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

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**Publication date**  
2011

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Wonneberger, A. (2011). *Coping with diversity: exposure to public-affairs TV in a changing viewing environment*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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## CHAPTER 4

### Staying Tuned. TV-News Audiences in the Netherlands 1988 – 2010

*This article has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media.*

#### **Abstract**

With an abundance of TV channels available, viewers with no interest in politics might escape from news watching completely. But whether this is true depends on how viewers deal with an increasing complexity. Do people follow their viewing motives and preferences even more or do unintentional choices prevail? Using people-meter data, the authors studied news exposure over the last two decades in the Netherlands. They found increasing levels of news exposure more strongly influenced by the viewing context than by motivations of the viewers. The results showed how a mix of public-service and commercial news still can reach wide audiences today.

Keeping up with current affairs is an integral part of political or civic engagement (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2004). The relationship between exposure to political information and engagement was found to be mutual. While politically interested and engaged citizens tend to seek out current affairs information, exposure to it also reinforces political interest (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Especially, news programs on TV were considered effective for their ability to reach large audiences across socioeconomic groups and varying degrees of political interest and sophistication. Audiovisual forms of presentation are assumed to aid attention and learning of the less interested more easily than other news sources (e.g., Grabe, Kamhawi, & Yegiyani, 2009; Kwak, 1999).

Because of this special status of TV news, shrinking news audiences often triggered worries about audience fragmentation and specialization. Fragmentation refers to a general decline of audience shares. With an increasing number of viewing alternatives, TV exposure is less concentrated but more diversified over the available options. Audience polarization, or specialization, in contrast, describes the trend that audiences of specific channels or programs become more exclusive. So, individual viewers would watch more of the same content that differs from content watched by others (Fewksbury, 2005; Webster, 1986, 2005). The potential of TV news programs to reach wide audiences today depends on how viewers deal with the increase of viewing alternatives. More available channels may inevitably lead to less news viewing. But are the viewers that follow the news primarily those who are also interested and motivated to watch? TV viewing was often regarded as a low-involvement activity (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Television may be used for relaxation and often has its fixed times and functions in everyday routines. Viewers who are not intentionally selecting programs might be “trapped” by programming strategies to watch programs that do not match their interests (Schoenbach, 2008; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002, 2004). In this way, political information on TV could reach viewers who are not politically interested and who would not follow the news via other sources.

The present study investigates changes in news exposure during the last two decades in the Netherlands. Its aim is to compare decisions to watch the news in both a high-choice environment and a low-choice one. With both public-service and commercial programs, the Dutch national news programming is typical for North-Western European countries. The authors studied news-viewing situations from 1988 to 2010 using Dutch people-meter data on the level of individual viewers. These unique data allowed the study of news exposure on an equal level of precision over time.

## Fragmentation and Specialization of News Audiences

With more available channels and alternative programs to watch, almost inevitably audience shares of specific channels or programs diminish. For the United States, audience fragmentation was described as a result of the introduction of cable TV, and later, of digital TV (Webster, 1986, 2005). In Europe, the introduction of commercial channels in addition to public broadcasting as well as the advent of digital TV resulted in increased fragmentation (Gerhards & Klingler, 2005).

Fragmentation also may lead to smaller audiences of news programs. This was observed in the United States as well as in some European countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press [Pew], 2009; Zubayr & Geese, 2009). However, Hewlett (2009) noted that British news programs were less influenced by fragmentation compared to other genres. The main Dutch evening newscast still ranked second among programs that attracted the largest audiences in the Netherlands in 2010 (Stichting KijkOnderzoek [SKO], 2011). Overall, the number of Dutch news and current-affairs programming doubled between 1987 and 1997 (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). But if audience shares in general are dropping, viewers may watch less news today than 20 years ago. The first aim of this study was to compare levels of news exposure over time. It expects that viewers watch less news when more options are available:

H<sub>1</sub>: The increasing number of available channels has led to a decrease of news exposure in the Netherlands.

There are two ways in which behavior of individual viewers might lead to fragmentation of aggregated audiences, and thus, two consequences for patterns of news exposure. First, all viewers may spend less time watching news programs since they use the available alternatives for a more diverse TV consumption. Second, there may be an increasing difference between news-seekers—viewers who watch the news regularly, and news avoiders—viewers who abstain from the news (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2007). The latter case refers to audience polarization or specialization. Audiences are specialized if there is little overlap between different programs or channels (Webster, 1986, 2005).

Specialization of news audiences is regarded as problematic since this might potentially increase gaps of political knowledge, interest, or involvement (Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2002; Tewksbury, 2005). It is assumed that with more viewing

alternatives, political content on TV increasingly is received by viewers who are interested in politics and who actively seek out information on news and current affairs, whereas viewers less interested in politics may turn to alternative programs.

In the United States for instance, the average duration of exposure to TV news was relatively stable from 1994 to 2010, at about 30 minutes a day. But the number of those regularly watching the news dropped from 72% in 1994 to 58% in 2010 (Pew, 2010). Thus, more opportunities to watch but also to avoid news programs resulted in growing differences between individual levels of news exposure (Prior, 2007). So far, there is little empirical evidence on specialization of news audiences in Europe, and in the Netherlands in particular, which leads to the following research question:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Has an increase in the number of available channels led to a specialization of news audiences in the Netherlands?

### **News Exposure between Motivated Choice and Situational Cues**

Whether an increasing variety of programs leads to more people seeking or avoiding news programs does not depend only on the channels available but also on how viewers make their program choices. The scenario of specialization and, thus, of an increasing difference between individual levels of news exposure is based on the assumption that viewers do not watch news programs accidentally but because they are motivated to do so. Viewers may watch the news because they want to keep up with current affairs. This may be motivated by an interest in politics – or by a broader interest in public affairs or in more specific topics such as sports or the weather forecast (e.g., Zubayr & Geese, 2009).

In addition to viewing motives, the viewing situation defines a structure that can further or restrict news exposure (Webster, 2009). Viewers may be encouraged to choose programs according to their preferences or accidentally may encounter news programs independently of their likes or dislikes. An integrative approach on viewing behavior, therefore, regards viewing decisions as influenced by both motivational and situational factors (Cooper & Tang, 2009; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2011).

For Dutch viewers in 2007, Wonneberger and colleagues (2011) found that news watching was strongly related to situational factors such as watching TV at all, watching a specific channel, or watching together with others. But has the relevance of motivational and situational factors changed compared to a low-

choice situation? Depending on how viewers respond to a high-choice environment, their viewing motivations might actually have become more important or less important relative to situational cues. If viewers now make use of their extended choice opportunities by selecting those programs that best match their interests more often, news audiences would be more specialized. Or, the audience might be overwhelmed by the diversity of the new programming. As a reaction, heuristics may develop to deal with the abundance of choice, for instance, viewing routines, or a stronger focus on favorite channels. An increasing impact of such situational cues would explain an absence of audience specialization.

### *Motivated Viewing*

The assumption that viewers follow their interests more consciously in a high-choice environment is based on the idea of rational viewing decisions. Viewers are assumed to maximize their viewing utility by choosing programs that best match their interests. Models of program choice regard preferences for specific programs or genres as the main motive of viewing decisions (e.g., Klövekorn, 2002; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). The uses-and-gratifications approach to media exposure offers an extensive understanding of how viewers select programs according to gratifications sought, and how gratifications obtained influence future choices (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982; Rubin, 1983). Since not all available alternatives can be evaluated, choices may be based on bounded rationality (March & Simon, 1958). Instead of seeking an optimal program choice, the first alternative may be chosen that proves to be satisfying enough.

To maximize or satisfy interests, viewers need to be aware of their needs and preferences and seek to find the best or quickest match when making a choice. Thus, viewers have to regard the programming important enough to be willing to switch between channels to seek out the most interesting program available. Viewers might even make appointments to watch the news. Especially evening newscasts can be considered as “anchor points” since many viewers start watching TV to not miss the news of the day (Wonneberger et al., 2011).

### *Situational Cues*

An alternative approach to highly selective audiences emphasizes watching TV as a low-cost activity (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999). Instead of choosing programs intentionally, viewers are regarded as strongly influenced by their viewing

environment and may, for instance, accidentally encounter programs that are scheduled cleverly at specific times or on specific channels (Cooper, 1996).

An increase of program alternatives would mean that viewers need to adapt their strategy for “low-cost” choices to efficiently deal with an increasing number of program alternatives. Viewing habits help limit the cognitive work necessary for viewing decisions. Habits are, thereby, understood 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. If viewing habits become more important to deal with an increasingly complex viewing environment, the importance of such situational cues should increase.

What are those cues? First of all, viewers need to be *available* for watching TV to be exposed to specific programs at specific times (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). When they watch, most of the time viewers are not aware of the complete programming but use a limited *repertoire of channels* and programs from which they choose (Heeter, 1985; Yuan & Webster, 2006). However, viewers may not actively switch between those channels looking for interesting programs all the time. Adjacent programs on the same channel control inheritance effects on the audience composition of a program (Cooper, 1996). A program scheduled on the same channel preceding a newscast has a *lead-in effect* if viewers stay on that channel and thus encounter that newscast. *Lead-out effect* refers to viewers who watch the news because they do not want to miss the start of the program thereafter (Boemer, 1987; Marcinkowski, 2010). Finally, *co-viewers* who are present in a viewing situation take part in viewing decisions or may overrule a person’s program choice (Webster & Wakshlag, 1982).

### *Fluctuations over Time*

More viewing alternatives might lead to a stronger influence of either viewing motives or of situational factors on news exposure, or of both. But these two types of factors also influence each other. So, in Giddens’ terms they can be thought of as a “duality” (Webster, 2009). Program preferences develop and change as a result of specific viewing situations. Positive viewing experiences might support the confirmation of viewing habits or the development of new ones. Situational cues then become relevant to activate those habits. Moreover, broadcasters take viewing preferences into account to adjust programming schedules (Webster, 2009). Such a feedback mechanism may increase, for instance, *lead-in effects*. A third aim of this

study is to compare the relative strength of the two types of influencing factors over time. Moreover, which specific factors are most relevant and did their relative influence change?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Has the increase of viewing opportunities led to an increasing influence either of viewing motivations or situational factors on news exposure or both?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Which specific factors were particularly important, and did their relevance change between 1988 and 2010?

### Data

The study used Dutch people-meter data that contain unobtrusively and electronically recorded information about individual viewing behavior. Since 1987, the national television audience research was conducted by *Continu KijkOnderzoek* (CKO), and since 2002 by *Stichting KijkOnderzoek* (SKO). *Intomart GfK* collected the audience data. People meters were installed in every participating household of a representative national panel. Every time panel members watched TV, they needed to register with a remote control. Then the channels watched and the exact moments of switching were recorded electronically. The quality of these measures was carefully monitored (SKO, 2008).

The participating households were selected from an *establishment survey* according to their representation of 100 subgroups whose distributions were based on the “Golden Standard,” a tool of the Market Research Association (*MarketOnderzoekAssociatie*) for representative sampling in the Netherlands, and prior to 2007 by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics and the biennial GfK MiniCensus. A household could participate for a maximum of 5 years. An annual survey among all panel members provided background information such as sociodemographics, political interest, and media use behavior about each household and individual member (SKO, 2008). The programming of the major Dutch channels was analyzed by *TV Times*, since 2007 *MediaXim Nederland*, so that watching a channel at a particular time could be allocated to a specific program.

The sample comprised one week in March of every second year from 1988 to 2010. TV viewing during this time of the year was little affected by weather, holidays, or changes of programming schedules. Furthermore, no major news events occurred in these weeks. Survey-, viewing-, and program data were

combined from the people-meter system. All panel members 13 and older were included, resulting in a total sample size of  $N = 22,379$  viewers.

### The Dutch TV-News Environment

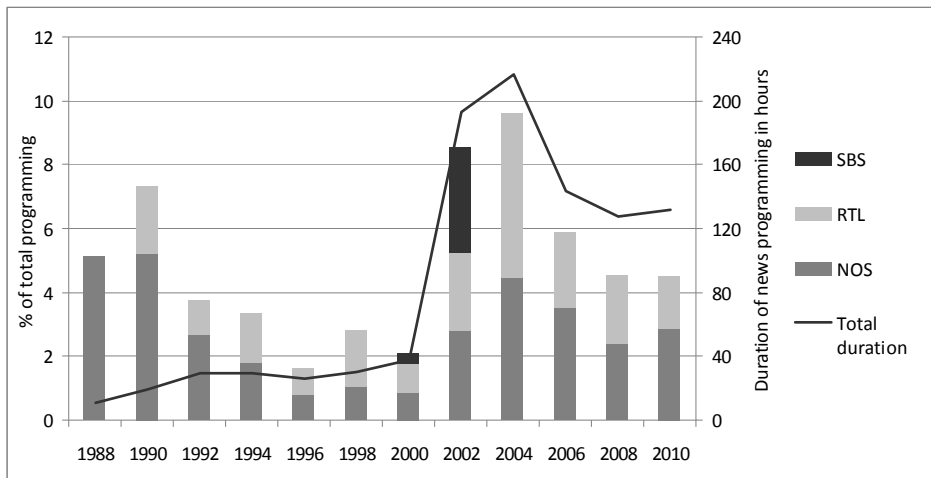
With its mix of public service and commercial channels, Dutch programming is typical for democratic corporatist media systems of North-Western European countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). TV was available to about 98% of all households throughout the research period. The average viewing time increased from 133 minutes per day in 1988 to 191 minutes in 2010. The national TV market became generally more competitive, with an increasing number of news programs broadcast during that time.

In 1988, national TV was dominated by three public-service channels. In the years to follow, the first Dutch commercial channels were introduced. With 13 national commercial channels, a first peak was reached in 1998. Also more foreign and local TV channels became available. In 2010, about 58% of all TV households received digital TV, and 50 or more channels. The analog households had access to 30 channels on average. But despite more channels, the concentration of the market remained relatively high. Both in 2002 and 2010, about 78% of the market share could be ascribed to 9 channels (SKO, 2011, 2004). This also was reflected by viewers' channel repertoires that comprised 10 channels on average in both years (see below).

The national news market expanded but remained concentrated on a few channels. Figure 4.1 shows the proportions of broadcasting time devoted to news, the distribution among broadcasters, and the overall duration of the news programming in 1 week per year. Newscasts of regional and foreign channels were of only minor importance for the national news market. Therefore, this study focused on national news.

In the public-service only situation, *NOS Journaal* was the only national news program with one main newscast in the evening and about 10 shorter bulletins and reruns throughout the day. RTL 4 introduced a daily newscast, *RTL Nieuws*, in 1989. Although this became increasingly popular, *NOS Journaal* still had higher audience shares in 2010 (SKO, 2011). These two programs not only dominated the TV-news market but were also comparable (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). Their main evening bulletins of about 20–30 minutes included 10–15 items devoted to current-affairs, 1 or 2 human-interest stories, and the weather forecast. Several reruns and short bulletins were scheduled throughout the day.

**Figure 4.1:** Proportion of News Programs Relative to the Duration of Total Programming per Broadcaster per Year and Total Hours of News Programming per Week



In 1999, a second commercial broadcaster (SBS Nederland) entered the market with *Het Nieuws* on channels SBS 6 and Net 5. When SBS increased the frequency of its newscasts to over 20 bulletins of 10–30 minutes per day in 2002, NOS and RTL also expanded their news programming. RTL launched a special program covering business and economy issues along with general public affairs in 2001. Although SBS opted out of the news market after 2002, the total amount of news programming increased further in 2004 and decreased thereafter. An additional NOS program *Journal op 3* was launched in 2007 with 4–5 bulletins per day. In 2010, NOS had kept its leading position—due also to an increasing number of bulletins of about 5–10 minutes (up to 4 times per hour), especially during the mornings and early afternoons. The time devoted to news by all broadcasters increased from 11 hours per week in 1988 to 132 hours in 2010. The proportion of newscasts on the total programming, however, dropped from almost 10% during the period of competition to about 5%.

### Measures

**News exposure** was operationalized as the exact minutes that a viewer watched news during one week. A threshold of watching at least 5 minutes of a news program was applied. Watching the main evening news programs and the shorter bulletins was included.

**Motivational factors** comprised political interest as an indicator of interest in political information as well as indicators of viewers' readiness to select programs intentionally. In the annual survey, *political interest* was measured on a 3-point scale.<sup>1</sup> To determine a viewer's *switching rate*, the number of changes between channels was divided by the total number of programs watched. A viewer's score for *appointment viewing* resulted from the frequency of starting to watch TV not longer than 5 minutes before watching a newscast divided by the total number of newscasts watched by that viewer.

**Situational factors** were viewer availability, channel repertoire, lead-in and lead-out effects, and co-viewing. *Availability* was the number of hours a viewer watched TV during 1 week. To ensure independence from the dependent variable, the time spent watching news was excluded. A viewer's channel *repertoire* was determined by the number of channels watched for at least 5 minutes during 1 week. Programs with a *lead-in effect* were those broadcast prior to a news program on the same channel and watched for at least 5 minutes. Since viewers may not watch a lead-in program entirely, the authors calculated the proportion of a *lead-in* program watched by a viewer. The average proportion of all *lead-in* programs viewed in 1 week was a viewer's *lead-in* score. Similarly, *lead-out* scores were the average proportions viewed of programs scheduled on the same channel and watched for at least 5 minutes after a newscast. *Co-viewers* were defined by the average number of people who were present during news exposure.

**Viewer characteristics** were found to make a difference in news viewing behavior. The study controlled for factors such as *age*, *gender*, and *education*<sup>2</sup> as well as *newspaper* consumption.<sup>3</sup>

## Results

### News Exposure over Time

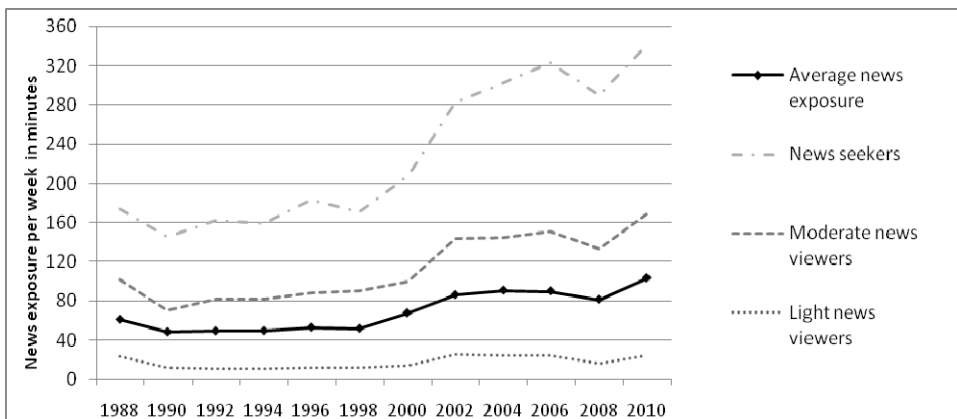
Dutch viewers spent increasingly more time watching news with average durations of 61 minutes per week in 1988 to 103 minutes in 2010 (see Figure 4.2). Three phases could be discerned: 1) a decrease from 1988 to 1990, 2) a stable period between 1990 and 1998, and 3) a phase of increasing news exposure from 2000 to 2010. These periods could be related to changes of the TV market in general and of news programming in particular.

When new channels were introduced between 1988 and 1990, average news exposure decreased from 61 to 48 minutes per week. From 1990 to 1998, even

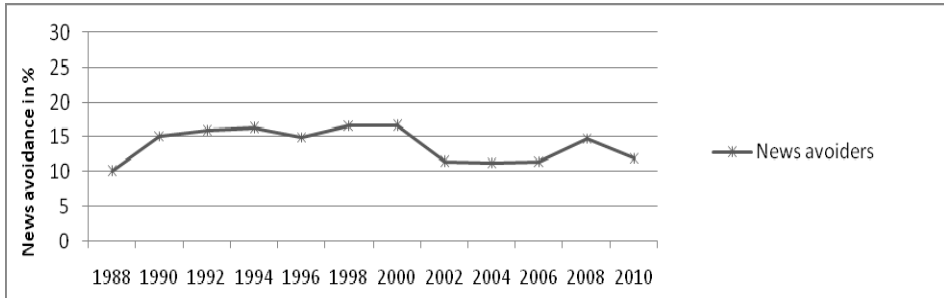
though the overall proportion of news programming decreased, levels of news exposure were relatively stable. After 1998, news exposure started to increase. When SBS launched a new news program in 2000, the exposure level was higher than in 1990 with an average duration of 67 minutes. Although news programming was reduced after 2004, news exposure further increased to an average of 103 minutes per week in 2010. Therefore, H<sub>1</sub> can be rejected. With more channels and more news programs available, the general level of news exposure did not decrease but rather increased in the Netherlands. Specific news programs probably suffered from audience fragmentation but the genre as a whole was used more extensively over time.

Parallel to increasing average levels of news exposure, the variation between viewers increased over time. Of course, not all viewers used the increasing possibilities to watch news to the same extent. The strongest increase of news exposure could be ascribed to news seekers and moderate news viewers (Figure 4.2). But to what extent did viewers turn away from the news more often? The exposure level of light news viewers remained relatively stable over time. When more channels became available, the proportion of viewers who watched no news at all first increased from 10% in 1988 to 17% in 2000. With more competition on the news market after 2000, the proportion of avoiders dropped again. About 88% of the Dutch still watched the news at least 1 day a week in 2010 compared to 90% in 1988 (Figure 4.3). The answer to RQ<sub>1</sub> was therefore that the degree of specialization of news audiences in the Netherlands was very low.

**Figure 4.2:** News Exposure over Time



Note: Dashed lines show maximum levels of news exposure for lower 25% of the sample (light news viewers), up to 75% (moderate news viewers), and up to 95% of the sample (news seekers).

**Figure 4.3:** News Avoidance over Time

*Note:* Percentage of viewers per year who were not exposed to at least one news program during one week.

### Explaining News Exposure

How did the impact of viewing motives and the viewing context change with the transformation to a high-choice environment? Stepwise regression on news exposure for each year was applied to compare the different predictors. Since the distribution of the viewing duration was right-skewed, negative binomial regression was employed. Sociodemographics and newspaper use were first entered into the models. The models were then estimated with motivational factors in addition to the individual characteristics and, finally with situational factors in addition to the individual characteristic, before estimating the full models. Thus, the contributions of motivational and situational factors were controlled for other viewer characteristics. Shifts in the relative importance of motivational and situational predictors should become visible in the changes in R-Square caused by each block of predictors (Table 4.1).

Consistent over time, the situational factors were relatively more important compared to the motivational ones. While the situational variables led to changes in pseudo R-Square between .20 and .30, the respective scores for viewing motivations were below .10. However, parallel to changes of the amount of news programming, the relative strength of motivational and situational factors changed. More news programming after 1988 and 2000 was associated with greater changes in R-square for situational factors and smaller changes for motivational factors. When the share of news programming dropped again after 1990 and 2004, viewing motivations became more relevant. Therefore, the answer to RQ<sub>2</sub> was that situational factors were more relevant than viewing motivations. The relative strength of situational and motivational factors was dependent on the amount of news programming.

**Table 4.1:** Negative-Binomial Regression Models on News Viewing Duration: Contributions of Motivational and Situational Factors per Year

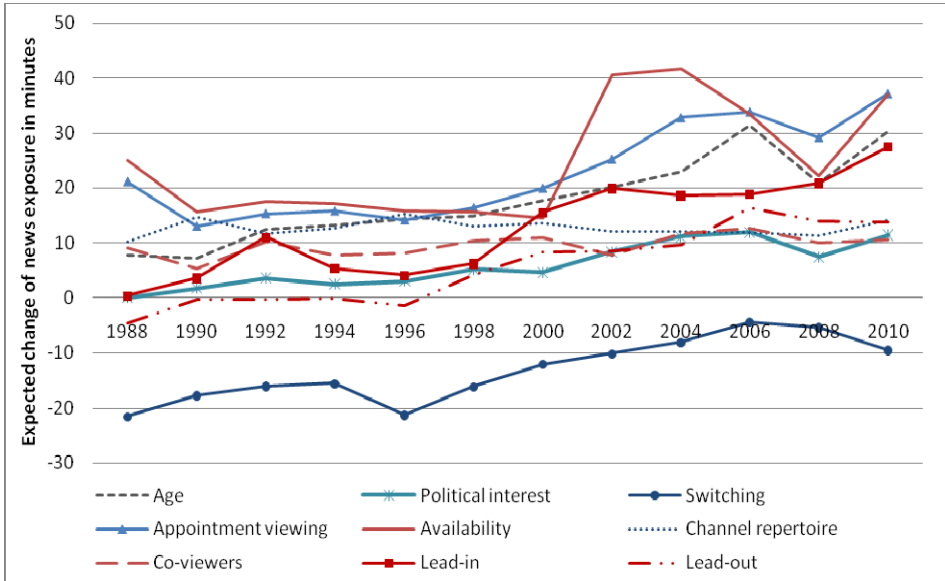
Cragg & Uhler's												
R-Square	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Individual												
characteristics	0.054	0.128	0.141	0.124	0.147	0.141	0.140	0.122	0.127	0.149	0.152	0.169
Motivational												
factors	0.127	0.180	0.183	0.180	0.229	0.225	0.207	0.177	0.177	0.212	0.240	0.241
R-change	0.073	0.052	0.042	0.056	0.082	0.084	0.067	0.055	0.050	0.063	0.088	0.072
Situational												
factors	0.224	0.32	0.319	0.286	0.312	0.315	0.330	0.373	0.336	0.335	0.369	0.376
R-change	0.170	0.192	0.178	0.162	0.165	0.174	0.190	0.251	0.209	0.186	0.217	0.207
Total R-Square	0.354	0.464	0.431	0.385	0.441	0.428	0.411	0.439	0.423	0.431	0.491	0.474
N	766	1,274	1,202	1,373	1,922	1,900	2,194	2,345	2,325	2,390	2,412	2,306

*Note:* Individual characteristics: age, gender, education, newspaper use. Motivational factors: political interest, switching, appointment viewing. Situational factors: availability, co-viewing, channel repertoire, lead-in, lead-out. Changes in R-square denote model improvement relative to individual characteristics.

Which of the predictors were particularly important? And how did their influence behave over time? To compare the specific effects of individual predictors, statistical simulation was used to yield quantities of interest from the regression coefficients that could be meaningfully interpreted (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). The authors calculated the expected changes in minutes of news viewing that would be expected for a predictor change from half a standard deviation below to half a standard deviation above its mean. All other predictors were held constant at their means (Table 4.A1). Based on these average changes in news exposure, Figure 4.4 shows how the impact of one variable relative to the strength of the other variables changed over the years and was used to answer RQ<sub>3</sub>.

Over the whole period, viewer *availability* and appointment viewing were the most important predictors, followed by age. The difference in news viewing duration between light and heavy TV viewers ranged from about 16 minutes in the early years to about 40 minutes per week in the later years. Frequent appointment viewers spent up to 37 minutes more watching news. The difference between younger and older viewers increased from about 7 to more than 30 viewing minutes.

**Figure 4.4:** Trends and Relative Strength of Effects on News Exposure, 1988–2010



*Note:* Expected changes in viewing minutes per predictor per year (see Table 4.A1). Reading example: In 2010, viewers with high levels of availability (half a standard deviation above the mean) spent about 37 minutes per week longer on news compared to viewers with an availability of half a standard deviation below the mean. In contrast, viewers strongly interested in politics spent about 12 minutes longer on news programs per week than viewers with a low interest.

*Lead-in* was the factor with the highest increase of relevance. Watching higher proportions of programs prior to news on the same channel had no effect in the early years but made a difference up to 28 minutes in 2010. Similarly but less strong, the *lead-out effect* was significant only after 1996. In 2010, watching higher proportions of subsequent programs made a difference of about 14 minutes of news viewing. The two remaining situational factors, *channel repertoire* and *co-viewing* had a moderate positive influence on news viewing with some fluctuations over the years.

While appointment viewing was the most important motivational factor (see above), the impact of political interest increased over time resulting in a difference of 12 news-viewing minutes between “*little*” and more “*strongly interested*” viewers in 2010. Switching was the only factor with a negative impact on news exposure throughout the research period. Thus, changing channels was often associated with less exposure.

Age was most influential of all individual characteristics. Education showed a positive but small effect on the duration of news viewing in most years. Gender and reading newspapers were not relevant except for some minor influences in some years.

The periods that were characterized by an increase of news programs and levels of news exposure coincided with changes in the relevance of motivational and situational factors. With more channels between 1988 and 1990, the impact of availability and appointment viewing decreased. Although availability still was relevant, viewing time was more often allocated to programs other than the news and the routine of turning on the TV to watch news, became less important. With the increase of news exposure after 1998, the influence of most factors also increased again. Only the negative relationship of switching and news exposure in the early years faded away over time. Although switching between channels occurred more often in general, viewers avoided news programs less often in the later years. The impact of availability, in contrast, strongly increased after 2000 when more news programs on more channels were broadcast.

### Conclusions and Discussion

Media advocates were concerned that viewers who are less interested in politics would escape from news watching given the chance to do so. Increasing opportunities for viewers to choose alternative programs instead of watching the news were primarily attributed to drop in news audiences. The authors analyzed news exposure from 1988 to 2010 in the Netherlands to study the transformation from a low-choice to a high-choice viewing environment in a democratic-corporatist media system. They found that instead of abstaining or escaping from the news, the time spent watching increased. Throughout the last two decades, news exposure was more strongly influenced by the viewing context than by motivations. Explanations for high levels of exposure might, therefore, be found in characteristics of the Dutch viewing environment as well as of audience behavior.

The factors that clearly stand out regarding their impact on news exposure are viewer *availability*, *appointment viewing*, *lead-in*, and age. Despite a considerable increase of the number of available channels, viewers to some extent still watch news simply because they watch TV. One explanation may be attributed to the increasing amount of time that the Dutch spend watching TV per day.

Although more available channels would allow viewers to abstain from the news, the authors actually discovered that viewers avoid news by switching to a

different channel less often when they have more viewing alternatives. People react to the increasing complexity by sticking to one channel more often, thereby giving importance to channel loyalty when more alternatives are available (Webster, 2005).

The still strong position of news programs on Dutch TV today may also result from the long tradition of public-service TV. Public broadcasting has a good reputation as a reliable source for news and current-affairs programming in the Netherlands (Peeters, 2002). Moreover, the audience is accustomed to the news programs and their schedules. An increasing “trap” effect (Schoenbach, 2008) might also be the result of an increasing number of short news bulletins. Simultaneous scheduling of these bulletins on commercial and public service channels during daytime, made it simply more likely to encounter news when watching TV. These bulletins might also just be short enough so that viewers do not find it necessary to change channels even if they were not initially interested in watching news. Moreover, a brief update on current issues and events along with appealing presentation features might even be regarded as valuable and entertaining. So, the Dutch news environment seems to stimulate news exposure as a side-effect of watching TV as well as selective viewing. Maintaining both the interested and less interested news audiences yielded high and even increasing levels of news exposure.

The increasing amount of news exposure did not apply in the same way to younger viewers. Ultimately, generational differences could lead to a declining relevance of TV as a public-affairs medium. The main concern, however, is whether youths simply rely on different media or whether they tune out completely with possible consequences like decreasing political knowledge and participation (Mindich, 2004). Although new media gain importance for youths in the Netherlands, television is still their primary source for news and current-affairs information (Van Cauwenberge, Beentjes, & d’Haenens, 2011). Therefore, their use of different news sources should be studied more extensively.

This study’s results point to a different scenario than has been described for the United States. In a politically polarized news environment, viewers are more inclined to select news programs according to their political preferences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). With an increase of program alternatives, especially, those who only are moderately or less interested in politics abstain from news watching as well as from voting (Prior, 2007). With the news market ideologically far less polarized than the one in the United States, politically less interested viewers seem to be less discouraged to watch the news and, therewith, less inclined to abstain from the

news when the number of viewing alternatives increase. As a result, news audiences are less fragmented and specialized.

To date, news consumption in the Netherlands is still dominated by linear media and their specific situational constraints (Van der Burg, Lauf, & Negenborn, 2011). But most likely, online news exposure will increase. In the United States, for instance, 44% of the public uses new media regularly as a news source (Pew, 2010). What implications does the increasing importance of non-linear media have for the overall level and degree of fragmentation of news exposure? Certainly, both the number of alternatives and independence from schedules increase. But this does not automatically result in audience autonomy. Online news, too, seems to be encountered accidentally (Tewksbury, Weaver, Maddex, 2001). Or new recommendation systems on the Internet facilitate and narrow choices at the same time (Webster, 2011). Future research should address the relative strength of motivational and situational factors in increasingly complex choice situations.

Dutch news programs still are an important source for political information, even in a high-choice viewing environment. Newscasts that present a convenient overview of public affairs are probably easily integrated into viewing diets without demanding much effort from the viewers. The study's results indicate that a mix of public-service and commercial news as found in Western Europe has the ability to reach large audiences. News audiences stay tuned because of the combination of an enabling viewing environment and an audience that relies on TV and has strong viewing habits.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Based on the question (translated from Dutch): “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?”

<sup>2</sup> Education was measured by six categories according to the Dutch educational system.

<sup>3</sup> For 1988 to 1998, *newspaper use* was measured by the number of days per week that respondents reported to read a newspaper. For 2000 to 2010, an additive-index score was calculated consisting of items of the days per week that different national and regional newspapers were read.

## Appendix

**Table 4.A1:** Changes of Expected News-Viewing Minutes [and 95% Confidence Intervals] for Predictor Changes from ½ Standard Deviation below to ½ Standard Deviation above the Mean

	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996	1998
Age	7.7 [3.3; 1.2]	7.1 [4.9; 9.5]	12.5 [9.6; 15.1]	13.2 [10.9; 15.5]	14.3 [12.0; 16.5]	14.8 [12.8; 16.9]
Gender (male)				-3.2 [-5.1; -1.3]		-2.0 [-3.7; -0.4]
Education		2.5 [0.5; 4.6]	3.2 [0.7; 5.7]	2.5 [0.1; 5.0]		
Newspaper						
Political interest			3.6 [1.3; 6.1]	2.5 [0.3; 4.3]	3.0 [1.1; 4.8]	5.2 [3.4; 7.0]
Switching	-21.5 [-29.6; -13.7]	-17.8 [-20.8; -14.6]	-16.1 [-19.3; -12.3]	-15.6 [-18.6; -12.3]	-21.3 [-24.1; -18.7]	-16.1 [-19.0; -13.0]
Appointment viewing	21.2 [16.5; 26.1]	13.1 [10.8; 15.2]	15.4 [12.6; 18.2]	15.8 [13.3; 18.3]	14.2 [12.0; 16.3]	16.4 [14.1; 18.8]
Availability	25.1 [18.4; 31.8]	15.6 [13.0; 18.4]	17.7 [13.6; 22.2]	17.2 [14.0; 20.8]	16.0 [13.4; 18.4]	15.7 [12.8; 18.8]
Channel repertoire	10.2 [3.1; 17.9]	14.7 [11.2; 18.1]	11.8 [7.8; 15.3]	12.7 [9.3; 15.6]	15.3 [12.0; 18.7]	13.0 [9.6; 16.2]
Co-viewers	9.1 [5.6; 12.7]	5.3 [3.5; 7.0]	10.2 [7.5; 13.1]	7.7 [5.1; 10.2]	8.1 [5.7; 10.6]	10.4 [7.8; 13.2]
Lead-in		3.6 [1.6; 5.4]	11.1 [8.3; 13.7]	5.4 [2.8; 7.9]	4.1 [2.1; 6.2]	6.2 [4.1; 8.5]
Lead-out						4.2 [2.0; 6.2]

*Note:* Based on negative-binomial regression models per year (see Table 4.1), statistical simulation was employed to calculate average changes of expected values and associated confidence intervals (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). Only significant changes are displayed ( $p < .05$ ).

*(Continued)*

	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Age	17.6 [15.1; 20.1]	20.0 [16.8; 23.3]	22.9 [19.3; 26.6]	31.3 [28.0; 34.8]	20.7 [17.1; 24.1]	30.3 [25.8; 34.4]
Gender (male)					-3.9 [-0.7; -1.1]	
Education	3.9 [1.8; 6.1]	7.4 [4.5; 10.2]	5.0 [2.0; 7.9]	5.2 [2.2; 8.3]	6.4 [3.4; 9.4]	5.0 [1.1; 9.1]
Newspaper			4.9 [1.7; 8.4]			
Political interest	4.6 [2.5; 6.8]	8.4 [5.5; 11.3]	11.1 [7.9; 14.2]	11.9 [8.8; 15.1]	7.5 [3.9; 10.7]	11.5 [7.1; 15.3]
Switching	-12.0 [-15.9; -8.4]	-10.1 [-14.7; -5.4]	-8.0 [-13.6; -20.4]			-9.5 [-16.6; -2.2]
Appointment viewing	20.0 [17.1; 22.7]	25.3 [21.5; 29.1]	32.8 [28.4; 37.8]	33.9 [29.7; 38.2]	29.3 [24.7; 33.6]	37.2 [31.2; 42.8]
Availability	14.6 [11.3; 17.8]	40.7 [35.6; 46.3]	41.8 [36.7; 46.8]	33.6 [28.3; 38.8]	22.2 [17.3; 27.2]	37.1 [30.7; 43.9]
Channel repertoire	13.7 [10.2; 17.4]	12.1 [7.1; 17.2]	12.1 [6.7; 17.0]	11.9 [6.6; 16.8]	11.2 [6.4; 16.3]	14.3 [8.1; 20.5]
Co-viewers	11.0 [8.6; 13.3]	7.8 [4.5; 10.9]	11.6 [7.5; 15.8]	12.6 [8.8; 16.7]	9.9 [4.1; 16.2]	10.5 [6.6; 14.4]
Lead-in	15.6 [12.5; 18.8]	20.0 [15.6; 24.3]	18.6 [13.5; 23.6]	18.9 [13.5; 24.2]	20.9 [15.5; 26.2]	27.5 [21.4; 33.8]
Lead-out	8.5 [5.7; 11.5]	8.5 [4.6; 12.0]	9.6 [4.5; 15.0]	16.5 [11.8; 20.8]	14.0 [9.2; 18.9]	13.9 [8.4; 19.5]