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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*.

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Television has long been regarded as the ‘main’ source of public-affairs information. News and current-affairs programming has been assumed to reach viewers irrespective of their socioeconomic status, or their actual interest in news and politics. The relevance of TV as a public-affairs medium, however, has been challenged by tremendous changes in the viewing environment. More viewing choices have raised concerns about audience fragmentation and specialization. The increasing variety of viewing alternatives enhances selective program choices. Viewers with no interest in news and current-affairs are enabled to avoid public-affairs programming completely, or shift to more entertaining infotainment or soft-news formats. So far, such shifts in individual viewing behavior have not been explored over longer periods of time. This dissertation studies the consequences of a changing viewing environment for exposure to news and current-affairs programs in the Netherlands from 1988 to 2010.

An integrated approach to audience behavior is developed to study program choices in the context of exposure to news and current-affairs programs. It draws on individual approaches to audience behavior such as uses-and-gratifications research as well as the structural approach of audience duplication research. Influences of viewing motivations and aspects of viewing situations are integrated for a comprehensive understanding of viewing behavior.

This theoretical framework is applied to study changes of exposure to public-affairs TV in the Netherlands. From 1988 to 2010, the Dutch national TV market has gradually changed from two public-service channels to a multi-channel environment offering a mix of public and commercial channels. Increasing competition has resulted in a greater variety of public-affairs programming. People-meter data on the individual level are used to analyze how viewers have responded to this expansion of choice opportunities. Electronically recorded viewing data provide precise measurements of exposure to public-affairs TV and overall viewing behavior.

A comparison of different manners of measuring news exposure with people-meter data reveals three dimensions of news viewing: the amount of news exposure, the selectivity towards news programs, and the viewer’s news-viewing

share. Although manners of program choice have been assumed to gain importance in a high-choice viewing environment, the amount of news viewing explains differences between viewers in the most powerful and consistent way.

A cross-sectional analysis of the amount of exposure to news programs compares and integrates motivational and situational influences. Aspects of viewing situations, such as the amount of time that viewers spend watching TV, watching adjacent programs on the same channel, and the presence of other people, have a stronger impact on news exposure than motivational factors, such as a viewer's interest in news and politics or active choice behavior. A longitudinal study of news consumption reveals that this prevalence of the viewing situation has been consistent over the entire research period. Finally, an analysis of informational viewing patterns over-time reveals that individual information diets have included an increasing variety of public-affairs formats, from serious to more entertaining, light programs. Diverse and comprehensive information diets are, thereby, associated with a high relevance of TV as a medium.

Thus, contrary to fears of audience fragmentation and specialization, Dutch viewers have spent more time watching a greater diversity of public-affairs TV over the last two decades. Exposure to traditional news formats has especially increased. Viewers did not shift from traditional formats that focus on politics and current-affairs to more entertaining information programs, but embraced the growing variety of serious and entertaining information formats. The growing relevance of public-affairs TV in the Netherlands can be understood as an interplay of a specific viewing environment and characteristics of audience behavior. The results indicate that viewing habits, triggered by situational factors, become stronger in more complex choice situations. Stable habits of watching public-affairs TV might be encouraged by the long-standing tradition, and also by the good reputation of the national public-affairs programming. The typical Western-European mix of public-affairs programs broadcast by public-service and commercial channels might be responsible for a diversity of news and current-affairs programs that is perceived as reliable and appealing by the audience.

The increase of exposure to public-affairs TV emphasizes the Dutch case as an exceptional one. However, the positive trends do not apply to the same extent to younger viewers, and thus might not last. A decreasing attention to news and current affairs by younger viewers, and possible consequences for their political involvement, will be the main challenge for the relevance of television as a public-affairs medium in the future.