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

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CHAPTER 5

How Keeping up Diversifies: Watching Public-Affairs TV in the Netherlands 1988–2010

Manuscript under review.

Abstract

With increasing viewing alternatives available, TV viewers can not only choose more easily to watch or to avoid public-affairs programming. They can also choose between a growing diversity of serious and light programs covering news and current-affairs. Using electronically recorded people-meter data, this study explores information viewing patterns in the Netherlands over the last two decades. The historical analysis reveals how viewers have adapted to the growing abundance of choice opportunities. As opposed to concerns about a fragmentation of audiences, we find that public-affairs viewing has become more divers on the individual level. More entertaining information programs do not substitute serious formats but are used as an additional source of information. Overall, Dutch viewers are exposed to plenty and multifaceted public-affairs information. The personal relevance of TV as a medium is one of the main drives behind high levels of exposure.

To date, a majority of citizens in many Western countries rely on television as their most important source of information about public affairs (Köcher, 2008; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2010; Van der Burg, Lauf, & Negenborn, 2011). However, major changes of the viewing environment have raised concerns about a possible decline of the information function of TV. With an abundance of television channels available, viewers can not only choose to watch or to avoid public-affairs information more easily, they can also choose between a growing diversity of program formats that deal with news and current-affairs issues. In addition to programs with a clear focus on public affairs, information formats that also cover human-interest or celebrity issues have become more widespread over the last decades (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000). Such soft news or infotainment formats present political information in a more entertaining fashion, guided by news values such as personalization, prominence, or emotions.

Commercialization of the media landscape is regarded as the main drive behind the trend toward a more entertaining presentation of political content on TV (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). As a consequence of an increasing market-orientation and competition, news organizations seek to cater to large audiences that are assumed to be not that interested in politics (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000; Pfetsch, 1996). Quite plausibly, substantial differences have been found between media systems that are more market-oriented such as in the United States and media systems that are more strongly regulated by the state and with a stronger public-service character, such as the ones of the Netherlands, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Sweden, and Norway (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). While public television has been found to maintain a rich news and current-affairs programming, commercial channels indeed pay less attention to serious political journalism but more to entertaining formats (Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Soft news and entertaining presentations of political content are often perceived as a threat to citizen's political awareness or knowledge about current affairs. More entertaining formats might pull politically uninterested viewers away from traditional, serious news formats (Bennett, 2003; Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007). But light formats have also been regarded as an opportunity to reach politically uninterested viewers that would otherwise not be exposed to political information at all (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Zaller, 2003). However, there seem to be mixed effects of watching political entertainment formats on political interest,

knowledge, trust, or political engagement (Cao, 2010; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009).

But to begin with, not much is known about the actual exposure to these types of programs. The discussion about possible effects of soft news or infotainment often presumes that such light information formats are so attractive that they substitute serious information programs for many viewers. But who actually watches what? Do entertaining information programs indeed substitute more serious formats or are different formats watched in a supplementary fashion?

So far, no research has been conducted about such actual consumption patterns. This study analyzes consumption of public-affairs programs on TV in the Netherlands over the last two decades. The analysis is based on Dutch people-meter data that contain electronically recorded information of individual viewing behavior. These data are unique in offering very precise measures of TV exposure that are highly consistent over time. Our sample consists of one week of every second year from 1988 to 2010. This allows us to observe the transition from a low-choice viewing environment with two public-service channels to a high-choice one with a mix of various public and commercial channels. With these data we can answer the question to what extent an increasing number of TV channels and a growing variety of public-affairs programs have changed the information function of TV.

Public-Affairs Formats

Two types of formats of public-affairs TV can be discerned in Western cultures: news programs and current-affairs programs (Aalberg et al., 2010). These two can be discerned according to their degree of their "openness" as a text (Eco, 1979; Leurdijk, 1999). News programs can be considered as "closed," providing a brief overview on a relatively broad range of public-affairs topics. The presentation of news items leaves little room for interpretation, and often one leading perspective is taken. Current-affairs formats, in contrast, offer more detailed information on a smaller selection of issues. Typical forms of presentation are interviews, debates, or background coverage. These account for different viewpoints and are more open to interpretation by their audience.

Over the last decades, programs that present public-affairs information have changed tremendously with an increase of soft news or infotainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000). Programs can be broadly discerned according to their degree of covering public affairs in a more "serious" or more "light"

manner (see Baum, 2002; Brants & Neijens, 1998). "Serious" programs have a clear focus on politics and major public events. The presentation is often guided by ideas of journalistic objectivity and is, thus, characterized by a balanced and neutral coverage. Examples are political debates, interviews, or documentaries. "Light" formats, in contrast, primarily cover soft news or non-public policy issues such as human-interest or celebrity news. Examples are talk shows, comedy shows, and daily morning or evening shows. They may cover some political issues or invite political guests but have a clear focus on "soft", non-political stories, such as personal dramas, life style, and celebrities. The coverage is guided by news values such as personalization, prominence, unexpectedness, negativism, and emotions (Esser, 1999; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). The presentational style of these formats is often entertaining or sensational with a more cheerful, empathic, or excited atmosphere.

To define the broad spectrum of political information formats that viewers can choose from, the two dimensions openness vs. closeness and serious vs. light can be combined. This yields four types of political information formats (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Typology of Public Affairs Formats with Examples of Dutch Programming

Format \ Content	Serious	Light
News (open)	News ('serious') Examples: NOS Journaal, RTL Nieuws	News ('light') Examples: Hart van Nederland, Editie NL
Background (closed)	Discussion, debate, and other 'serious' current affairs Examples: Nova, Buitenhof, Netwerk	Talk shows, morning shows, and other 'light' current affairs Examples: Goede Morgen Nederland, De Wereld Draait Door, Pauw & Witteman

Public-Affairs Programming in the Netherlands

Trends of Dutch TV programming are marked by growth in all domains. The number of channels available has steadily increased since the introduction of commercial TV in the late 1980s. While Dutch TV still was a public broadcasting system with two channels only in 1988, it offered about 35 commercial and public-

service channels on cable and about 50 and more channels digitally in 2010. Along with the number of channels, the number of news and current-affairs programs broadcast in the Netherlands has increased over the last two decades (Aalberg et al., 2010; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, in press). Serious and light news programs on Dutch TV not only differ in the type and range of issues that are covered. Light newscasts have also been found to be considerably more sensational compared to their serious counterparts (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005).

Those entertaining or sensational forms of presentation have increased. But in the meantime, this trend has levelled out, resulting in a co-existence of serious informative journalism and more popular, entertaining information programs (Brants, Cabri, & Neijens, 2000; Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Kleemans, Van Cauwenberge, D'Haenens, & Hendriks Vettehen, 2008). Our first research question addresses these trends of Dutch programming regarding the four formats of covering public affairs:

RQ_1: How has the amount of broadcasting of different formats of public-affairs programs changed in the Netherlands from 1988 to 2010?

The Response of the Audience

But how has the audience reacted to the developments described above? Have light information programs indeed been used as substitutes for more serious formats as it is often feared? Alternatively, different formats may be watched side by side by the same viewers. Thus, two extreme ways of dealing with an increasingly complex programming could be expected. We call these two patterns specialization and diversification. Specialization refers to the segregation of information seekers and avoiders, and between soft and hard news aficionados. Diversification denotes a growing variety of information formats within individual viewing patterns.

Specialization describes increasing differences of information viewing patterns between viewers or media users in general (Schoenbach & Becker, 1989; Tewksbury, 2005). From an individual approach on audience behavior, it is assumed that viewers make use of increasing choice opportunities by primarily watching programs that match their preferences (e.g., Rubin, 2009). To actually watch programs that match one's interests best, viewers need to actively select

them from the alternatives available. Thus, viewers need to be willing to switch between channels to specialize in their viewing behavior (Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2011). Accordingly, serious information formats would be primarily watched by politically interested and involved viewers who seek information about public-affairs (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). Put to the extreme, specialization could result in a growing gap between viewers who regularly follow news and current affairs and those who completely tune out from any type of political information. Or: light information formats might function as a substitute of serious formats for politically less interested viewers since they also cater to viewing motives different from an interest in news and current affairs.

Diversification of viewing patterns, in contrast, would mean that viewers do not focus on programs that match their interests best – or even seek a diverse viewing diet. They would, thus, make use of the increasing variety of the programs available by watching serious and light information formats in a supplementary way. The degree of diversity of patterns of information exposure might depend on a number of structural factors that are assumed to enable exposure to specific programs (see Webster, 2009). In addition to the viewing options available, viewing situations define the structures that influence whether people watch information programs (Wonneberger et al., 2011). As a situational aspect, the time that people are available watching TV has been regarded as a pivotal premise of exposure also to specific programs (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983). In addition, the awareness of available programs depends on a viewer's channel repertoire. Often, viewers only rely on a selection of channels to make their program choices (Heeter, 1985; Yuan & Webster, 2006). And also co-viewers who are present in a viewing situation influence viewing decisions (McDonald, 1986; Webster & Wakshlag, 1982).

Because of a strong influence of the viewing situation, viewers might be "trapped" by political information programs regardless of their interests and viewing preferences (Schoenbach, 2008; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002, 2004). Indeed, viewers who watched the news accidentally have been found repeatedly (Levy, 1978; Marcinkowski, 2010; Van den Bulck, 2006). Applied to a more diverse offer of public-affairs programs, a strong impact of the viewing context on program choices may lead to more diverse viewing patterns including a greater variety of serious and light information formats. Of course, viewers may also simply seek a more diverse viewing diet, welcoming the opportunities that are offered by a growing number of viewing alternatives.

Viewing Behavior in the Netherlands

Levels of news exposure have been surprisingly stable in the Netherlands over the last two decades (Aalberg et al., 2010; Wonneberger et al., in press). But how about light news programs? So far, very little is known about levels of exposure to those news and current-affairs formats. One study found that light news generally ranked lowest regarding its levels of exposure and also in its perceived importance and reliability as a news source in 2001 (Peeters, 2002). The following research questions address possible trends in information viewing behavior:

RQ_2: How has exposure to different formats of public-affairs programs changed over time?

RQ_3: How have the different information formats been combined by viewers?

RQ_4: To what extent have audiences of public-affairs information become more specialized or more diversified with an increase of viewing alternatives?

Possible trends of specialization or diversification of exposure to public-affairs TV are related to the mechanisms of program choice. Results of a Dutch study suggest that frequently watching serious news programs is strongly supported by factors of the viewing situation such as the time spent watching TV at all, co-viewers being present, or watching adjacent programs on the same channel. Motivational factors, in contrast, such as interest in politics and the preference for news programs were less influential (Wonneberger et al., in press). Does the same explanatory pattern apply to watching light and other serious information formats?

Finally, also sociodemographics have been found to make a difference for exposure to serious news programs. Repeatedly it has been found that young people turn to the news on TV less often than older ones (Delli Carpini, 2000; Mindich, 2005). However, young Dutch people also get most of their news from TV (Van Cauwenberge, Beentjes, & d'Haenens, 2011). Since an age difference could not be found for exposure to light news programs (Peeters, 2002), news exposure of the young might shift to those formats. The better educated typically watch less TV in general and also fewer TV news programs (Blödorn & Gerhards, 2004; Newton, 1999).

RQ5: To what extent have information viewing patterns been related to viewer interests, situational aspects of watching TV, and sociodemographics?

Data

The analysis was based on Dutch people-meter data that contain unobtrusively and electronically recorded information of 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 as viewers, using a separate remote control. Then the channels watched and the exact moments of switching between channels were electronically recorded. The quality of these measures was carefully monitored (see 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," which is a tool of the Market Research Association (*MarktOnderzoekAssociatie*) for representative sampling in the Netherlands, and prior to 2007 by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics and the biennial GfK MiniCensus. In addition to the establishment survey, an annual survey was held among all panel members providing relevant information for this study such as sociodemographics and viewer's interest in politics (for a more detailed description see SKO, 2008). The program offer of the seventeen major Dutch channels is analyzed by *TV Times*, since 2007 *MediaXim Nederland*, so that watching a channel at a particular time could be allocated to a specific program.

Our sample was based on 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, holiday time, or changes of programming schedules. We combined survey-, viewing-, and program data from the people-meter system. All panel members of the age of thirteen and older were included resulting in a total sample size of n = 22,379 viewers. For each case, the viewing data of one week on the level of individual programs watched was obtained. The panel turnover was about 25 percent per year. As a result, the data set included 13,028 unique respondents and about 42 percent of duplicate cases. Since the results were highly similar to the ones obtained from a sample without overlap, all cases were included in the analyses.

Measures

Public-affairs programs. Based on the distinctions of openness vs. closeness and serious vs. light forms, we discerned four types of information formats: serious news, serious background, light news, and light background programs (see Table 5.1). To assign these categories to the program data, descriptions of the programs were collected from online program guides and online information provided by the channels. In cases of doubt, programs were retrieved and watched by the authors to allocate them to a category. The categories constituted ideal formats since the two dimensions could be regarded as continuous. However, each program was assigned to the category that matched its features best. Programs were included that covered political news and current affairs on a local, national, or international level. Public-affairs coverage had to include explicit references to political decision making, political actors, or important events of public interest (McNair, 2003; Patterson, 2000). References to such topics could be direct, such as news coverage or debates on political issues, or indirect, such as an indirect reference on political decisions or debates within a report about persons concerned.

Exposure to public affairs formats. Viewers were regarded as exposed to a program if they watched at least five minutes of that program. For every viewer the exact minutes of exposure during one week were calculated per program format resulting in four measures of the amount of exposure. An equal amount of exposure could however result from different viewing styles. Did viewers follow entire programs or did they turn to a different channel while watching? To discern viewers who watched a small number of programs without switching away from those who only watched fragments of many different programs, we accounted for the viewed proportion per program type. For this, we took the average proportion of a program that was watched. Since the formats differed in their length, the proportion viewed also enhanced comparability between the formats.

Viewer characteristics. Viewer characteristics that were compared were sociodemographics, political interest, switching activity, viewer availability, a viewer's channel repertoire, and co-viewing. Sociodemographic characteristics were age, gender, and education[1]. In the annual survey, political interest was measured on a three-point scale.[2] To determine a viewer's switching rate, we divided the number of changes between channels by the total number of programs that were watched. Viewer availability was the number of hours a viewer watched TV during one week, excluding the time spent watching public-affairs programming. The

channel repertoire was determined by the number of channels a viewer watched for at least five minutes during one week. Finally, co-viewing was defined by the average number of persons that were present when a viewer watched TV.

Results

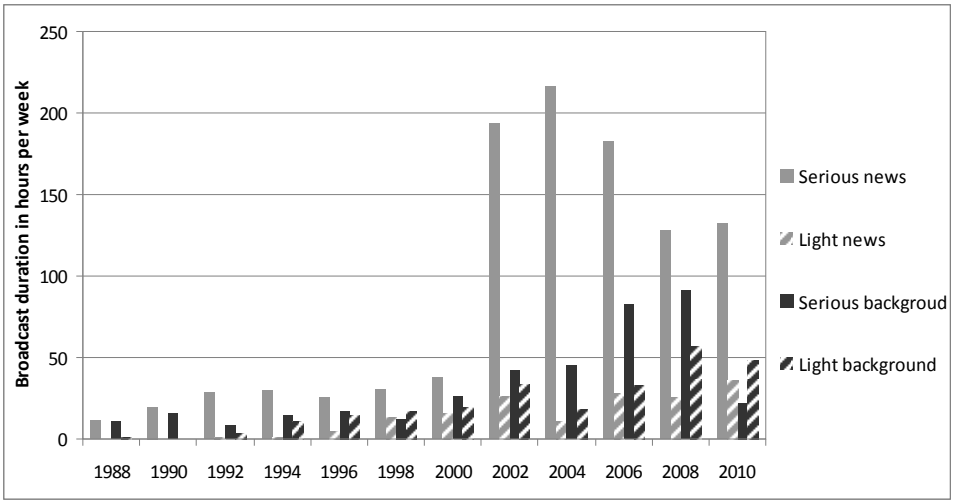
Trends of Dutch Public-Affairs Programming

To what extent has the programming of informational formats changed during the period of our study (RQ_1)? Figure 5.1 shows the duration of the four informational program types broadcast during one week from 1988 to 2010. The sample period was characterized by a strong increase of serious news programs and the introduction and moderate increase of light information formats. Thus, although the offer has become increasingly diverse, serious news programs still prevailed.

In 1988, the public-service *NOS Journaal* was the only serious news program with one main newscast in the evening and about ten shorter bulletins and reruns throughout the day. The commercial channel RTL4 introduced a daily news program, *RTL Nieuws*, in 1989. Also RTL4 scheduled several reruns and short bulletins throughout the day. In 1999, with SBS Nederland a second commercial broadcaster entered the market with *Het Nieuws* on channels SBS6 and Net5. In the more competitive situation, all three news providers increased the frequency of their newscasts to over twenty bulletins per day. This might explain the strong increase of news programs between 2000 and 2002. In addition, RTL launched a special program covering business and economy issues along with general public affairs in 2001. Although SBS stopped broadcasting serious news after 2002, the total amount of news programming further increased in 2004 and decreased thereafter. An additional NOS program *Journal op 3* was launched in 2007 with four to five bulletins per day.

While a light news program was first introduced by public-service Nederland 3 with "Gewest tot gewest", this market was taken over by the two commercial broadcasters SBS with the "Heart van Nederland" (since 1995) and RTL with "5 in het land" (since 1998), later "4 in het land" and "Editie NL." The increase of light background programming could be ascribed to public-service as well as commercial channels although public-service programs prevailed. Popular examples of this format are "De wereld draait door" (Nederland 3, since 2005) or "Goedemorgen Nederland" (Nederland 2, 2002–2010). Serious background programming had been exclusively provided by public-service broadcasters

Figure 5.1: Amount of Public-Affairs Formats Broadcast per Year (in Hours)



Note: Dutch program data of one week in March per year.

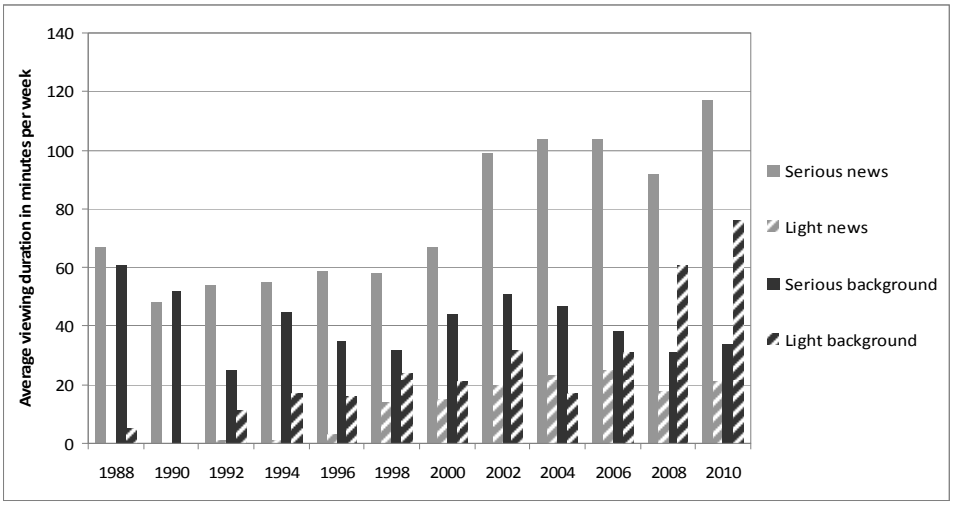
throughout the research period. Popular examples were "Buitenhof" on Nederland 1 since 1997 or "NOVA" on Nederland 2 from 1992 to 2010.

Exposure to Public-Affairs TV

How have the average levels of exposure to the different program formats developed (RQ_2)? Parallel to the program offer, serious news programs also dominated exposure to information programs. The increase of serious news programs broadcast, especially from 2002 on, also resulted in higher levels of exposure (Figure 5.2).

For exposure to the other information formats, some shifts in the amount of attention paid to them could be observed. In 1988, viewers spent about the same amount of time watching serious background programs as serious news programs. Over time, however, this amount has decreased from over 60 minutes to an average of 34 minutes per week in 2010. Exposure to light formats, in contrast, has increased over time. Although compared to the other formats, fewer light background programs were broadcast in 2010, their exposure level ranked second after serious news in that year. As opposed to their broadcast frequency, light news had the lowest level of exposure. Thus, the average viewing times imply that especially light background viewing might have displaced serious background viewing. News exposure, however, was still dominated by serious programs.

Figure 5.2: Average Exposure per Program Format per Year



Note: Dutch people-meter data of one week in March per year.

Informational Viewing Patterns

A cluster analysis of viewer's diets of information programs over all years explored the extent to which different public-affairs formats were watched by the same viewers (RQ_3). For each of the four information formats, we included the time that was spent watching this genre and the average proportion of programs that viewers remained watching. While the viewing duration accounted for the quantity of exposure per format, the proportion viewed gauged the extent to which viewers followed entire programs or switched to different channels during exposure. SPSS TwoStep, a hierarchical agglomerative clustering procedure, allowed the inclusion of a large number of cases. Outliers that formed clusters of less than five percent of the sample were excluded from the cluster solution. The number of clusters was determined by the ratio of distance change between the cluster solutions based on the Akaike Information Criterion (see Bacher, Wenzig, & Vogler, 2004).

The analysis revealed five information viewing patterns and a small group of outliers (Table 5.2). The viewing patterns could be discerned according to their overall amount of information viewing as well as the combination of specific formats that were watched.[3]

Information avoiders. About 15 percent of the viewers were characterized by very low levels of exposure to information programs. All four formats were

watched for less than five minutes per week on average. Also the viewed proportions of programs of all formats were very low, with less than ten percent.

Serious news viewers. This group which comprised about 21 percent of the sample spent about 50 minutes per week on serious news programs. The other program formats were not relevant for this viewing pattern.

Serious information viewers. About 19 percent of the viewers showed a clear focus on the serious formats. They spent more than one hour per week on serious news and serious background programs.

Table 5.2: Typology of Information Viewers: Cluster Solution of Duration and Proportion of Exposure to News and Current-Affairs Formats

#	Cluster description		Serious news		Light news		Serious background		Light background	
		%	Duration	Prop.	Duration	Prop.	Duration	Prop.	Duration	Prop.
1	Information avoiders	15.2	1.42 (6.45)	0.03 (0.08)	3.48 (9.41)	0.11 (0.26)	4.39 (12.40)	0.09 (0.22)	3.57 (11.30)	0.06 (0.16)
2	Serious news viewers	20.8	**48.71 (44.76)**	**0.74 (0.17)**	0.78 (2.84)	0.03 (0.09)	2.69 (6.49)	0.05 (0.11)	2.73 (8.32)	0.04 (0.10)
3	Serious information viewers	19.0	**85.05 (66.67)**	**0.77 (0.14)**	1.38 (4.98)	0.04 (0.13)	**70.93 (59.57)**	**0.71 (0.19)**	2.72 (7.20)	0.04 (0.09)
4	Serious news & mixed background viewers	21.4	**117.57 (89.78)**	**0.76 (0.15)**	5.19 (11.84)	0.14 (0.26)	**78.81 (84.43)**	**0.55 (0.31)**	**87.57 (77.83)**	**0.71 (0.19)**
5	All-rounders	22.3	**110.57 (89.89)**	**0.77 (0.17)**	**50.32 (38.42)**	**0.81 (0.16)**	**26.12 (39.10)**	**0.30 (0.32)**	**27.24 (44.13)**	**0.26 (0.31)**
	Outliers	1.3	**430.84 (259.84)**	**0.82 (0.09)**	**78.73 (84.44)**	**0.63 (0.37)**	**225.37 (190.38)**	**0.65 (0.28)**	**268.18 (185.71)**	**0.68 (0.22)**
Total		100.0	82.03 (94.76)	0.65 (0.30)	14.33 (30.38)	0.25 (0.37)	40.39 (67.37)	0.35 (0.35)	29.98 (64.01)	0.24 (0.33)

Note: Means (and standard deviations) resulting from SPSS TwoStep Cluster with Euclidean distance measure, controlling for outliers of ≤ 5%. Ratio of distance change: 2.637; n = 22,379.

Serious news and mixed background viewers. About 21 percent of the sample had a focus on serious news with about two hours of exposure per week. In addition, these viewers also spent about one and a half hours per week on the two background formats. However, they followed light background programs less often entirely compared to serious background programs.

All-rounders. A group comprising about 22 percent of the sample was exposed to all four formats. With an average of 110 minutes per week, most of their time of information viewing was devoted to serious news. Less than one hour was spent on light news. Typically, all-rounders would watch fractions of background programs adding up to about half an hour for each background format.

Finally, about one percent of the sample has been identified as outliers. This group showed the highest amount of information exposure for all formats.

Regarding RQ_3, we concluded that viewers showed a considerable overlap between the four information formats, with a preference for serious news programs, however. Exceptions from this pattern were avoiders who watched no public-affairs information and serious news viewers who focused on this one format. Light news programs were the least important, except for the group of all-rounders. Surprisingly, no viewing pattern that exclusively contained light information formats could be found.

Specialization or Diversification?

How has exposure to different information formats changed over the last two decades (RQ_4)? To interpret changes of information viewing patterns over time as specialization or diversification, the distributions of the five informational viewing patterns were compared over time. Specialization would occur if the share of viewing patterns with a focus on either light or serious information formats had increased. The trend would point to diversification if viewers would increasingly watch light as well as serious formats. Most changes of the proportions of the viewing patterns, however, did not follow clear linear trends. While some changes could be related to changes of the programs available, others were contrary to the developments of programming (Figure 5.3).

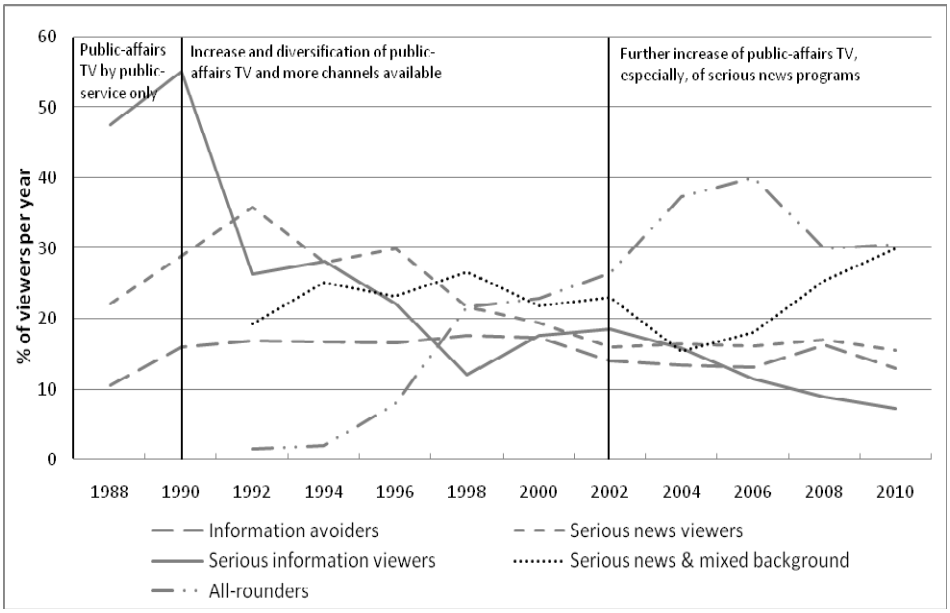
In spite of more serious news programs available, the size of the two groups with a focus on serious information formats – serious news viewers and serious information viewers – gradually diminished over the last two decades. Especially serious information viewers have regressed from about 48 percent in the early

years to about 7 percent in 2010. They have become the smallest group of the five clusters over time.

Naturally, the two viewing patterns that included light information formats appeared more frequently over time. With about 30 percent each, serious news and mixed background viewers as well as all-rounders comprised the majority of the viewers in 2010. The proportion of serious news and mixed background viewers increased after 1992 when more background programs were introduced, followed by a decrease after 1998. After 2004 the level has increased again and has almost doubled until 2010 even though the number of available background programs has dropped after 2008. Similarly, more viewers could be attributed to all-rounders when more light news programs were available after 1996. This increase even continued when the actual number of light news available dropped after 2002. Surprisingly, the proportion of this pattern decreased after 2006 when more light news became available again.

With more viewing alternatives available after 1988, the share of information avoiders considerably increased from 11 to over 17 percent. But after 2000, this number decreased again to about 13 percent in 2010.

Figure 5.3: Relative Frequencies of Information Viewer Types over Time



Note: See Table 5.2 for description of viewer types.

So, regarding RQ_4, we concluded that the increase of viewing alternatives was accompanied by a diversification of information viewing in the Netherlands. Overall, viewers have spent more time watching both serious and light formats of information programs. Fewer viewers have focused on serious formats over time. But at the same time, no distinct viewing pattern with a focus on light formats has developed. Also information avoidance has not increased permanently.

Determinants of Information Viewing Patterns

To explain patterns of information viewing (RQ_5), we compared means and standard deviations of the viewer characteristics for each viewing cluster (Table 5.3). To control for interrelationships between the attributes, we tested their influence on the different viewing patterns with multinomial logistic regressions. Five separate models with each cluster as a reference category were estimated. Due to the small group size, outliers were excluded from this analysis. The coefficients were interpreted as changes in the likelihood that a viewer belonged to that viewing cluster instead of falling in the reference cluster (Table 5.A1).[4]

Table 5.3: Characteristics of Information Viewer Types: Means (and Standard Deviations)

Cluster	Age	Gender (male in %)	Education	Interest in politics	Switching rate	Viewer availability	Channel repertoire	Co-viewing
1	32.15	49.3	4.39	1.47	0.85	10.04	7.31	1.13
	(14.90)	(50.0)	(1.63)	(0.65)	(0.15)	(9.16)	(4.83)	(0.84)
2	38.33	50.1	4.21	1.57	0.79	16.19	8.97	1.03
	(15.79)	(50.0)	(1.76)	(0.69)	(0.16)	(12.25)	(4.65)	(0.75)
3	46.87	51.6	4.06	1.85	0.72	19.72	8.68	0.91
	(16.33)	(50.0)	(1.81)	(0.75)	(0.18)	(12.21)	(4.73)	(0.68)
4	50.48	46.3	4.40	1.96	0.74	26.43	10.44	1.04
	(16.45)	(49.9)	(1.80)	(0.74)	(0.16)	(14.98)	(4.99)	(0.67)
5	47.02	44.4	4.15	1.60	0.76	29.89	12.12	1.33
	(15.71)	(49.7)	(1.64)	(0.69)	(0.14)	(15.77)	(4.43)	(0.63)
Total	43.86	48.1	4.24	1.70	0.77	21.69	9.71	1.09
	(17.20)	(50.0)	(1.74)	(0.73)	(0.17)	(15.63)	(4.99)	(0.72)

The findings suggest that information avoiders clearly differed from the other groups in a number of aspects. This was the youngest group, with the lowest political interest, and the highest switching rate. Avoiders spent less time watching

TV than other viewers and used fewer channels when they watched. Although their average level of education was relatively high, the regressions showed that education did not lead to information avoidance. On the contrary, all other predictors being equal, higher education increased the likelihood to belong to one of the other four groups.

The other clusters successively included more information formats – from serious news viewing only to all-rounders making use of all four formats. This coincided with an increase of age, political interest, viewer availability, and channel repertoire over these four patterns. Viewers of these groups also switched relatively less often between channels compared to information avoiders.

Serious news and mixed background viewers had the strongest interest in politics and also the highest level of education. Serious information viewers, in contrast, were highly interested in politics but had the lowest average level of education. They watched TV alone more often than other viewers. All-rounders had the highest number of co-viewers. All-rounders – but also serious news and mixed background viewers – were more often women than men while gender was relatively balanced for the first three clusters.

Regarding RQ_5, we concluded that information viewing patterns were determined by viewers' interest and viewing situations as well as by other sociodemographics. Especially information avoiders differed from other viewer groups in most characteristics. Watching more different information formats was related to watching more TV in general, using more channels but switching less often between them. Also political interest had a positive influence on the diversity of serious and light formats used. Exposure to all formats clearly increased with age. Education especially enhanced serious information viewing. Women incorporated slightly more light formats in their viewing patterns than men.

Conclusions and Discussion

Public-affairs information on TV has gone through severe changes over the last two decades. Negative effects of soft news, infotainment, entertainization, popularization or sensationalism have been feared. However, little is known about their actual consumption: How have changes of the viewing environment influenced viewers in their decisions to watch different news and current affairs programs? Based on people-meter data on the individual level, this study analyzed information viewing behavior in the Netherlands from 1988 to 2010.

An abundance of choice opportunities, it has been suspected, would lead to a fragmentation of audiences of news and current-affairs programs – because viewers are assumed to specialize in their program choices. While those who are interested in public-affairs find even more programs that match their preference, viewers who are not interested can easily avoid any form of public-affairs information. What we found, however, is that news is not avoided more often because of more variety of viewing alternatives. Instead, viewers have spent more time watching a more diverse diet of political information programs. Programs with more entertaining elements and in combination with soft news were used in a supplementary way and not as a substitute for more serious formats of public-affairs information. Some viewers even avoided the new light formats completely and focused on traditional public-affairs formats. So, light news programs have not replaced serious news programs. Viewers have, however, watched more light background information at the expense of serious background formats.

The diversification of exposure to public-affairs TV developed gradually and not as an immediate response to changes in the viewing environment. After a period of orientation, viewers seem to have become familiarized with the diversity of programs and developed a greater autonomy for choosing how much variety they wanted to consume. With more viewing alternatives at the beginning of the 1990s, exposure to public-affairs TV decreased and more viewers avoided news and current-affairs programs. But over time, viewers included the growing offer of more entertaining public-affairs programs into their viewing diets. After getting used to more diversity, viewers remained more stable, were less influenced by later changes of the viewing environment. The strong increase of serious news programs after 2000, for instance, was accompanied by higher exposure levels. But viewers spent even more time watching the news when actually fewer programs were broadcast after 2004. Serious background programming, in contrast, was watched less even though its availability had increased after 2002.

The general stability of exposure to public-affairs programs suggests that public-affairs TV is strongly integrated in viewing routines. Moreover, the political information function of TV for an individual viewer is more closely related to the relevance that is attached to the medium as such than to interest in politics. Information avoiders spent less time watching TV and switched between channels more actively. Viewers with the highest levels of information exposure, in contrast, also devoted more time to watching TV than all other viewers. Obviously, by developing viewing routines, viewers create stable viewing situations. This can be watching at specific times, in the same social setting, and turning to the same

channels. News viewing, in particular, has been found to be influenced by such situational factors, namely by the time spent watching TV at all, preferring specific channels, or watching together with co-viewers (Wonneberger et al., 2011, in press). But a stable context, of course, also enables recurring exposure to the same constellation of different public-affairs programs.

Plausibly, personal interests in specific TV content also have an impact on how viewers allocate their viewing time. Generally, viewers interested in politics made use of serious as well as light information formats. Information avoiders, in contrast, were on average the least interested in politics. However, the group of avoiders did not increase over time, although it became easier for them to skip news. Thus, even in a high choice environment, politically less involved viewers could be reached by public affairs TV.

What could be the reasons for the surprisingly low degree of audience specialization that our analysis revealed? The continuous relevance of serious information formats within the viewing diets of Dutch viewers may be due to the still very strong position of public-service TV. Traditionally, news and current-affairs formats on Dutch TV have been provided by public-service broadcasters, and public broadcasting is perceived as reliable by many viewers (Peeters, 2002). The long tradition of many news and current affairs programs and their routine schedules could have cultivated and strengthened viewing habits, too. Another reason why public-TV news programs still have the highest levels of exposure might be that these programs have kept pace with the competing light formats, without losing their seriousness, though.

Light information programs together with the increase of the number of channels available have often been considered as a threat for the political information function of TV. Concerns about possible negative effects of light public-affairs TV on political knowledge or participation are based on the assumption that viewers increasingly turn to these formats instead of watching their serious counterparts. For the Netherlands with its dual broadcasting system this fear cannot be confirmed. Serious public-affairs programming still reaches the majority of TV viewers. For most viewers traditional news formats with a strong focus on public-affairs information are most relevant in their information diets. Light formats are used as an additional source of information. Therewith, TV still plays a crucial role in providing information on current political issues and events.

There is one exception, though, to the overall bright picture: Often it has been found that especially the young more and more tune out from the news. We too find that exposure to all kinds of information formats increased with age, and

information avoiders are mainly young. Due to a falling birth-rate in the Netherlands, the proportion of older viewers has increased over time. So, even though the amount of avoiders remained the same, fewer young viewers in the sample are actually responsible for stable levels of information avoidance. This points not only to age differences, but to generational ones. Young people of today consume less public-affairs information on TV than they did twenty years ago. Even more entertaining formats do not seem attractive enough for this group. Since the TV still is the most important news medium for young Dutch people, their decreasing attention to public-affairs TV is a reason to worry. Future research should study information use of the young more extensively.

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Appendix

Table 5.A1: Multinomial Logistic Regression Models of Viewer Characteristics and Viewing-Related Factors on Information Viewing Patterns

Cluster	Reference Cluster				
	1	2	3	4	5
Predictor	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)
1 Age		0.98	0.95	0.94	0.95
		(0.97;0.98)	(0.95;0.96)	(0.94;0.94)	(0.95;0.95)
Gender (male)		0.95	0.90	1.27	1.22
		(0.86;1.04)	(0.81;1.00)	(1.14;1.41)	(1.10;1.36)
Education		0.98	0.95	0.82	0.90
		(0.96;1.02)	(0.92;0.99)	(0.80;0.85)	(0.87;0.93)
Political interest		0.81	0.51	0.42	0.76
		(0.75;0.88)	(0.47;0.55)	(0.39;0.46)	(0.70;0.82)
Switching		36.43	347.01	328.77	508.29
		(24.89;53.32)	(230.69;521.97)	(214.60;503.69)	(327.88;787.97)
Availability		0.95	0.93	0.90	0.90
		(0.94;0.96)	(0.92;0.94)	(0.90;0.91)	(0.89;0.91)
Channel repertoire		0.93	0.93	0.89	0.84
		(0.92;0.95)	(0.91;0.95)	(0.88;0.91)	(0.82;0.85)
Co-viewing		1.17	1.43	1.13	0.59
		(1.10;1.25)	(1.33;1.54)	(1.05;1.22)	(0.55;0.63)
2 Age	1.02		0.97	0.96	0.97
	(1.02;1.03)		(0.97;0.98)	(0.96;0.96)	(0.97;0.97)
Gender (male)	1.06		0.95	1.34	1.29
	(0.96;1.16)		(0.87;1.04)	(1.22;1.47)	(1.18;1.42)
Education	1.02		0.97	0.84	0.91
	(0.99;1.05)		(0.94;1.00)	(0.81;0.86)	(0.89;0.94)
Political interest	1.23		0.63	0.52	0.93
	(1.14;1.33)		(0.59;0.67)	(0.49;0.56)	(0.87;1.00)
Switching	0.03		9.53	9.02	13.95
	(0.02;0.04)		(6.90;13.15)	(6.42;12.69)	(9.78;19.91)
Availability	1.05		0.98	0.95	0.95
	(1.04;1.06)		(0.97;0.98)	(0.95;0.95)	(0.94;0.95)
Channel repertoire	1.07		1.00	0.96	0.90
	(1.06;1.09)		(0.98;1.01)	(0.94;0.97)	(0.88;0.91)
Co-viewing	0.85		1.22	0.97	0.50
	(0.80;0.91)		(1.14;1.30)	(0.90;1.03)	(0.47;0.53)
3 Age	1.05	1.03		0.99	1.00
	(1.05;1.05)	(1.02;1.03)		(0.98;0.99)	(0.99;1.00)
Gender (male)	1.11	1.05		1.41	1.36
	(1.00;1.23)	(0.96;1.15)		(1.29;1.54)	(1.24;1.49)
Education	1.05	1.03		0.86	0.94
	(1.01;1.08)	(1.00;1.06)		(0.84;0.89)	(0.92;0.97)
Political interest	1.96	1.60		0.83	1.49
	(1.81;2.13)	(1.49;1.70)		(0.78;0.89)	(1.39;1.59)
Switching	0.00	0.10		0.95	1.46
	(0.00;0.00)	(0.08;0.14)		(0.69;1.30)	(1.04;2.06)
Availability	1.07	1.02		0.97	0.97
	(1.07;1.08)	(1.02;1.03)		(0.97;0.98)	(0.96;0.97)
Channel repertoire	1.08	1.00		0.96	0.90
	(1.06;1.09)	(0.99;1.02)		(0.95;0.97)	(0.89;0.91)
Co-viewing	0.70	0.82		0.79	0.41
	(0.65;0.75)	(0.77;0.87)		(0.74;0.84)	(0.38;0.44)

(Continued)

(Continued)

Cluster		Reference Cluster				
		1	2	3	4	5
	Predictor	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)	Predictor (95% CI)	Exp(B) (95% CI)
4	Age	1.06	1.04	1.01		1.01
		(1.06;1.07)	(1.04;1.04)	(1.01;1.02)		(1.01;1.01)
	Gender (male)	0.79	0.75	0.71		0.96
		(0.71;0.88)	(0.68;0.82)	(0.65;0.78)		(0.88;1.05)
	Education	1.21	1.19	1.16		1.09
		(1.17;1.25)	(1.16;1.23)	(1.13;1.19)		(1.06;1.12)
	Political interest	2.36	1.92	1.20		1.78
		(2.17;2.56)	(1.79;2.05)	(1.13;1.28)		(1.68;1.90)
	Switching	0.00	0.11	1.06		1.55
		(0.00;0.00)	(0.08;0.16)	(0.77;1.45)		(1.11;2.16)
	Availability	1.11	1.05	1.03		1.00
		(1.10;1.12)	(1.05;1.06)	(1.03;1.03)		(0.99;1.00)
	Channel repertoire	1.12	1.04	1.04		0.94
		(1.10;1.14)	(1.03;1.06)	(1.03;1.06)		(0.92;0.95)
	Co-viewing	0.88	1.04	1.26		0.52
		(0.82;0.95)	(0.97;1.11)	(1.18;1.35)		(0.49;0.55)
5	Age	1.05	1.03	1.00	0.99	
		(1.05;1.06)	(1.03;1.03)	(1.00;1.01)	(0.99;0.99)	
	Gender (male)	0.82	0.77	0.74	1.04	
		(0.73;0.91)	(0.71;0.85)	(0.67;0.81)	(0.95;1.13)	
	Education	1.11	1.09	1.06	0.92	
		(1.07;1.15)	(1.06;1.12)	(1.03;1.09)	(0.89;0.94)	
	Political interest	1.32	1.07	0.67	0.56	
		(1.21;1.44)	(1.00;1.15)	(0.63;0.72)	(0.53;0.60)	
	Switching	0.00	0.07	0.68	0.65	
		(0.00;0.00)	(0.05;0.10)	(0.49;0.96)	(0.46;0.90)	
	Availability	1.11	1.06	1.03	1.00	
		(1.10;1.12)	(1.05;1.06)	(1.03;1.04)	(1.00;1.01)	
	Channel repertoire	1.20	1.12	1.11	1.07	
		(1.18;1.22)	(1.10;1.13)	(1.10;1.13)	(1.06;1.08)	
	Co-viewing	1.71	2.00	2.44	1.93	
		(1.59;1.83)	(1.88;2.13)	(2.29;2.61)	(1.82;2.06)	

Note: Exp(B) – exponentiated multinomial logistic regression coefficients indicating the change in relative probability of a viewing cluster (see Table 5.2) compared to the reference cluster for one unit change in the predictor (increase for Exp(B) < 1 and decrease for Exp(B) > 1).

Notes

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

[2] 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 has been reversed, so that "1" was low, "2" medium, and "3" strong political interest.

[3] We repeated the analysis with a subset of the sample with no overlap between respondents and years. For panel members who participated over several years, only the data of the first year was included. This yielded exactly the same cluster solution with minor differences in the means and standard deviations of the compositional variables.

[4] Again, the analysis was compared to the subsample without overlap of respondents. No substantial differences in the results could be identified.