viewers if they usually watched the news with more than two co-viewers. Furthermore, political interest interacted with viewer availability. However, contrary to expectations, spending more time in front of the TV increased the news viewing duration especially for those who were politically interested.

In sum, the results only partly confirm H_3 and H_4 on the interactions between viewer interests and situational factors. Political interest modified the impact of the lead-out effect, and news preference modified the impact of co-viewing on news exposure. Political interest, in contrast, reinforced the influence of viewer availability. All other interactions were not significant. Regarding RQ_b, one can conclude that viewer interests can reinforce as well as reverse the influence of situational factors on news viewing behavior.

Finally, it should be noted that individual background characteristics improved the models even more than the motivational factors, with R-squares of between .16 and .27. This impact could be primarily ascribed to age. Older viewers were more likely to watch the news at all, watched the news on more days, and spent more time watching the news. But also news interests, viewing situations, and thus the strength of influencing factors might differ for younger and older viewers. To analyze the difference, the study ran the models on news viewing duration separately for younger viewers of the "Net generation" versus viewers born before 1977 (Tappscott, 1998, pp. 22–24).[4] The proportional strength of motivational and situational factors was about the same for the two groups. Political interest was not significant for younger viewers; consequently, no interaction effects could be found for the young. News preference had a positive effect on news exposure of young viewers. However, being interested in news did not modify the influence of situational factors for them.

Conclusions and Discussion

Television news is still the most important source of political information for many citizens. However, news audiences are shrinking, which is why it is relevant to know which factors actually contribute to news viewing. In other words, do

viewers watch the news intentionally because they are interested in it, or is news viewing simply a by-product of watching TV? Assuming that audience activity is a continuum, the study was interested in the proportional strength of motivational and situational factors. Using Dutch people-meter data, the impact of possible influence factors was tested on watching the news at all, days per week, and news viewing duration.

Most surprisingly, viewing motives seem to play only a minor role in the decision to watch news programs. Instead, the relevance of situational factors was obvious even at the most basic level of news exposure, namely the distinction between news viewers and news non-viewers. However, the relative importance of the viewing context actually increases once news exposure is measured more specifically. Viewers spent about half an hour more per week watching news programs if they watched together with others or watched preceding programs on the same channel.

However, situational influences should not be misunderstood as deterministic, rendering passive viewers. Viewers may quite deliberately relinquish their choice opportunities and leave their news exposure to chance (Schoenbach, 2007). Previous research repeatedly pointed to the habitual character of news viewing (e.g., Tenscher, 2008). Viewing habits were described as automatic behavior, displayed as a response to key stimuli (Koch, 2010). Once viewing choices are 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.

In the Dutch context, news viewing habits might be explained by a long tradition of public service news. The audience is accustomed to the news programs that are both available and regularly scheduled. A prominent position of public broadcasting news is also very common in other European countries, for example in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Belgium. But differences in the influence of situational factors and, thus, also of viewing habits might be expected in countries that have more competitive news markets, such as the United States. A larger number of program alternatives should also influence viewer's program selection. Switching between channels might be more relevant where more choice opportunities are available. On the other hand, this might not be the case; the more, and the more different channels there are, the less necessary it might be to stop watching somewhat unsatisfactory programs (Cooper, 1996). Internationally comparative research could reveal to what extent the proportional strength of

motivational and situational determinants found in a European context is conditional on a specific news environment.

The context, although very important, does not have an equal impact on all viewers. Personal interests can not only strengthen, but also weaken the influence of situational aspects. For instance, especially the strongly interested viewers spent more time watching the news if they also watched more TV in general. Thus, viewers might indeed allow programming and other situational constraints to define their viewing behavior, but only as long as they actually like what they watch.

In certain viewing situations, however, viewers seem to be less particular about which programs they watch. Viewers who are less interested in the news are more willing to continue watching it if they do not want to miss the program that comes on after the newscast. Uninterested viewers are also encouraged by co-viewers to watch the news. For them, the social aspects of watching together (e.g., in a family setting) might be more important than the actual content that is watched. The strong impact of social viewing is surprising, because viewers were found to increasingly watch TV alone (SKO, 2009). Little is known about country-specific differences regarding social versus solitary news exposure, or about the effects of programming strategies.

There is concern about decreasing news consumption, especially by the younger generation. Results indicate that the young might watch the news for reasons other than wanting to learn about political affairs. But also their news encounters are influenced substantially by co-viewing and other situational aspects. That young viewers nevertheless watch less news might be explained by their less stable viewing habits (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2010; Köcher, 2008). Since they spend less time watching TV, they are also less likely to come across the news accidentally.

This study focused on the traditional news format. To obtain a more complete picture, increasingly popular news shows that mainly cover human interest issues, celebrities, or local events should also be investigated (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Prior, 2007). To what extent have alternative news formats replaced the traditional ones? And for whom? This study shows that, to answer such questions, accounting for motivational and situational factors, and their interrelationships, is a promising way to integrate two traditions of audience research and thus further enhance an understanding of audience behavior.

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Appendix

Table 3.A1: Multivariate Regression Models on News Exposure

Predictors	News Viewing at All		News Viewing Days		News Viewing Duration			
					IRR		IRR	
	OR		B		Unconditional		Conditional	
Individual Characteristics								
Age	1.04***	(0.01)	0.04***	(0.00)	1.02***	(0.00)	1.02***	(0.00)
Gender (male)	0.94	(0.12)	0.02	(0.06)	1.00	(0.04)	1.00	(0.04)
Education	1.10*	(0.05)	0.02	(0.02)	1.05**	(0.02)	1.05**	(0.02)
Newspaper	0.92	(0.22)	-0.10	(0.12)	0.83*	(0.06)	0.84*	(0.07)
Free daily	0.93	(0.10)	0.00	(0.06)	1.02	(0.04)	1.02	(0.04)
Internet	0.99	(0.04)	-0.01	(0.02)	1.00	(0.02)	1.00	(0.02)
Motivational Factors								
Political interest	1.26*	(0.13)	0.18***	(0.05)	1.17***	(0.04)	1.17***	(0.04)
News preference	1.65***	(0.17)	0.32***	(0.06)	1.32***	(0.05)	1.29***	(0.06)
Political interest* news preference							0.98	(0.06)
Switching	1.24*	(0.12)	0.16**	(0.05)	1.18***	(0.04)	1.15***	(0.04)
Appointment viewing			1.27***	(0.11)	4.64***	(0.38)	4.52***	(0.38)

(Continued)

Predictors	News Viewing at All	News Viewing Days	News Viewing Duration	
			IRR	IRR
	OR	B	Unconditional	Conditional
Situational Factors				
Availability	1.09***(0.01)	0.04***(0.00)	1.02***(0.00)	1.02***(0.00)
Availability* political interest				1.01* (0.00)
Availability* news preference				0.99 (0.00)
Co-viewers		0.56***(0.04)	2.98***(0.13)	2.80***(0.12)
Co-viewers* political interest				0.88 (0.06)
Co-viewers* news preference				0.70***(0.05)
Lead-in		2.38***(0.18)	19.82***(2.58)	19.33***(2.51)
Lead-in* political interest				0.86 (0.17)
Lead-in* news preference				0.91 (0.18)
Lead-out		0.13 (0.14)	2.14***(0.23)	2.03***(0.22)
Lead-out* political interest				0.73* (0.11)
Lead-out* news preference				0.95 (0.14)
Constant	-3.31 (0.38)	-2.34 (0.21)	-1.51 (0.16)	3.66 (0.02)
Lnalpha			-0.03 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Alpha			0.96 (0.03)	0.95 (0.03)
Adjusted R^2		0.564		
Cragg-Uhler/ Nagelkerke R^2	0.351		0.598	0.610

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. OR = odds ratio of logistic regression; B = unstandardized coefficients of OLS regression; IRR = incidence rate ratios of negative-binomial regression. Interactions terms of political interest and news preference with the situational factors are added in the conditional model of news-viewing duration.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Notes

[1] Question wording translated from Dutch: "The following questions concern your interest for different issues. In a moment, I will name some issues. Could you indicate for each issue whether you are strongly, fairly, or little interested? Politics: Could you indicate how much you are interested in that?" This scale was converted to "1" low, "2" medium, and "3" strong political interest.

[2] Translated question wording: "To what extent are you interested in the following television programs? You can choose from: highly, somewhat, hardly, and absolutely not interested. News and current affairs (such as J*ournaal*, *RTL Nieuws*, and *Netwerk*)." "Absolutely not interested" had a relative frequency of less then 2% and was collapsed with category "little interested" with negligible effects on the results. The scale was converted so that "1" was low, "2" medium, and "3" strong news preference.

[3] Education comprised six categories that comply with the Dutch educational system.

[4] Viewers born after 1977 were regarded as members of the "Net generation" who grew up with new technologies, especially the Internet, and supposedly have developed different patterns of media use. Six hundred and one of the study's respondents matched this age group.