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### Transformations of television systems: Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes

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**Publication date**  
2014

[Link to publication](#)

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

Arbaoui, B. (2014). *Transformations of television systems: Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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## Chapter 3

### Sensationalism in news coverage

#### A comparative study in 14 television systems and 29 television stations

##### Abstract<sup>18</sup>

Drawing on a sample of 14 television systems and 29 television stations, we investigate the effect of two dimensions of media systems on sensational news coverage: (1) the television system dependency on advertising as a source of income and (2) audience fragmentation. At the aggregate level, both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency yield significant effects on three dimensions of sensationalism. The news coverage of commercial channels is more likely to be sensational in topics and in storytelling compared to public television. The difference in these two dimensions of sensationalism between commercial and public channels increases as television systems become more fragmented. This finding does *not* support the common hypothesis according to which commercial and public broadcasters would converge as a consequence of an increasing audience fragmentation. The analysis reveals that both advertising dependency and audience fragmentation stimulate the use of sensationalist formal features - the third dimension of sensationalism -, without revealing any channel-level effects.

**Keywords:** audience fragmentation, sensational news coverage, television news, comparative communication, media systems.

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<sup>18</sup> This chapter is a revision of a paper co-authored with Knut de Swert, Stefaan Walgrave and Wouter van der Brug.

### **3.1. Introduction**

When commercial television stations entered West-European media systems, many observers feared this would inevitably generate 'poor' quality media coverage. In this view, economic considerations would increasingly dominate journalistic production so that journalists could no longer serve their role of the democratic 'Fourth Estate' (Hamilton, 2004). Commercial television producers would consider their audiences as potential consumers who should get what they want (i.e., entertainment and sensation) instead of as citizens who should be informed and educated. This consumer-orientated style of news production and packaging would allegedly generate more entertainment-oriented news stories and news items that are 'sensational' or 'tabloid-like' (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; McManus, 1994) So, in commercialised media systems, news would be less informative and the credibility and objectivity of news reporting would therefore be at risk<sup>19</sup>.

In the West-European context, the commercialisation of television systems is often portrayed as a historical shift from a system that was dominated by a government-funded public television monopoly to a mixed revenues dual television system in which public and private television co-exist (Brants and De Bens, 2000; Siune & Hulten, 1998). The general assumption of prior studies is that these changes in television systems will compel television channels to increasingly consider news as a commodity instead of a public good. It is often assumed that the urge to 'sell' the news in order to attract audiences and/or to make profit will inevitably lead to low quality news centred on infotainment, sensationalism and human-interest news (e.g. Manning, 2001).

Notwithstanding these claims, there are few empirical studies that have actually tested this assumed direct effect of the aforementioned changes of media

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<sup>19</sup> Implicit to this literature is the assumption that citizens do not *really* want to be educated or informed.

systems on media content. Most studies that address these effects are channel level studies, while appropriate testing of such effects would require an analysis of the structural features of entire media systems affecting news coverage and would necessitate a comparative approach between national media systems. This is the approach of this study.

We investigate these common hypotheses about the effects of media system change on media content by analysing the relationship between the relative dominance of sensationalism in news coverage and two aspects of television systems: (1) Television systems' advertising dependency; and (2) Audience fragmentation across television channels, indicating competition intensity. Drawing on data from 14 television systems and 29 private and public television stations, we analyse the effects of these two television system characteristics on sensationalism in news coverage, and also investigate whether channel level effects depend on these contextual characteristics. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses such a cross-level design to study sensationalism in news coverage.

## ***3.2. Theoretical background***

### **3.2.1. Characterising the television systems**

The transformation of the television system from a pure public institution to a dual institution is often thought to have been accompanied by the adoption of more business-like management philosophies, values and approaches. In this process, television systems, which in most West-European countries were organised as a public sector institution, have been transformed into markets where competition for advertising revenues and audiences determine the delivered services. In Western- Europe this process generally started in the 1980s. In this study we focus on two crucial components of this process of transformation: (1) Increasing

advertising dependency of television systems; and (2) increasing competition intensity between television channels measured by the degree of audience fragmentation across channels. In chapter two, we operationalised these two concepts.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the introduction of commercial television stations changed the rules of the game of West-European television systems in two ways. First, it meant that new *for profit* actors, who mainly depended on commercial revenues from advertisers, entered television systems. Gaining substantial audience shares, preferably consisting of the right target group of consumers, was essential to the success of these channels. Second, while in most West-European countries public television stations are still important players, public channels increasingly had to generate part of their income from advertising. Public channels therefore saw themselves competing with private channels for audiences in order to generate revenues and in order to legitimise their existence. Both the entry of commercial TV and the increasing dependency of public television on commercial revenues increased commercial and competitive pressure in television system as a whole.

The fact that there are more channels, each attracting smaller segments of audiences, implies that there is more competition among channels for audience shares and advertising money. Competition intensity between television channels is often cited as one of the most important driving forces of the so-called entertainment focus (Aalberg et al., 2013; Curran et al., 2009). Research has shown that when competition is fierce, television channels tend to produce increasingly *similar and low quality* programmes (Van der Wurff & Van Cuilenburg, 2001).

We can therefore hypothesise that the more the system is dependent on advertising, the more news will be treated as a commodity, leading to the increasing

domination of consumer-oriented styles of news production. Some scholars assume that if news becomes a commodity in commercially oriented media that it somehow automatically loses its informative and educative value. For instance, (McManus, 1995, p. 85) argues that that: “to the extent that the business goal of maximizing profit dominates”, competitors will offer “the least expensive content that guarantees the largest audience”. He also asserts that the market rationale of minimising costs and maximising profits has produced trivial, superficial and often inaccurate reporting.

However, McManus describes this process of *competition* for the almost totally commercially oriented media context of the US. West-European television systems differ from the US system since they are dual systems consisting of a mix of public and private television. One can argue that the ‘business goal of maximizing profit’ is less dominant in European media systems because public television plays an important role, which benefits from government support in terms of funding, and because of the presence of content regulation. Competition in West-European television systems is therefore partly a competition between profit-oriented television channels and non-profit public television. This ‘mixed’ competition may not be completely driven by profit making as in the case of the US, where all news organisations are for-profit actors. However, the struggle to attract and retain audiences may not be less intense.

The related struggle of maximising audiences and revenues particularly applies to commercial channels. The more intense the competition, the more difficult it will be to attract audiences and advertising money. This would make it hard for television channels to invest in high-quality reporting, which would push them to produce low-cost and easy-to-sell media products (Picard, 2000, p. 178).

### **3.2.2. Sensationalism in news coverage**

Empirical evidence suggests that news producers have used sensational ‘non-substantive’ news topics such as violence, crime, accidents, disasters, sex, and misconduct in an attempt to attract viewers (Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, , 2005; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). The profit motive of media and the ability of sensational news to attract audience’s attention are often cited as the drive behind using sensational news. This alleged increasing level of sensationalism in news coverage is often seen as an indication of a supposed declining quality of news coverage.

Early research on sensationalism in news coverage has tended to operationalise sensationalism as an issue feature. In this logic, some topics are seen as emotionally arousing and are thus defined as ‘sensational’. This research made a dichotomous distinction between ‘proper’ and ‘entertaining’ news topics. Other scholars argue that sensationalism does not need to be a feature of news topics only, but should include its capacity to arouse audiences emotionally by addressing their human biological sensory system (Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011).

Following this literature, we focus on the characteristics of news that *arouses audiences emotionally* in the operationalisation of sensationalism. Arousing elements in a news item may occur along three dimensions. The first one is the topic, which is the traditional way of operationalising sensationalism. For instance, content about violence and sex are typically sensational issues. The second dimension is the storytelling perspective. In comparison to abstract information, using human exemplars giving concrete and emotional testimonies is considered to be salient information in news stories. Personalised exemplification exerts

considerable emotional influence on viewers' processing of the news (Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2011). Ordinary people can be used in news as actors by commenting on a topic as a passer-by or as an eyewitness. In this way ordinary people function as actors in news and fulfil this function of exemplification. It has been argued that sensational news involves actors who tend to 'personalize and dramatize news by ordinary people' (Bek, 2010; Wang, 2012). Some empirical European studies have revealed the use of this strategy by commercial television stations (Hvitfelt, 1994 for Sweden). Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) found that, between 1995 and 2001, the use of ordinary people increased in Dutch television news coverage. As this period was characterised by an increase in news programmes, they suggest this trend may be explained by increasing competition.

The third dimension of sensationalism is the use of specific audio-visual features. In the relevant literature these are referred to as '*formal features*'. Using music and specific camera techniques arouses the attention of the audiences as it directly affects the human sensory system (Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). These sensational features include a fast editing pace, an eyewitness camera perspective, zoom-in camera lens movements, re-enactment of news events, the use of music, and voice-over narration (Wang 2012). Empirical research has shown that audiences pay attention to these formal features of news to make a distinction between serious news and sensational news. Audiences viewed news that used lavish audio-visual techniques as less serious (Grabe et al. 2001). The separation of these three dimensions of sensationalism will allow us to assess which of the strategies described above are most preferred by television channels. Our operationalisation of sensationalism for this study is elaborated in the section 3.4.

### **3.3. Hypotheses**

Due to the lack of cross-national comparative data, most prior studies addressed the relationship between the transformations of television systems and media content by testing the differences between private television on the one hand, and public television on the other (for a review see: Schaap & Pleijter, 2012). Much of this research is based on the idea that public service and commercial channels have different goals (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). While public service broadcasting is mainly preoccupied with providing the necessary information for an informed citizenry, commercial broadcasters need to prioritise ratings for their survival, leading to a “greater responsiveness to popular pleasures” (Curran, 2000, p. 143; see also: Curran et al., 2009). In addition, the costs of sensational news are relatively low while its impact on attracting audiences seems high. This makes covering more crime, for instance, attractive for commercially driven media outlets (Esser, 1999). Several studies found that commercial channels air more ‘soft’ and sensational news than public broadcasters (Hvitfelt, 1994; Norris, 2000, pp. 110-111; Powers, Kristjansdottir, & Sutton, 1994). That is why we expect news coverage in commercial television to be more sensational in its selection of news topics, its storytelling perspective, and the formal features of sensationalism in comparison with public television news coverage.

Although commercial channels might be more sensitive to profit motives in their news production in comparison with publically owned television, comparing both types of organisations is not an appropriate methodology to empirically test of the claims stated above. This test does not take the market context in which the channels operate into consideration and can only say something about the behaviour of (some) commercial channels versus (some) public channels and does not allow us to directly assess the aggregate effects of the television environment on news content. After all, the programming of publicly owned channels is likely to also

be affected by the introduction of private channels and these channels have also become more dependent on advertising revenues. The choices made by television stations do not only depend on their public or private status, but also on characteristics of the market in which they operate which determine their competitive strategies. Theoretically, a commercial channel may choose for “dumbing down” quality in order to maximise profit, but another competing commercial channel might chose for quality instead, in order to make profit through reaching particular niche audiences targeted by particular advertisers. Such choices for a specific competitive strategy are likely to depend not only on the channel characteristics but also on competition intensity in the entire media system.

At the aggregate level, the tendency to ‘sell news for profit’ may also differ between television systems because some systems rely more on advertising revenues than others. In addition, at the aggregate level, the effect of ‘wanting to sell news for profit’ may be cancelled out when various channels use opposing strategies. Yet, these effects may reinforce each other when various channels choose the same strategy and start imitating each other. This last scenario is expected to occur in extreme competitive markets (Van der Wurff & Van Cuilenburg, 2001). Previous research has generated some evidence showing that competition affects television programming and news content (Atwater, 1984; Powers et al., 1994). Competition forces media outlets to cater to the prejudices of their readers; the more competition the more aggressive catering to these prejudices there will be (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). In a longitudinal study analysing the effects of competition on the Dutch television market, van der Wurff and van Cuilenburg (2001) found that under conditions of extreme competition, an excessive sameness of low-quality programming occurs. Similarly, a study of

various television systems in Europe suggests that competition intensity in television markets has resulted in decreased quality and a “dumbing down” of media content (OSI, 2005).

These studies suggest that competition may lead to convergence of various channels towards similar, low-quality programming. However, most of this research is conducted at the channel level or in a single country. Recently, some cross-country comparative studies have been conducted, and also suggest that sensationalism is stimulated by higher competition (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Hendriks Vettehen, Zhou, Kleemans, D'Haenens, & Lin, 2012; Wang, 2012) and higher journalistic professionalism stimulates ‘soft’ news coverage (Wang, 2012).

This study responds to the need for more cross-level research in communication studies (e.g. Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006) and in comparative studies of sensationalism in news coverage (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2012). Our study differs from previous studies because it directly measures competition intensity at the television system level and analyses its effect on news content while controlling for the advertising dependency of the whole system. Another innovative feature of our study is its use of multilevel analysis, which allows for the analysis of macro-level effects while accounting for channel-level characteristics and analysing cross-level interaction effects. From the previous discussion we draw our hypotheses.

At the aggregate level:

- **H (1.a).** *There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in topics selection.*
- **H (2.a).** *There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in storytelling perspective.*
- **H (3.a).** *There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in formal features.*

At the channel level:

- **H (1.b).** *There is more sensationalism in news topics in privately owned channels compared to public channels.*
- **H (2.b).** *There is more sensationalism in storytelling perspective in privately owned channels compared to public channels.*
- **H (3.b).** *There is more sensationalism in formal features in privately owned channels compared to public channels.*

These hypothesised differences between private and public channels might depend on the competition intensity between television channels, which is known in the literature as the convergence thesis (Pfetsch, 1996). The realisation of the ideals of public 'service' television (e.g. Curran et al. 2009) may not be fully achieved in situations in which public television partly depends on commercial revenues and has to cope with competition from other television channels at the same time. Although most studies have found that European public broadcasting generally produces a more varied and educational programming than commercial (private)

television (De Bens, 1998; McQuail, 1998; Pfetsch, 1996), signs of convergence in programming between commercial and public broadcasters have also been noted (e.g. De Bens 1998; Pfetsch 1996). Although the empirical focus of this study is on programming, the theoretical argument can be extended to news coverage. It is also possible that some commercial channels chose to compete with public television while imitating public television standard of content quality. Also in this case, convergence between both types of channels will result. Hence, public and private channels are both likely to be influenced by the larger media context, and convergence between programming/news coverage of public and private channels is more likely to happen in a competitive television context. This leads to the final set of hypotheses.

At the cross-level:

- **H (1.c).** *The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in news topics is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e. convergence).*
- **H (2.c).** *The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in storytelling perspective is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e., convergence).*
- **H (3.c).** *The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in formal features is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e., convergence).*

### **3.4. Content analysis**

To measure the dependent variables, which cover the three dimensions of sensational news, we rely on a content analysis of a sample of 29 daily newscasts

on public and private television stations from 14 television systems. This sample is taken from two existing data sets, which provide data on all variables for 14 media systems: Belgium (where we distinguish between the French and Dutch media systems), Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. For Italy, Poland, Portugal and Switzerland the sampling period is January-March 2008 (Cohen, Hanitzsch, & Stepinska, 2013). For the other countries, the sample was taken between December 2006 and April 2007. These periods were selected as in none of the countries elections were called. Fortunately, no major news events dominated the international news agenda during that period. Even so, the exact same days were coded in all countries during the two sampling periods to avoid that large international events would bias the data and make them non-comparable between countries.

In almost all countries, we included the newscast that had the largest viewership of one commercial channel and one public broadcaster. In total 812 broadcasts and 13,444 news items were analysed and coded. Table 3.1 contains a description of the distribution of the news items across television station. The total number of items is large and the amount of items per country and per station is sufficient to be able to analyse sensationalism both at the country as well as at the channel level. The sample is partially a convenience sample. Availability of newscasts online and of native-speaking coders played a role, as well as the availability of data on audience shares and public versus commercial revenues. However, we consider the sample to be sound on theoretical grounds, because, with the exception of Turkey and Poland, the selected countries share similar traditions of public broadcasting and they have all experienced a liberalisation process of their television systems.

**Table 3.1. Sample of 28 days of coverage in main evening newscast on 29 TV stations in 14 television systems**

<i>TV Station</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Channel type</i>	<i># news items</i>
VRT	Belgium-Flanders	Public	595
VTM	Belgium-Flanders	Commercial	594
RTBF	Belgium-French	Public	489
RTL-tvi	Belgium-French	Commercial	582
CBC	Canada	Public	208
CTV	Canada	Commercial	347
Fr2	France	Public	564
TF1	France	Commercial	712
ARD	Germany	Public	262
ZDF	Germany	Public	293
RTL	Germany	Commercial	336
RTE	Ireland	Public	484
RAI	Italy	Public	737
Canal5	Italy	Commercial	628
NOS	Netherlands	Public	334
RTL4	Netherlands	Commercial	286
NRK	Norway	Public	481
TV2	Norway	Commercial	400
TVP1	Poland	Public	279
TVPN	Poland	Commercial	261
RTP	Portugal	Public	841
TVI	Portugal	Commercial	866
SF1	Switzerland	Public	489
TeleZuri	Switzerland	Commercial	351
TSR	Switzerland	Public	542
TRT	Turkey	Public	598
Star	Turkey	Commercial	496
BBC	UK	Public	234
ITV	UK	Commercial	155
Total	14	29	13.444

Although the number of news broadcasts is the same for all television stations, the total number of news items differs. This is due to two factors: the length of the main newscasts and the length of the news items differ across channels. In France, the commercial broadcaster *TF1* had long newscasts with on average short items which explains the higher sample of news items (N=712) while the other extreme, *ITV* in the UK, had short newscasts leading to a smaller sample of news items (N=155). However, these different samples can still be compared since we took the main news shows aired in prime time for each country.

Coders, carefully trained, and most of them native speakers, watched the recorded news broadcasts, and analysed them item per item. Four per cent of the sample was double-coded (due to the difficulty of finding enough native coders in many different languages). The key variable from which our dependent variables are constructed is the issue code. Drawing upon a detailed issue-codebook containing more than 200 different issue codes, coders could attribute up to three issue codes to a single news item. In many cases, coders only gave one code, and the average number of issue codes per item is 1.47. The intercoder-reliability score for the issue code is satisfying, with Cohen's kappa equal to 0.80. We recoded these original codes to construct a variable that indicates sensational news topics versus non-sensational news topics: If one of these three issue codes referred to crime (including crime policy, (political) corruption), misconduct, violence, disasters, accidents, terrorism, sex, drugs or celebrities, we consider the item to be about sensational topics (see Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2011)<sup>20</sup>.

We measure sensationalism in storytelling by investigating the use of personalised exemplification in news coverage by assessing the frequency of appearance of ordinary people as actors in news item. In news items an actor is

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix B for the list of sensational topics used.

coded if s/he is interviewed or quoted in the news item or when s/he is the subject of the news item. Many different people are shown in news items and, in this study, the focus is on only one type of actor: involved individuals (bystander, witnesses, victims, and perpetrators). This category only contains 'ordinary' citizens and does not include the authoritative actors (politicians, police, advocates, justice) involved in the news story. The intercoder-reliability score for these variables is 0.90 Cohen's kappa. Items that contain at least one of the ordinary actors above are defined as sensational news items.

To measure formal features of sensational news coverage, we focus on characteristics that elicit emotions. Each news item was scored on a number of dummy variables covering each sensational character (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). Because of data limitations we distinguish only two types of formal features: sensationalism in images and in sounds. Sensational images are images that are emotionally arousing, for instance images showing violence, dead bodies, or injuries of people. The sound of a news item can be sensational too: it can have a music score, contain dramatic sound (e.g. a gunshot), dramatic sound produced by people (e.g. crying and screaming), and/or incorporate sounds of joy. Sensationalism in these formal features is measured by six dichotomous variables: (1) the item shows violent scenes; (2) the use of images of dead people; (3) the use of background music in the news item; (4) the use of special effects in images (slow motion, speed-up motion, repetition of visuals, close-ups, soft focus, and other camera techniques); (5) the use of animated presentation exemplified by a stand-up journalist; (6) the use of pictorial or graphic representation (Chan & Lee, 2013; Wilke & Heimprecht, 2013).

In sum, our analyses employ three dependent variables: (1) Sensational versus non-sensational news topics; (2) Sensationalism in storytelling; and (3)

Sensational versus non-sensational formal features. These variables are binary: items with a sensational topic are coded as 1 and items with a non-sensational topic as 0. Items that use ordinary people as actors are coded as 1 and items not using ordinary actors as 0. As soon as a news item contains one of the formal features of sensationalism, we consider it to be a sensational item (score 1) and if none of these formal features is present we give it a score of 0.

### **3.5. Results**

#### **3.5.1. Descriptive evidence**

Before formally testing our hypotheses we present some descriptive analyses that give us more information about our data and variables. Table 3.2 shows the distribution of sensationalism across countries and television channels among the three dimensions of sensationalism which form our three dependent variables: (1) the selection of sensational topics versus non-sensational news topics; (2) the use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling; and (3) the use of sensational formal features in news coverage.

Table 3.2 shows that sensational news topics generally only get slightly more news attention compared to non-sensational news topics, although there are some differences between countries. In Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland and Germany non-sensational topics get more news attention. France and Poland dedicate as much coverage to sensational topics as to non-sensational topics. In the other countries sensational news topics get more attention (i.e., more news items) than non-sensational news topics. Turkey, the Netherlands and Canada show the biggest preference for sensational news over non-sensational news.

**Table 3.2. Sensationalism in news coverage across countries and television channels**

	% items with sensational news topics			% of items using ordinary actors			% of items using sensational formal features		
	Total	Public TV	Commercial TV	Total	Public TV	Commercial TV	Total	Public TV	Commercial TV
Canada	59.10	57.69	51.65	12.25	10.10	13.54	46.85	48.08	46.11
Flanders	55.00	52.77	57.24	14.21	11.26	17.17	21.95	13.78	30.13
France	50.78	50.71	50.84	12.07	13.12	11.24	47.18	43.79	49.86
Germany	49.94	45.41	57.44	6.85	4.86	10.12	31.99	32.43	31.25
Ireland	42.36	42.36	-	5.99	5.99	-	38.64	38.64	-
Italy	40.95	39.08	43.15	11.87	12.75	10.83	48.68	53.60	42.68
Norway	51.65	53.85	49.00	10.22	11.23	9.00	21.75	21.41	21.75
Poland	50.37	50.54	50.19	28.15	24.73	31.80	53.15	49.10	57.47
Portugal	40.48	38.64	42.26	15.58	14.86	16.28	14.70	15.81	13.63
Switzerland	49.13	46.36	57.26	8.68	7.76	11.40	30.97	29.49	35.33
The Netherlands	61.77	60.48	63.29	10.97	9.88	12.24	38.39	42.81	33.22
Turkey	62.43	56.19	69.96	12.25	5.85	19.96	73.22	62.21	86.49
UK	57.07	54.27	61.29	15.68	17.52	12.90	48.84	47.86	50.32
Wallonia	50.98	48.26	53.26	11.58	10.22	12.71	39.31	50.31	30.07
Total	50.36	48.03	53.23	12.33	10.75	14.28	37.67	36.89	38.63
N	13,444	7,430	6,014	13,444	7,430	6,014	13,444	7,430	6,014

The data also reveal important differences between channels. Overall, public channels spend less coverage on sensational news topics than commercial channels do. However, this general picture does not hold true for all commercial and public channels. In Norway for instance, the public station (NRK) has more coverage on sensational topics whereas the privately owned TV2 has more coverage on non-sensational topics. In Canada, Flanders, UK, the Netherlands, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, France and Poland both the main commercial and the main public channel cover more sensational news topics than non-sensational topics.

Approximately one third of the items in our sample use individual actors to construct the news narrative. 22 per cent of the items only use authoritative actors, while 12.3 per cent of the news items use ordinary actors. We also see differences between private and public channels. There is generally a stronger tendency for commercial channels to use ordinary people as actors in news storytelling compared to public channels, although this is not always the case. For instance, the publically owned BBC (UK) and NRK (Norway) both use more ordinary people than their privately owned competitors. There are also differences between television systems. Poland stands out with both public and commercial channels having a high share of news items using ordinary people, while Germany has the lowest use of ordinary people in news coverage.

Approximately one third of the news items in our sample use at least one sensational formal feature. At the country level, Turkey and Poland stand out with a majority of news items using sensational formal features. The UK, France, Italy, and Canada have nearly as many items with and without sensational formal features. For the Walloon Public television RTBF, the French commercial channel TF1, and the British commercial channel ITV, 50 per cent of the items use at least

one sensational formal feature. For the Italian public television Rai1 and the Polish commercial television channel TVN, a majority of news items have formal features of sensationalism. Turkish channels stand out in the use of sensational formal features. The Turkish public channel TRT, also uses a lot of sensationalist formats. On closer inspection, Turkish sensationalism is partly due to the abundant use of background music. Yet, even without taking music into account, the commercial Turkish channel *Star* would still be the champion of formal features sensationalism. Although commercial channels display more sensational formal features than public channels, the differences between commercial channels and public channels are generally small, and the variation between broadcasting systems as a whole seem more important.

To summarise these descriptive findings: sensationalism in news topics selection is relatively more frequent than sensationalism in storytelling and sensationalism in formal features. There are some differences between television systems in the levels of sensationalism in news topics and storytelling, but channel level differences are more important, with commercial channels depicting these two forms of sensationalism more often than public channels. Sensationalism in formal features also varies between commercial and public channels but the differences between countries seem to be more important. To understand these variations in the levels of sensationalism across countries and channels we will employ a multivariate, multilevel regression analysis, which will allow investigating whether the extent to which differences between channels and between countries can be explained by our two television system characteristics.

However, before doing so, we need to analyse the relationship between the three dimensions of sensationalism to see whether they can be seen as three variables underlying one *unique* dimension of sensationalism. We found that the

use of sensational formal features and the use of ordinary citizens as actors are significantly and positively associated with selection of sensational topics. In other words, sensational news topics depict more ordinary actors and more sensational formal features. At the channel level, the Pearson correlation coefficient between sensational news topics and the use of ordinary people as actors is *0.54* while the correlation coefficient between sensational news topics and the use of formal features is *0.43*. However, the correlation between the use of ordinary people as actors and the use of sensational formal features was close to zero.

This evidence suggests that, at the channel level, sensational topics tend to be packaged using sensational formal features and sensational storytelling more often, compared to non-sensational topics. However, packaging strategies, storytelling and sensational formal features are not related. At the item level the correlations between the three variables are very low. We therefore conclude that at the item level, which is our level of analysis, the three variables constitute three separate dimensions of sensationalism, and that we should therefore analyse the three variables separately.

### **3.5.2. Explaining sensationalism**

In order to explain the variation in the proportion of sensationalism (in topic, storytelling, and formal features) we estimate random intercept logistic multilevel models with three levels using the log link function for binominal distributions (Hox, 2002). The news items ( $N=13.444$ ), our level 1 unit of analysis, are first nested in television channels ( $N = 29$ ), the level 2 unit of analysis, which are nested in television systems ( $N = 14$ ), the third level. The choice for this method is not only justified by the clustered data structure, but, more importantly, by the questions of

our study that address the effect of the television system level (the macro-level) as well as the channel level (the meso-level) and the dependence of the latter on characteristics of the former (cross-level) (e.g. Slater et al., 2006).

We looked at the correlation between our independent macro-level variables before conducting the regression analysis. The correlation between competition intensity and the advertising dependency is low and not significant (Pearson's correlations is 0.36). This exemplifies our theoretical argument that these two variables measure different aspects of media systems. In our analyses we proceed to test our hypotheses as follows: In model (1) we test the television system and channel level variables and in model (2) we add the effect of cross-level interaction.

### Sensationalism in news topics

When accounting for differences in fragmentation of audiences and controlling for the advertising dependency, it appears that sensational topics have a significantly higher likelihood to be covered in the news than non-sensational topics (the effect of fragmentation is significant and positive, see table 3.3). However this likelihood is not very large: the odd ratio for the presence of sensational news topics to the expense of non-sensational topics as the television system gets more competitive is 1.03 (log odds is 0.03). Advertising dependency does not have any significant effect. Commercial channels cover sensational news topics more often than publically owned channels.

This difference between commercial and public channels is important. The odds ratio for a commercial channel covering sensational news topics is 1.23 (log odds is 0.21). This means that, on average, commercial channels cover 23 per cent more sensational news topics compared to publically owned television channels.

**Table 3.3. A three level random intercept logistic regression model explaining sensationalism in topic news selection<sup>21</sup>:**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
<b>Fixed effects</b>		
Intercept	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.04 (0.07)
Audience fragmentation	0.03* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Advertising dependency	0.002 (0.007)	0.001 (0.007)
Commercial channel	0.21*** (0.06)	0.20*** (0.04)
Audience fragmentation *Commercial channel	-	0.03*** (0.009)
<b>Estimated variances</b>		
intercept variance television system level	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)
intercept variance television channel level	0.01 (0.009)	0.005 (0.006)
<b>Goodness of fit</b>		
AICC (Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)	57.135.34	57.145.146
BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)	57.150.35	57.160.15

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001. System level effects are tested one-sidedly. N news items=13444, N channels=29, N television systems=14. Sensational news topics =1 and non-sensational topics =0 (the reference category). Commercial channel =1 and public channel =0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

The cross-level interaction between fragmentation and the channel type is positive and has the same sign as the effect of the channel type. This implies that fragmentation strengthens the effect of the channel type: commercial channels in

<sup>21</sup> The analyses were conducted using the GENLIMIXED programme in IBM SPSS version 19. The GENLIMIXED programme for categorical outcomes uses a method of estimation referred to as active set method (ASM) with Newton-Raphson estimation (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2012). We also tested for the presence of cross-level interactions between advertising dependency and channel type, but none were present (results not shown).

more than average competitive television systems tend to significantly cover more sensational news topics, than commercial channels in less than average competitive television systems.

It seems that public channels are not significantly affected by the level of competition, although the direction of the effect of audience fragmentation on public channels is positive (0.01, see model 2). To see whether our results are robust, we performed a jack-knife test in which we excluded one country at a time (results not shown). We found the effect of channel type and cross-level interaction to be significant in all cases, and to have the same direction as shown in the table. The effect of audience fragmentation on public television which has not reached the significance level was positive in all cases. It reached the significance level in one case, that is, when we excluded Norway from the analysis.

In sum, our results support the hypothesis that audience fragmentation stimulates sensational news topic selection, but also show that the coverage of sensational topics does not depend on the level of the advertising dependency of the television system.<sup>22</sup> H (1.a) is thus partly supported, while H (1.b) is fully supported as commercial channels have a clear preference for selecting sensational news topics compared to publically owned channels. H (1.c) is not supported and we cannot speak about convergence of public and commercial channels under the influence of stronger competition. When television systems are more competitive, commercial channels tend to provide more coverage for sensational topics than they already do irrespective of the level of audience fragmentation. Public channels are not significantly affected by audience fragmentation, neither positively nor negatively. So, audience fragmentation does not urge them to distinguish

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<sup>22</sup> The interaction between our two television system variables was positive but not statistically significant.

themselves by offering less sensational topics.

It seems that public television channels carefully observe the coverage of commercial channels without *significantly* following their behaviour. The presence of an aggregate positive level effect for fragmentation, even when controlling for the channel type (see the results of model 1), support this interpretation. We conclude that the results do not indicate convergence between private and public channels when competition becomes more intense, but also do not suggest divergence.

#### Sensationalism in news storytelling: the use of ordinary actors

When controlling for fragmentation of audiences and advertising dependency at system level as well as for channel type, we find that television systems which depend more on advertising have a significantly higher use of 'ordinary actors' in news coverage (see table 3.4). This effect is not dependent on channel level characteristics. Contrary to expectation, competitive television systems tend to use this strategy significantly less often. Commercial channels have a significantly higher use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling compared to public television channels. Model 2 suggests that the negative effect of fragmentation of audiences is related to the behaviour of public television. The effect of audience fragmentation on public channels is negative and significant (-0.06), while commercial television in more fragmented television system tends to use significantly more ordinary actors as news actors.

**Table 3.4. A three level random intercept logistic regression model explaining sensationalism in news storytelling.**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
<b>Fixed effects</b>		
Intercept	-2.12*** (0.11)	-2.01*** (0.11)
Audience fragmentation	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)
Advertising dependency	0.02* (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)
Commercial channel	0.29* (0.14)	0.26* (0.13)
Audience fragmentation *Commercial channel	-	0.05* (0.02)
<b>Estimated variances</b>		
intercept variance television system level	0.06 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)
intercept variance television channel level	0.11 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)
<b>Goodness of fit</b>		
AICC(Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)	68.904.65	68.930.81
BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)	68.919.66	68.945.82

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001. System-level effects are tested one-sidedly. N news items=13444, N channels=29, N television systems=14. Sensational news topics =1 and non-sensational topics =0 (the reference category). Commercial channel =1 and public channel =0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

With regard to our hypotheses, we can reject our proposition that, in the aggregate, audience fragmentation leads to the increased use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling, but advertising dependency does, on the aggregate, lead to more sensationalism in storytelling. Hypothesis (2.a) is thus partly rejected. The effect of advertising dependency is positive and does not depend on the channel type, indicating that in highly advertising-dependent television systems, both

commercial and public television make increased use of ordinary people in news storytelling. Commercial television uses ordinary people in storytelling significantly more frequently than public television. H (2.b) is thus fully supported. The empirical results do not support the hypothesis of convergence between commercial television and public television. Instead, the results suggest that in competitive television systems, public television distinguishes itself from commercial television by using ordinary people significantly less often than already is the case in less competitive systems. So, in competitive television systems, the distance between commercial television and public television becomes larger instead of smaller. H (2.c) is therefore rejected.

#### Sensationalism in the formal features of news

Table 3.5 shows that fragmentation of audiences; and advertising dependency are both significantly positively correlated with the use of sensational formal features in news coverage. This means that H (3.a.) is accepted. Contrary to the other dimensions of sensationalism, the results concerning the presence of formal features do not reveal any significant channel level effects. H (3.b.) is therefore rejected. The aggregate-level effects that we found do not depend on the privately or publically ownership of channels. H (3.c.) is therefore rejected: Commercial and public channels use formal features of sensationalism in their news coverage equally frequently.

**Table 3.5. A three level random intercept logistic regression explaining sensationalism in the formal features of news**

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
<b>Fixed effects</b>		
Intercept	-0.56*** (0.15)	-0.56*** (0.15)
Audience fragmentation	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)
Advertising dependency	0.03* (0.01)	0.03* (0.01)
Commercial channel	0.1 (0.1)	0.1 (0.15)
Audience fragmentation *Commercial channel	-	0.01 (0.03)
<b>Estimated variances</b>		
intercept variance television system level	0.19 (0.11)	0.18 (0.11)
intercept variance television channel level	0.13 (0.05)	0.14 (0.06)
<b>Goodness of fit</b>		
AICC(Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)	59.808.89	59.820.217
BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)	59.823.90	59.835.228

\* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001. System-level effects are tested one sidedly. N news items=13444, N channels=29, N television systems=14. Sensational news topics =1 and non-sensational topics =0 (the reference category). Commercial channel =1 and public channel =0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

### **3.6. Discussion**

This study investigated the effect of television system dependency on advertising ; and of audience fragmentation on sensationalism in news coverage. Following earlier research, this study measured sensationalism in news coverage using three dimensions. We distinguished sensationalism in news topics, sensationalism in storytelling by using personalised exemplification, and sensationalism in formal features through the use of emotionally arousing features in news coverage. To our

knowledge, this is the first study that simultaneously assesses aggregate level effects, channel level effects and cross-level effects on the three dimensions of sensationalism in news coverage. Empirically, these three dimensions appeared to be independent from each other. The empirical analyses revealed significant effects of audience fragmentation and television system advertising dependency across the three dimensions of sensationalism.

We found that, at the aggregate level, audience fragmentation leads to a small but significant increase in the selection of sensational news topics. The advertising dependency of television systems did not seem to matter in determining the degree of selection of sensational news topics. Commercial channels appeared to have a stronger preference for selecting sensational news topics, while increasing levels of system-level competition further reinforced this tendency. The analyses on sensationalism in news topics did not support the hypothesis that public and commercial television converged as a result of intensified competition. However, the analysis did not find evidence for a distinction strategy of public under increased competition either.

For storytelling – the second dimension of sensationalism – the empirical analysis offers a somewhat different picture than for sensationalism in news topics. Audience fragmentation has an aggregate negative effect on the use of personalised exemplification in news storytelling. The television system's advertising dependency, however, has an aggregate level positive effect on sensationalism in storytelling. Again, commercial channels turn out to be keener to use personalised exemplification in news storytelling than public television. For this dimension of sensationalism, audience fragmentation is associated with a divergence, instead of a convergence, between public television and commercial television, resulting in a

negative aggregate-level effect of audience fragmentation on sensationalism in news storytelling.

The third dimension of sensationalism in news coverage relates to the use of sensational formal features in news coverage. The analyses show that both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency lead to a significantly more frequent use of sensational formal features in news coverage. Contrary to the two other dimensions of sensationalism, we did not find a channel level effect, indicating that there are no significant differences between commercial and public channels. Both channel types use the same amount of sensational formal features in their news coverage and this is not dependent on audience fragmentation and the advertising dependency of the television system. As this variable measures a 'technical' dimension of sensationalism, it may indicate an effect of professionalism in news production in terms of technical skills and what can be called a journalistic craftsmanship, which may be more developed in commercially oriented and competitive television systems. Technological innovation enables the use of technical formats that stimulate the senses and are emotionally arousing. Both public and commercial television systems use these technologies to make their news production more appealing to the audience.

This study showed that sensationalism occurs in the two stages of news production: during news selection and news packaging; and that both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency matter in this process. When competition increases, sensational news items are prioritised. It is often thought that sensationalism in news topic is detrimental to how well citizens are informed, as it intentionally leads to avoiding some 'hard' news issues. The idea is that this negatively influences political knowledge of citizens about certain important political and government matters. However, this negative perspective on

sensationalist media content has not been uncontested. Some have argued that people who would normally not watch 'hard news' will at least get some information if the news is offered in a more popular style (Brants 1998; Temple, 2006). News packaging provides the possibility of making even 'difficult' news items more appealing to the general audience (e.g. Franklin, 1997; Graber, 1994). This happens in the second stage of news production, which implies using sensational news storytelling and sensational formal features.

More sensationalist news packaging might engage the less politically-interested individuals but it might also lead to an oversimplification of news topics. The use of personalised exemplification gives the audience an 'individualistic' coverage of the news. This might lead to citizens being more interested in news topics because they can personally and emotionally identify with it. However, personalised news coverage might prevent the structural-causal coverage of the news, which may obstruct a more profound understanding of the news in structural and political terms (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; see for instance Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991 about the news coverage of crime).

In terms of the implication for audiences, most of whom watch commercial as well as public channels, our results suggest that commercial and competitive pressures in television systems matter for the level of sensationalism in news coverage and is thus expected to have indirect effects on the public. However, in a media system with multiple suppliers, individual level consumption patterns in terms of channel repertoires still matter as various suppliers might chose various strategies to sell the news. As we have shown in this chapter, there are important differences between television channels. The level and nature of sensationalism in news coverage on audiences will not only depend on structural level characteristics

of the media system but also on channel level variables.

Although this is one of the first studies using a comparative cross-level design to study how characteristics of media systems affect sensationalism in news coverage, the limited number of broadcasting systems included is a clear limitation of our study. The limited number of television systems included statistically precludes the investigation of other relevant macro-level variables, such as cultural differences between countries. Nevertheless, this study has shown that different types of channels react differently to changes in the media context. As the number of channels increases, audiences have increasing opportunities to choose the channels that appeal to their preferences, tastes and predispositions. Future research on sensationalism in news coverage would therefore need to consider differences between audiences in their 'taste' for sensationalism in news coverage.