Switching during commercial breaks
van Meurs, A

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1 Research question

1.1 Research objectives

This dissertation presents an analysis of the effects of switching on the ratings of commercial breaks. With the growing number of channels available on television, the rising penetration of the remote control, and the growing importance of ratings for the marketing of television channels and the selling of time, channel switching during commercial breaks has become a major concern for channels, their sales houses, media agencies and advertisers.

This dissertation focuses on the reasons why viewers zap during a commercial break. The objective of the research is to determine:

• the actual extent of channel switching before, during and after commercial breaks;
• the effect of this behaviour on the ratings for commercial breaks;
• the causes of this form of channel switching.

The aim of this study is to provide advertisers with more information concerning this phenomenon and to make an inventory of the potential strategies channels could employ in order to reduce switching during (their) breaks. The study described is based upon a research project set up in 1995 at the instigation of STER and IP, the two principal sales houses for television advertising in the Netherlands. The immediate reason for their initiative was a debate on the growing irritation towards television advertising among viewers, and viewers zapping or switching away during commercial breaks. The debate flared up in the industry journals at the end of 1994 among producers of commercials, advertisers, media agencies and television channel sales houses. A summary of this debate follows in the next section. Also, the issues that led to the research on switching during commercial breaks are highlighted. The objectives and organisational framework of the research are further discussed in section 1.1.2.

Apart from practical implications, this study can also provide a more theoretical understanding of the behaviour of the television audience and the selection processes involved. The relevance of this study for these themes, and for other areas of research in communication science concerned with the analysis of the medium television, is discussed in section 1.2.

1 The journals for professionals in the Dutch media industry, including Adformatie, Nieuwstribune and Reclameweek.
1.1.1 Debate on television advertising

In the autumn of 1994, Van der Mee, an influential advertising executive, publicly expressed his concerns about the effectiveness of advertising on television in the Netherlands (Initiatief Vea, 1994). At that time, a number of major advertisers were running “burst” campaigns. These campaigns involved a single, not particularly witty or original commercial that was frequently rebroadcast over a short period of time. Van der Mee expressed the opinion/expected that a majority of television viewers would reach for the remote control out of irritation and zap away to another channel when confronted with these commercials. And, that this would happen increasingly in the case of television advertising in general. Shortly thereafter, a provocative special report was published that included the disturbing results of a series of opinion polls showing a growing irritation among viewers towards television commercials (Zal reclame overleven, 1994).

These publications ignited a debate in the industry journals after the New Year break. Advertising agencies, advertisers, media agencies and sales houses blamed each other for growing irritation among viewers and its supposed effects (Adformatie, issues 3, 4 and 5, 1995). Advertisers and the producers of their commercials criticised the media agencies and the sales houses of airing their wonderful commercials at inappropriate times, confronting the wrong target groups or sandwiching them between the irritating ads of other advertisers. The media agencies blamed the advertisers for producing inappropriate commercials and the sales houses for placing them in unsuitable breaks. The sales houses in turn blamed the advertisers and the media agencies, citing their non-selective media purchasing and the lack of variation in their media targets.

The debate served to remove the taboo surrounding the discussion of a number of aspects of television advertising. For the first time, the parties involved with television advertising were talking about the undesirable factors that increase irritation. These included the high broadcast frequencies of some commercials and the discrepancy between the target group profiles of commercials and those of the programmes that surround it. Given the involuntary nature of viewers’ exposure to it, television advertising was never popular, but it was felt that irritation towards it may well grow with the increase in the number of commercial breaks and the introduction of programme-interrupting advertising (Franzen, 1995).

Reactions to the debate were mixed. Some compared it to a high school debate, others characterised it as incestuous or as media hype (Van Os, 1995b). Other media specialists were less perturbed about the increase in irritation and its supposed consequences for switching. Two media agency executives, Van Niekerk and Bohlander, commented that while it was the case that irritation towards advertising had increased in the past few years, there had been no substantial increase in zapping. They went on to note that the distinction between irritation and actual zapping was demonstrated by the fact that programme-interrupting adver-
tising generated irritation, but did not result in zapping (Van Os, 1995a). Another media agency executive, Van Zaanen, asserted that zapping was not as negative a phenomenon as presented in most discussions. On the contrary, he felt that if people did not switch we would have to question their intelligence. He went on to note that electronic registration of viewing behaviour (as carried out by Intomart) means that switching is accurately registered. As a result, advertisers do not have to pay for zapping (Van Os, 1995a).

In response Levi, a major advertiser, commented that while everyone expressed an opinion on the subject, no one really knew very much (Analyse, 1995). In fact, much of the opinion expressed was not substantiated by actual data. It soon became clear to everyone concerned that the debate lacked an empirical foundation. No hard data was available on the extent of switching away during television advertising, let alone on the reasons for this behaviour. The only available information came from a number of surveys on advertising irritation and avoidance. These studies, frequently cited during the debate, painted a very sombre picture. Television viewers declared *en masse* that they did not continue watching a channel during commercial breaks, but switched to another channel, made themselves a cup of coffee, or went to the toilet. However, the authors of these studies themselves made a point of putting the alarming results in perspective by drawing attention to the effect of social desirability, the tendency of respondents in surveys to give what they perceive to be the socially desirable or acceptable response. As they noted, in contrast to a few years earlier, it is now “not done” to admit to enjoying watching advertising (Zal reclame overleven, 1994).

A second major benefit of the debate in the industry journals, then, was to demonstrate the general need for fundamental research on switching behaviour. When a large scale research project on switching during commercial breaks (see below) was announced, the debate quickly abated as the participants in the debate awaited the results of this study.

1.1.2 The SPOT research project

In the summer of 1995, the Foundation for the Promotion and Optimisation of Television Advertising (SPOT) took the initiative in setting up research on channel switching. The aims of this research were to determine the actual extent of channel switching before, after, and during commercial breaks, the effect of this behaviour on the ratings for commercial breaks, and the causes of this type of channel switching (Intomart, 1996a). This study is a result of that initiative. Representatives of all parties in the advertising process, including advertisers, advertising

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2 These included surveys by Trendbox (Zal reclame overleven, 1994), by the Weekbladpers (Bakker, 1995), and by The Media Partnership and Intomart (TV-irritatie, 1995).

3 The SPOT research project has resulted in a number of different publications. The results have been published in Dutch (Intomart, 1996a; Intomart, 1996b; SPOT, 1996a), in English (Van Meurs, 1998d; Van Meurs & Ligthart, 1996), and in German (Van Meurs, 1998e).
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agencies, media agencies and sales houses, were involved in setting up this research project. Together with independent experts in communication science and statistics, they formed a body to supervise the research (see section acknowledgements).

The SPOT research was intended to provide the participants in the advertising process (including sales houses, advertisers and media agencies) with the means to make television advertising more effective. An understanding of the background and causes of switching can aid the developing of forecasts for audience behaviour during commercial breaks. These forecasts can be used by channel managers in establishing the commercial rates for commercial breaks, while media agencies can use them as a basis for their purchasing policies. Additionally, the research results can provide a basis for practical recommendations for channel managers concerning measures aimed at counteracting switching during commercial breaks. As vendors of advertising time, television channels and sales houses benefit from as large an audience as possible during their commercial breaks. They have a direct interest in measures which counteract audience loss during commercial breaks and which increase the number of new viewers during the commercial breaks.

Not all switching is advertising-avoidance behaviour. Viewers not only switch away from commercials (and/or stop watching), but also switch in during commercials (and/or start to watch). Switching in may be influenced by factors other than those that influence switching away. For this reason, in the formulation of this research the decision was made to deal with these two types of switching separately. This allows for recommendations to be made both for stimulating switching in to commercials as well as for discouraging switching away.

In some instances, switching away and switching in may cancel each other out, leaving the total number of viewers unchanged. However, even when the net number of viewers is not affected, channel managers and media agencies may still benefit from a minimisation of switching. Reducing the flow in and out during commercial breaks of specific target groups results in a more stable viewer profile, making these breaks more attractive to advertisers who want to reach (or avoid) a specific target group with their commercials.

In the end, even viewers may also benefit from improvements in the efficiency of advertising purchasing resulting from a reduction in switching as well as from better forecasting of switching. As a result of a reduction in "waste" (the broadcast of commercials for the wrong target group), viewers could be confronted less often by advertising not relevant to their interests. More efficient channel programming, a better placement of commercial breaks and a more effective purchasing policy with respect to advertising time might even lead to a decrease in the amount of advertising on television.

Despite the ambitious design of this research on switching, it must be noted that there are limits to its objectives. The study is limited to a description and explanation of switching behaviour; other aspects of television advertising that could in-
fluence consumer behaviour and attitudes, such as the effectiveness of the message or viewer attention during reception, lie beyond the scope of the research.

1.2 Theoretical framework

In the preparation for this research, a survey of the relevant research literature was carried out. Previous studies of switching are reviewed and their relevance for this study of switching during commercial breaks in the Netherlands is examined in chapters 2 and 3. Although this study has been generated by practical commercial concerns, it also bears relevance for various areas of research in communication science concerned with the analysis of the medium television. In this section, a number of more general theoretical approaches in communication science applicable to this research are discussed. The relevance of specific results from this research for communication science is discussed in section 7.1.

Ever since communication science research turned its attention to the television audience, a central question has been whether audience viewing and selection behaviour can be considered active. The theoretical models and research that have tried to answer this question can be divided into two approaches. One approach focuses on the non-active or non-selective aspects of television viewing, while the other emphasises the active or selective role of the television viewer. These approaches are discussed in the following two sections. A third set of theoretical issues dealing with a number of changes in technology and in the available supply of television that have taken place over the past decades is discussed in section 1.2.3.

1.2.1 Television viewing as a non-selective activity

The first studies on the effect of television on its viewing audience emphasised the potentially addictive nature of this new medium and the passivity and emptiness of television viewing in comparison to the consumption of other types of mass media. Examples of this early theoretical approach include studies of the negative influence of television on children (e.g., Himmelweit, Vince & Oppenheim, 1958; Steiner, 1963; both cited in McQuail, 1997). Children were not the only potential victims of the harmful influence of the new medium, the entire television audience was seen as passive and open to exploitation and to cultural damage. This vision of the harmful influence of television is derived from earlier theories about the effects of other media, where these effects were compared to hypodermic needles, injecting their messages directly and relatively intact into the passive audience. According to McQuail (1997), this pessimism about the power of the media can be traced back to publications by the Frankfurter Schule and C. Wright Mills, both of whom stressed the vulnerability of the media audience to exploitation. In their view, the presumed susceptibility of the television audience to the influence of the medium is a consequence of their passivity. Viewers were regarded as passive receivers, ready and able to receive nearly all messages. A direct relationship was as-
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sumed between the content of the message and the effect on its recipients (Stappers, 1983).

In this approach viewers are seen as non-selective. Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988) described watching television as an easy activity that costs very little effort and is frequently a way of killing time when the viewer has nothing better to do.

The fact that we are little involved in most of what we watch explains, for example, the low use of VCRs relative to the total amount of television viewing, the steady day to day size of the total television audience regardless of what is being shown, the low repeat-viewing of all program series, the often fairly moderate levels of audience attention and appreciation, and the tendency for people to avoid watching demanding programs (Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1988, p. 124).

They argue that, as a consequence of their low degree of involvement with television, viewers watch programmes out of habit, without making properly motivated choices based on programme content.

Many other authors presuppose the passivity of the television audience. The non-involving, secondary nature of television viewing was demonstrated in a time-use study by Kubey (1986). Analyses of viewers' own reports of viewing behaviour showed that watching television was not so much the result of a desire to see a specific programme but rather a distraction and a means of passing the time during periods of unstructured time and in solitary situations. Goodhardt, Ehrenberg and Collins (1975) asserted that the time of the broadcast was a more important factor for predicting audience size than programme content. Watching television was seen as a relatively trivial endeavour, in which viewers flowed passively from one programme to the next. On the basis of experiments carried out in Britain and the United States, they claimed that viewing behaviour was so non-selective that it could easily be predicted using a formula based on audience duplication and repeat viewing. In this model, viewing behaviour was a fixed pattern based on channel loyalty and the inheritance effect, whereby viewers of a specific programme will have also seen the preceding programme. Similarly, Gerbner noted that "most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program" (1979, p. 216). For the Netherlands, Hendriksen (1979; 1993) gave as reasons for the non-selectivity of viewers the non-specific nature of the medium, the relative non-transparency of the programmes, the lack of repeats, and the influence of the family context which prevents viewers from making individual choices.

This study of switching provides an opportunity to test the assertion that television viewing is primarily a non-selective activity. If viewers watch television non-selectively and out of habit, it should not make much of a difference to them whether they are watching either a programme or commercials during a break, and they will not readily switch channels when advertising is broadcast.
1.2.2 Television viewing as active behaviour

In contrast to the image held of the television audience as being passive and non-selective, a second approach in communication science emphasises the selective nature of viewing behaviour. One of the earliest studies to assign a selective role to the audience is that of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). Their “two-step-flow” model was based on individuals operating rationally in a selective use of media. A distinction was made between two types of media users: non-active and active (opinion leaders); it was assumed that this latter group would be very selective in their use of media.

Similarly, in later “uses and gratifications” studies, the public was regarded as being active, selective and motivated. In this approach, it was assumed that the audience selected media while following a rational process, motivated by the expectation of need gratification: “media choice is rational, directed towards specific goals” (Rosengren, 1985, cited in McQuail, 1997). It can be assumed that rational television viewers are not likely to turn on the set in order to watch commercials, but to watch programmes. Based on the assumptions of the uses and gratifications model, viewers motivated by rational need gratification could be expected to avoid television advertising as much as possible, with the exception of those viewers who consciously chose to watch commercials because they enjoyed them or found they provided some other benefit. Bauer (1964) introduced the term “obstinate audience” to describe the avoidance of undesired influence, an excellent description of an audience that switches from channel to channel and tries to avoid as much advertising as possible. This study of switching during commercial breaks offers the opportunity of determining to what extent this behaviour actually takes place.

A general critique of the uses and gratifications approach is that it overestimates the selectivity and rationality of the public. Elliot (1973) argued that, as far as television is concerned, the public was much less active than the uses and gratifications approach suggested. For television, he asserted, the most important reason programmes were watched was their availability. Elliot’s argument lends support to the non-selective approach discussed in the previous section.

In a related approach, the expectancy-value theory, the audience is also seen as selective, rational and even calculating. The audience makes choices based on the perception of benefits and their value. Channel switching occurs if the gratification sought outweighs the gratification obtained (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). The majority of television viewers do not expect gratification from watching television advertising (Intomart, 1995a; Smit, 1998), so this portion of the audience can be expected to switch away during commercials.

Levy and Windahl (1984; 1985) distinguish three phases in the selectivity process, depending on the moment in relation to exposure to the medium. The first phase is selectivity before the exposure. Here selectivity means:
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in the time prior to the exposure, individuals make decisions about a given set of communications, and that such goal-oriented choices are the outcome of the interplay between the individual’s desire to gratify certain social and psychological needs, the individual’s learned expectations about media qualities and settings, and the individual’s continuing experiences with a given medium. (1984, p. 54-55)

In the second phase, selective activity takes place during the experience. Here selective behaviour is not limited to avoidance through switching, but may also be involved in the way in which the media is consumed; an example of this would be paying attention to selected messages only.

The third phase of selectivity takes place after the exposure. Selective recall is an example of post-exposure selectivity. It is arguable whether the third phase represents a form of audience activity. Levy and Windahl describe a person without recall as “the quintessential image of a passive audience member” (1985, p. 114), but fail to take into account the many other factors that determine recall or the lack thereof. This study cannot provide information on this third phase of viewer selectivity. Because of the design of the research, selectivity can only be gauged by whether viewers watch a commercial break or switch away.

The point at which viewers switch away during a commercial break can serve as an indication of whether the selective behaviour represents first or second phase selectivity. Switching away before or at the very start of the break could indicate selectivity before the exposure, based on prior expectations. However, if the contents of a break are a major factor in selectivity, then a great deal of switching away during the course of the break can be expected.

In a critique of Goodhardt et al. (1975, see section 1.2.1), Webster asserted that programme content is a major factor for viewers in selecting what they are going to watch. "The work of Goodhardt et al. is noteworthy for its failure to find any program-type effects. A considerable body of theory holds that program content should be the principal determinant of program choice" (Webster, 1985, p. 122). Based on an analysis of viewing behaviour, Webster concluded that "... this research demonstrates the additional impact of scheduling and program type variables on audience inheritance. Contrary to the findings of Goodhardt et al., program type does have a significant, albeit limited, effect on audience duplication patterns" (Webster, 1985, p. 130).

The role of programme content in the process of selection among television viewers was demonstrated in a study by Hawkins, Reynolds and Pingree (1991). In a study of the viewing behaviour of 377 students, they were able to distinguish five different kinds of viewing styles. Of these, only one corresponded with the stereotyped image of viewers exercising little choice and just watching what was available. The remaining four styles were much more active and viewers used (a
lot of) switching in seeking out diversity or their favourite programmes. This study provides an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of various aspects of programming on switching.

1.2.3 Changing media, new theories
The last decade has seen a radical transformation of the television landscape. The increase in the number of television sets per household and the reduction in the average size of households have increased the opportunity for viewers to individualise their viewing behaviour. Two other developments of particular relevance for switching are the growing penetration of the remote control (see figure 5 in section 3.4.14) and the increase in the number of Dutch and foreign channels viewers can receive in the Netherlands.

Technical developments such as cable and satellite, together with increased opportunities for commercial television in the Netherlands, have led to a rapid increase in the number of channels available. In 1988, television viewers received, on average, 11 channels while 23 hours of programming were broadcast daily on channels specifically intended for the Dutch audience. Ten years later it was possible to receive an average of around 23 channels. In 1998, total programming on all Dutch channels had increased to around 157 hours per day, almost seven times more than in 1988 (figure 1 and appendix 2).

Figure 1 Daily viewing time and television offered (index 1988 = 100)

Despite the large increase in programmes, the amount of time people spend watching television has increased only slightly. In 1988, people watched an average of 2 hours of television per day. This figure increased by 30 minutes in the early 1990s; thereafter the increase in viewing time grew at a much slower rate. It
can be said that the supply of television available has increased dramatically over
the last few years, but demand has almost stagnated. The production and con-
sumption of television provides a striking example of the failure of the consump-
tion of information to keep up with an ever-increasing supply (Van Cuilenburg,
1998b).

This increase in supply and stagnation in demand forms the basis for a new
theoretical approach in communication science that is relevant to the study of
switching behaviour. In this approach, a possible consequence of this supply and
demand situation is a decrease in the willingness of consumers to invest effort in
the medium. Television is seen more as a commodity and the bond between the
public and the medium is becoming weaker (Van Cuilenburg, 1998a). Franzen
(1994) stated that, as a result of the overload on the medium, viewers will in-
creasingly avoid communication that is not interesting or relevant enough. An-
other consequence may be that people pay less and less attention to messages.
They break off contact increasingly earlier or they process the communication at
an increasingly superficial level. Neumann and Pool (1986) also predicted a de-
cline in the quality of attention as a consequence of an overexposure to the me-
dium.

If the audience’s willingness to direct effort at the medium (the willingness to ac-
cept unwanted information e.g.) decreases as a result of an increase in the amount
of television on offer, and their bond with the medium becomes weaker, Van
Cuilenburg and Neumann and Pool predict a shorter period of attention given to
the medium and a quicker breaking off contact with the medium. This decrease in
attention paid to the medium and the willingness to break off of contact more
quickly can be expressed in two forms of viewer behaviour: they quickly switch
away to another channel, or they engage in a kind of mental switching away by
paying less attention to what is being broadcast. Reduced attention to television
has been examined in a number of studies, including Gullen (1994) and a study in
the Netherlands by Van Meurs and Sijtsma (1994)4. While this issue cannot be di-
rectly addressed in this study, research on switching during commercial breaks can
provide insight into the willingness of viewers to switch channels and the speed
with which they switch.

A similar development can be seen in the supply and demand situation for televi-
sion advertising. Here, there has been an explosive increase in the number of
broadcast minutes but a relatively small increase in the amount of viewing time
(see figure 2 and appendix 2). In 1988, on average, 61 minutes of advertising were
broadcast daily on Dutch channels. Ten years later, the figure was 846 minutes,
almost fourteen times as much. In this same period, the average viewing time for
commercials on the same channels increased from 4.4 minutes per day in 1988 to
12.5 minutes per day in 1998.

4 See Smit (1998) for a more comprehensive review of research on the attention paid to television.
Television is typically an allocution medium; contact of viewers with advertising is dependent on forced exposure. After all, there are very few viewers who turn on their television with the purpose of watching commercials. With the increase in selection and the increased ease of switching thanks to the remote control, television is rapidly changing from being an allocution medium into becoming a consultation medium (McQuail, 1997). The increase in material available on the medium means that the audience is split and broken up into small groups (fragmentation). At the same time, the audience for any particular broadcast is becoming internally more homogenous (segmentation) because of the increased variety of programmes available on various channels (for example, the increase in special interest broadcasts and target group directed programming). Both the fragmentation and segmentation of the audience have important consequences for television as an advertising medium. They reflect consumer selection behaviour, and switching away when confronted with television advertising is an important component of that behaviour.

As a result of the changes in the medium of television, the role of the viewer has changed from that of target, consumer and receiver to that of seeker and browser.

In the early days of mass communication research, the audience concept stood for the body of actual or intended (often simultaneous) receivers of messages at the end of a linear process of information transmission. These usually constituted the paying media public for news and entertainment or the target for advertising and influence. This version has been gradually replaced by a view of the media receiver as more or less active, resistant to influence, and guided by his or her own concerns, depending on the particular social and cultural context. The communication process itself has
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been reconceptualized as essentially consultative, interactive, and transac-
tional (McQuail, 1997, p. 142).

However, this new and stronger influence of the audience on the medium should
be put into perspective. While the way in which viewers make choices has
changed, this has not resulted in fundamentally different behaviour. Most of the
influence of the audience on television content is based on their role as a market
segment. Not only does the audience determine to a large extent the composition
of the supply, it also determines how the communication process operates (Van
Cuilenburg, 1998a). This being the case, theory formulation and research in com-
munication science should focus (even) more on the audience. The process by
which the audience makes its choices is a decisive factor for the future of the me-
dia and for the opportunities as well as the threats to television as an advertising
medium. The switching behaviour of viewers during commercial breaks in par-
ticular is an area of research in which the selection process used by television
viewers as consumers of channels and their programmes is central. Hopefully, this
study will improve understanding of this selection process.

1.2.4 Is switching selective?

For some authors, switching is always an expression of selective behaviour. Every
switch is regarded as a conscious choice and the avoidance of advertising by
switching away is seen as a form of selection. However, this view is not shared by
everyone. The low threshold involved in switching and the uniformity of pro-
gramming means that choice-making behaviour, including switching, does not ne-
cessarily imply selective behaviour. As a medium, television seems to be particu-
larly suited to a-selective use. A person who is too restless to become involved in a
demanding activity can always, with a minimum of effort, find something on tele-
vision to kill time. Some viewers are so restless or indifferent that they zap through
channels without really paying attention to the programming on the various chan-
nels. People may watch television because they have no interest in any other activ-
ity, but are still unable to find any interesting or suitable programme. And, after
haphazardly switching back and forth for some time, they remain tuned to a ran-
dom channel. In either case, it is difficult to argue that their switching is an expres-
sion of selective behaviour.

On the other hand, to assume that this kind of behaviour is the norm is to ig-
nore the diversity of viewers' motives and of the selections they make. The sup-
posed uniformity of programmes is an illusion. As any soap-addicted viewer will
be able to explain, an in-depth examination of the contents reveals not only fixed
regularities but also many subtle differences (e.g., Ang, 1985). The “pulp fiction”
television provided in bulk is served up in very many different flavours. There are
probably very few viewers who really do not care what they watch and will watch
anything, “as long as it is moving”.
According to McQuail (1997), “channel switching and grazing with a remote control appear to indicate selectivity, although they also imply indecision” (p. 60). In contrast to television viewing, he argues, many other forms of media use are selective by definition. Making a choice by grazing and hopping through culturally “superior” media is generally considered selective behaviour. Anyone who makes the effort to go to a video rental store or library can be expected to be selective when making their final choice. No one will argue that grazing and hopping through magazines in a waiting room by glancing at them and leafing through a few pages before making a final choice is not selective behaviour. If grazing and hopping through newspapers or magazines is an expression of selective behaviour, then this must also be the case with respect to television. Ultimately, there is no real difference between zapping when watching television or grazing and hopping through other forms of media.

Readers have been zipping, zapping, flipping and grazing for years, although nobody called it that. A typical person does not read a newspaper from cover-to-cover. He or she grazes pages, sampling headlines, photos, advertising, and tables of contents, making decisions to read further or not based on the sample of cues. At the magazine stand, potential readers graze titles and covers, and may even flip pages in several. When they select one, they may open it to every page, but zip, zap, flip, and graze the articles and ads (Feinberg, 1989, p.17).

The assertion that switching during a commercial break is non-selective behaviour can also be used to make a different argument. Weibull (1985) argues that when a viewer is a highly motivated media user, he or she will be less affected by the media structure. Individuals who are less interested, on the other hand, will be more influenced by the composition of the medium. From this perspective, not switching away during commercial breaks is an expression of selectivity; highly motivated viewers are not put off by the commercials and remain tuned to the channel. In contrast, switching away during a break is non-selective behaviour: viewers who switch away have allowed themselves to be influenced by the composition of the media structure.

Channel changing is still theoretically ambiguous. On the one hand, high levels of flipping could reflect an active viewer who is constantly re-evaluating program offerings during television exposure .... Alternately, channel changing is a part of a distracted use of television marked by lower levels of attention .... (Ferguson & Perse, 1993, p. 36).

It would seem that both switching and not switching can be considered selective behaviour in certain situations and non-selective behaviour in others. Simply keeping a tally of the number of switches is not sufficient to determine whether or
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not switching is selective behaviour. In order to be able to correctly interpret switching, it is necessary to examine the factors that give rise to this behaviour. That is what this study hopes to achieve. A large number of explanatory factors that can be used to interpret switching behaviour are presented in chapter 3. In the interpretation of the results presented in chapter 6, it will be seen that, in general, switching during commercial breaks can be considered selective behaviour, while not switching away can, under certain circumstances, also be an expression of selectivity (see section 7.1.1).

1.3 Research strategy

The aim of this research is to provide insight into switching during commercial breaks or, to be more precise, to determine the following: what is the actual extent of channel switching occurring before, after and during commercial breaks; what is the effect of this behaviour on the ratings for commercial breaks; and what are the causes for this behaviour? In addition to the theoretical value of the research, it is the intention that the results will have practical value for television broadcasters, media agencies, advertisers and other interested parties involved in media planning.

Initially, a thorough survey of the literature was carried out in order to examine the ways in which switching had been operationalised in previous studies and to determine all relevant explanatory variables (Intomart, 1995b). On the basis of this survey, it was concluded that there was no previous empirical study, either Dutch or foreign, that could provide satisfactory responses to the research questions posited above, and that new research was necessary. A large set of research hypotheses were drawn up on the basis of the literature review and recommendations from the supervisory commission (see acknowledgements).

It was felt that the hypotheses and the underlying research questions could only be answered if the study was set up as empirical observational research, with observations that corresponded as closely as possible to the actual behaviour of television viewers. A purely theoretical study or experimental “laboratory” research was not sufficient. The research should provide a realistic approximation of the amount of switching in the general population and of the possible relationships between this behaviour and the explanatory variables.

The operationalisation of the dependent switching variables is discussed in section 2.6 and in appendix 3. In this study, a distinction is made between two types of switching during commercial breaks: switching away and switching in. In order to account for both types of switching as completely as possible, a large number of explanatory variables were defined. Within practical limits, an effort was made to achieve as complete and exhaustive an inventory of possible explanatory variables as possible. Overviews of all of these explanatory variables are provided in chapter 3 and appendix 4.
The two dependent variables are each explained in a separate model. Both models are constructed in similar fashion so that switching away and switching in can be compared. Each model should contain all explanatory variables causing one of the two types of switching behaviour. In contrast to the majority of studies of switching found in the literature which are limited to bivariate analyses, the model should be multivariate. In this way spurious relationships, relationships between sets of two variables which are due, totally or partially, to a common cause of the two variables, can be avoided. The explanatory model includes all of the relationships between the explanatory variables. This is represented schematically in figure 3.

In this study, all of the effects are assumed to be causal; if a relationship between an explanatory variable and switching is found, it is assumed the switching is caused by the explanatory variable, and not the other way around. In the explanatory model selected, only variables with a significant direct effect on the dependent switching variable are included.

However, it is possible that a variable has no direct effect on the dependent variable, but may have an indirect causal effect through other variables. In this sense, the model is inadequate. To include indirect causal effects, more complex multivariate models are needed than the relatively simple explanatory model represented in figure 3. In a structural Lisrel model, for example, the relations between the explanatory variables are also tested, thus allowing the inclusion of indirect effects into the model (Saris & Stronkhorst, 1984). In this kind of model, it would not only be possible to determine the direct effect of variables such as the
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sex of the viewer and the time of the broadcast on switching behaviour, but indirect effects due to the influence of the explanatory variables on each other would also be made apparent.

This kind of modelling was not used in this study. The selected explanatory model can be seen as a first phase in accounting for switching during commercial breaks and creating an inventory of possible relevant explanatory factors. Only then can a start be made in defining a structural, causal model in which the relationships between the explanatory variables can be tested. As far as could be determined and with the exception of several studies with a more limited scope (e.g., Verwey, 1986), no complete structural equation model for the explanation of audience behaviour, including switching, has yet been specified and tested. Due to practical considerations, the defining and developing of such a model lies beyond the scope of this research.