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

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CONCLUSION

Previous research, but also media observers have pointed out that the information function of TV for society might be at stake. With the proliferation of many new TV channels in the past three decades, it cannot be taken for granted anymore that public-affairs programming reaches the majority of citizens. More and more TV content to choose from makes it easy to even avoid news programs completely (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2007; Van den Bulck, 2006). Moreover, soft news or infotainment formats allow viewers to become informed somehow – but arguably provide less comprehensive, contextualized, and relevant information (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000).

Overall, these trends have been regarded as consequences of commercialization (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Patterson, 2000; Pfetsch, 1996). It is feared to have resulted in a growing competition between broadcasters and their news offerings. If this is true, substantial differences can be expected between media systems that are more liberal and market-oriented, such as the U.S. one, and media systems with a stronger public service broadcasting, to be found in many European countries (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009).

The democratic corporatist media system of the Netherlands is typical for countries of North-Western Europe (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Characteristic for their TV landscape is a mix of public-service and commercial channels. During the last two decades, the Dutch national TV market has become more competitive. Also, the volume of public-affairs programming, in general, has increased in the Netherlands, and more light information formats are now available (Aalberg et al., 2010; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). But different from, for instance, the U.S., public-service broadcasting has remained the main provider of public-affairs information. To what extent has this transition influenced the consumption of public-affairs programming?

The main goal of this dissertation was to study how TV has been used as a public-affairs medium in the changing viewing environment of the Netherlands. Have viewers turned away from public-affairs TV, just because they can? Have viewers, generally, become more selective in their program choices? The studies

presented here examined patterns and conditions of exposure to news and current-affairs programs in the Netherlands over the last two decades. In this concluding section, I summarize the results of the individual chapters and present major conclusions and implications. Finally, I discuss the limitations of my research and their implications for future studies.

Research Findings

Chapter one presented a process model of sequential TV viewing behavior. Viewing sessions were described as subsequent viewing activities: beginning to watch, evaluating a program and deciding whether to view this program or not, and perhaps switching to another channel. Evaluation, choice making, and possibly channel changing are repeated until the viewing session is terminated. Based on different theoretical approaches, the viewing process is regarded as influenced by individual factors, the social environment, the program structure, and other contextual factors. Moreover, these factors are assumed to be interrelated. This model served as a framework for the following studies on actual exposure to public-affairs TV in the Netherlands. Specifically, two major premises were applied to the analysis of exposure to public-affairs TV. First, it was regarded as embedded in entire viewing sessions. This was reflected by taking the proportion of exposure to public-affairs programs into account, as well as ways of selectivity. Characteristics of the respective viewing session were also considered to explain news exposure: the time people spend watching TV, a viewer's channel repertoire, and the influence of exposure to adjacent programs. Second, my analyses included a range of individual and social factors to explain exposure to public-affairs programming. Finally, a longitudinal approach took changes of television programming, and of other contextual factors, into account.

Chapter two evaluated the different manners of measuring exposure to news programs with people-meter data. Three separate dimensions of watching the news could be discerned. The first was the sheer amount of exposure. Although one's viewing duration gauged the amount of exposure most precisely, the number of programs watched, or the number of days with news consumption per week revealed similar relationships to other relevant viewer characteristics. The share of news viewing of a viewer's overall viewing time formed the second dimension. It measured to what extent watching the news was the main activity or embedded in longer viewing sequences. The third dimension comprised measures of approaching news programs. News selection measured the extent to which viewers

selected news programs by deliberately switching to a channel where news is on. Appointment viewing was a special case of program selection. It meant starting a viewing session by watching news programs. In contrast, dropping out measured if viewers changed channels – away from the news. Although these selectivity measures loaded on one factor, they were inconsistent in their relationships to viewer characteristics often shown as related to news consumption, such as political interest and news preference. In sum, the viewing share and selectivity measures yielded additional information for specific questions, for instance, on the relevance of news programs within viewing diets. But we found that even in a high-choice viewing environment amount measures were most powerful and consistent as measures of news exposure.

The study in chapter three was the first attempt to empirically integrate motivational and situational factors on the viewer level to explain news viewing behavior. Specifically, interest in news and in politics and selectivity towards news were contrasted with aspects of the viewing situation such as a viewer's availability to watch TV at all, the presence of co-viewers, and exposure to adjacent programs on the same channel. Overall, we found that situational factors had a stronger impact on the amount of news exposure than the most plausible motivational ones that we could investigate. Viewers spent more time with news programs when they watched more TV at all, when co-viewers were present, and when they watched the same channel prior to a newscast. We also found that interest in news and politics influenced the impact of the viewing context. Availability, for instance, had a stronger effect on interested viewers. By contrast, viewers less interested in politics were more strongly influenced by lead-out effects (staying with the news in order to not miss the following program on the same channel) and viewing together with other people.

Chapter four extended this study by a historical dimension. It was a longitudinal analysis of news viewing behavior in the Netherlands, 1988–2010. Surprisingly, the Dutch have watched more news during the last two decades. Consistently, only about ten percent avoided watching the news completely. Throughout the research period, the viewing context proved to be more influential compared to the impact of the viewing motivations that our data contained. With more viewing alternatives available over time, especially the amount of time that viewers spent watching TV at all, starting to watch TV with a newscast, and watching programs prior to newscasts on the same channel have become increasingly relevant for explaining why people watch the news. In other words, news viewing habits became stronger in more complex choice situations. But also,

age had an increasing impact. The generally high importance of television as a news source in a high-choice viewing environment was less the case for younger viewers.

A second longitudinal study, chapter five, expanded the range of public-affairs programming in the analysis. This analysis showed how viewers have adapted to the growing abundance of serious and light news and current-affairs programs. As opposite to the assumption that viewers use more light and entertaining programs, substituting serious public-affairs programs, we found a diversification of information viewing patterns. Serious news programs still prevailed for most viewers, but were combined with light formats. Within this combination, a greater relevance of TV as a medium was associated with exposure to more and more diverse public-affairs programs. But also, older viewers and those who were interested in politics generally watched more information programs.

Summary

Three major trends of exposure to public-affairs TV in the Netherlands can be extracted from the studies presented here:

I Exposure to public-affairs TV has increased. Instead of escaping to entertainment, we found that Dutch viewers have spent more time watching public-affairs programming throughout the last two decades.

II Information viewing has diversified. Dutch viewers have watched a more diverse range of public-affairs programs. Over time, viewing patterns combining “serious” and “light” public-affairs programs have evolved. However, virtually nobody used the more entertaining information programs in the Dutch TV offer exclusively. Moreover, those viewers who did watch light programs still spent more time watching serious newscasts. So, as opposed to a fear of fragmentation or specialization of audiences, more entertaining or light programs have not replaced serious programs with their focus on politics and current-affairs. Even those viewers who were less interested in politics made use of the growing diversity of public-affairs programming by watching a greater variety of information programs.

III The young are “tuning out.” Our results indicate that the overall positive trends of exposure to public-affairs TV do not apply to young viewers to the same extent as to older viewers. Generally, young people have used fewer news and current-affairs programs than older viewers. Over time, this difference has increased. Younger viewers have not made use of the greater variety of public-affairs programs to the same extent as older viewers and have even avoided any

type of public-affairs information more often. Also, more entertaining program formats have not stopped this development.

For the Netherlands, thus, none of the two scenarios developed by previous research seems to be true: One is that soft news and infotainment formats attract politically uninterested viewers that would otherwise not be exposed to political information (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Zaller, 2003). The other assumes that entertaining formats pull politically uninterested viewers away from the more traditional, serious formats (Bennett, 2003; Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2007). Increasing exposure to public-affairs TV seems to be highly specific for the Dutch context. A decline of TV news consumption has been found, for instance, in the U.S., but also in European countries such as the U.K., Norway, and Sweden (Aalberg et al., 2010; Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Pew, 2010). The Netherlands have been characterized as a highly developed “political communication culture” with higher levels of exposure to political information compared to the European average (Tenscher, 2008). The increase of exposure to public-affairs TV again emphasizes the Dutch case as an exceptional one.

Explanations for the three major trends can be found in the factors and mechanisms that I detected as influencing exposure to public-affairs programming. The strong importance of public-affairs TV in the Netherlands is obviously a result both of the specific viewing environment and of the characteristics of audience behavior. In the Dutch context, both sides seem to co-create a favorable precondition for high levels of exposure to public-affairs TV.

Our studies have repeatedly shown that exposure to news and current-affairs programs has been more strongly influenced by aspects of the viewing situation than by the most plausible viewing motivations – at least those which have become common knowledge in news audience research. The more time people spend watching TV at all, and the better they integrate TV viewing into their daily lives, the more important television also becomes as a source of public-affairs information. Being strongly interested in politics and in news and current-affairs programs is only of secondary importance for the volume and variety of a viewer’s information diet. It may be important for news in other media, but for news on TV it is not. Overall, the relevance of TV has increased over the last two decades with average viewing time of 133 minutes per day in 1988 and 191 minutes in 2010 – and, with it, the amount of time spent on public-affairs programs.

Our results seem to confirm that watching TV is mainly a low-involvement activity (e.g., Comstock & Scharrer, 1999), but not necessarily a passive one. Instead, watching TV is highly habitual (Koch, 2010). Viewers actively develop

recurring and stable viewing situations to make life easier. Viewing habits reduce the cognitive effort of viewing choices. Instead of having to scan all the available viewing options and consider what to choose, the presence of key stimuli triggers the activation of learned viewing patterns. Gathering in front of the TV set with other family members at 8 p.m. to start leisure time by watching the news could be such a habit. Or, a good experience with a particular channel might result in a strong loyalty toward this channel, including its news programming.

Viewing habits, of course, are also determined by the TV programming that is offered. It defines the audience's choice. This is where the specific environment of Dutch public-affairs TV comes into play. In particular, the long-standing reputation of public broadcasting for its national public-affairs programming seems to be relevant here (Peeters, 2002). Flagship programs such as the *Journal*, launched in 1956, or the talk program *Buitenhof* and its predecessor *Het Capitool* that started in 1981 have made the audience accustomed to specific genre rules and program schedules. And even the changes that public broadcasting has undergone may have even strengthened the bond between them and the news audience. Yes, public broadcasting now covers more soft news issues and adapted its presentation to a more modern appealing style – but slowly and carefully. In doing so, serious programs seem to have kept pace with competing light programs and prevented a massive migration of their audiences.

Of course, the amount of programs and scheduling strategies are also of importance for the extent of news watching. For instance, an increasing number of short news bulletins that are scattered throughout the day, as well as simultaneous broadcasting of news on commercial and public-service channels during daytime, have made accidental exposure to news programs more likely. Even viewers who were initially not interested in watching news might be “trapped” by such programming strategies and watch programs that do not exactly match their interests (Schoenbach, 2008; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002, 2004).

So, the Dutch viewing environment facilitates exposure to public-affairs TV as a side-effect of watching TV. But this does not lure younger viewers to watch news to the same extent as the older ones. First, TV plays a less relevant role in everyday life of the young. Second, younger viewers rely less on public broadcasting but allocate more of their viewing time to commercial channels (SKO, 2011). Thus, the likelihood for younger viewers to encounter public-affairs TV accidentally has decreased. This development could be reinforced by less interest in public affairs among young people (Delli Carpini, 2000). Declining news consumption of young people has also been found in other countries, for instance,

in the U.S. or the U.K. (Delli Carpini, 2000; Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002; Mindich, 2005). A decreasing attention to public affairs by younger people is especially alarming if this trend can be found across different media. Younger people are, for instance, often assumed to make more use of new media. However, television still is the most important news source for young Dutch people today (Van Cauwenberge, Beentjes, & d'Haenens, 2011).

Limitations

Although specific limitations have already been mentioned throughout the chapters, some general remarks apply to the studies conducted and the overall conclusions. These concern the method of data gathering, the Netherlands as our country of research, and the focus on television.

By using people-meter data, this study could overcome many shortcomings of self-reported exposure measures typically used in survey research. The main advantages of our datasets were the richness of information about individual television viewing behavior, the exclusion of memory as a potential cause of measurement error, and the possibility to compare viewing behavior over a longer period of time. As discussed in chapter two, people-meter data, too, do not yield perfect measures but have their own issues of validity (Napoli, 2003; SKO, 2008; Webster, Phalen, & Lichty, 2006). The main problems are related to the quality of the sample and the accuracy of the measurements. And since this is a secondary analysis, I had to rely on the variables available.

We used, for instance, political interest as a proxy for viewer's interests in public-affairs programming in the longitudinal studies in chapter four and chapter five. Political interest is certainly of importance here because many are worried about gaps in news exposure between citizens who are politically interested and those who are not (Ksiazek et al., 2010; Prior, 2007). But, of course, people do not watch the news solely because they are interested in politics. It may be thrilling for them, funny, or provide topics for conversations. Unfortunately, motivations of that kind were not measured in the survey at hand. We could only use, more generally, genre preferences in the cross-sectional studies of chapter two and chapter three. This is why we have to be somewhat cautious with statements such as "situation is more important than motivation."

Although very detailed, the viewing data are restricted to observational measures of TV program choices. Consequently, direct inferences about viewers' intentions, for instance, when switching between channels are not possible.

Switching to a news program might, for instance, result from the wish to follow the news but also be an attempt to avoid the programming on a different channel without having to turn off the TV. To date, however, there is no alternative way of measuring viewing behavior on such a detailed level and on a large scale as it can be done with people-meter systems.

A second general remark concerns the specifics of the Dutch context. The Netherlands are certainly an exemplary case for democratic-corporatist media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). So, the national public-affairs programming can be considered similar to other North-Western European countries. However, levels of consumption of TV news and newspapers are relatively high in the Netherlands compared to other European countries (Tenscher, 2008). Furthermore, news consumption in the Netherlands is still dominated by traditional media, namely TV, radio, and newspapers (Van der Burg, Lauf, & Negenborn, 2011). These characteristics certainly have a strong influence on our findings. Of course, the generalizability of the results obtained from studying one country is always limited. That is why our evidence has to be interpreted in the specific context of the Dutch viewing environment. But most likely, similar media systems, in particular with a comparable public-broadcasting system, would yield comparable results. Also, the finding of a strong impact of the viewing – or media environment – might be generalizable since it is the available structure that determines to what extent media users can follow their interests or develop consumption habits.

The third point of our limitations: Media use in high-choice media environments is not restricted to watching television. Research on media repertoires has undertaken first steps toward holistic approaches to media use in general (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006; Reagan, 1996; van Rees & van Eijck, 2003). However, learning how media users respond to changes specifically of the TV environment might also inform us about media users in general. Plus, the focus on one medium gives room for thorough investigation. How do viewers respond to an increasing complexity? How does choice behavior change? And most importantly, how does the influence of viewing motivations and situational factors on viewing decisions change over time? With the methodological approach that is chosen for this study, these questions can be answered specifically for TV consumption in a very detailed manner.

Some Implications for Future Research

This was the first study that made extensive use of Dutch people-meter data to study exposure to news and current-affairs programs over time. Including motivational and situational factors to explain viewing behavior contributed to ongoing attempts in audience research to integrate formerly exclusive theoretical perspectives. Finally, this was the first comprehensive longitudinal analysis of exposure to public-affairs TV in a European context. Based on the conclusions and limitations of our studies, several implications for future research can be outlined.

First of all, more international comparison is necessary to reach broader conclusions about the relevance and developments of public-affairs TV. In addition to comparisons to a market liberal media system such as that of the U.S., the diversity of information cultures within Europe should be further investigated. The use of people-meter data offers opportunities for internationally comparative research that have not been exploited so far. Similar techniques of collecting and applying people-meter data are used in a large number of countries. Often, the data collection is conducted by market research companies that even operate internationally such as Nielsen, TNS, or GfK.

This dissertation developed an integrated approach to audience behavior. Individual viewer characteristics as well as aspects of viewing situations have been taken into account to study exposure to public-affairs programming. The use of people-meter data allowed to directly compare motivational and situational determinants of viewing behavior. Integrative approaches to study audience behavior should be further developed in several ways, for instance, by accounting for a broader range of viewing motivations (see: Cooper & Tang, 2009) that could be based on action-theoretical approaches (e.g., Hartmann, 2009; LaRose, 2009; Westerik, Renckstorf, Lammers, & Wester, 2006).

Most likely, the relevance of new media will have tremendous effects on manners of obtaining information about ongoing political or societal events. More possibilities allow for quick news updates throughout the day or offer opportunities for more personalized information; for instance, via news feeds. Thus, especially with a growing relevance of online sources, consumption of public-affairs information should be studied across platforms (e.g., Kim, 2011; Ksiazek et al., 2010). In particular, the study of news consumption of young citizens considering multiple platforms seems inevitable. In 2009, traditional media still dominated the news consumption of young people in the Netherlands and

Belgium (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2011). However, following the development of information diets will reveal the impact of new media as sources for public affairs information for future generations.

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