

In Need of an Audience: Sensationalism in Dutch Public Service News and Current Affairs Programs in the 1990's *

Paul Hendriks Vettehen & Koos Nuijten

Introduction

Traditionally, one of the main tasks that has been ascribed to Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) organizations in a democratic society is to inform citizens about issues that are relevant to societies' functioning. Different types of programs may contribute to the fulfillment of this task. The perhaps best-known example is television news, which is generally considered the main source of the day's important events to the public. Current affairs programs, which provide more in-depth coverage or contextual information, are another example. Political talk shows, which feature more value-laden discussions of public affairs, are a final example.

Throughout the past decades, most European PSB organizations have witnessed a deregulation of broadcasting systems and the entrance of commercial competitors in the television market (d'Haenens & Saeys, 2001). The PSB television programs that were designed to inform citizens about public affairs also faced an increasing competition. For instance in the Netherlands, the number of television news programs rose from one in 1992 to five in 2001, and the number of current affairs programs to be seen on an average day rose from one in 1992 to three in 2001. Beside, a certain number of political talk shows and infotainment programs emerged, the precise number of which depends on the definition that is used to describe these genres (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005, 2006).

Over the same period, questions emerged about the PSB performance in fulfilling the task of informing citizens about socially relevant issues. The main topic in these discussions concerned the impact of market-driven journalism on the quality of the news coverage (cf. Fortuyn, 2000). In general, the discussions mirrored previous discussions in the U.S., where most researchers and critics were quite negative about the effects of market-driven journalism. In their opinion, the

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market mechanisms were expected to produce news with a generally low informational level and a homogeneous content, directed primarily at those sections of the population that are most interesting to the advertisers (e.g., Bagdikian, 1985; McManus, 1994; Underwood, 1988). However, some observers argued that the pressure of the market would urge journalists to take the information needs of the public seriously, which would result in a higher quality news (McManus, 1994, pp. 2–3).

A recurrent theoretical notion in the discussions about the quality of news and current affairs programs is that an increasing competition puts pressure on news producers and owners to capture and hold the attention of the audience. Various labels have emerged to describe the news that is expected to have this capacity, for instance ‘dramaturgically crafted news’ (Hvitfelt, 1994), ‘infotainment coefficient’ (Graber, 1994), ‘proximity news’ (Hjarvard, 2000), ‘tabloid news’ (Grabe, Zhou, Lang & Bolls, 2000; Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003), and ‘sensationalism’ (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, 2006), the label to be employed in the present paper because the concept of sensationalism has been theoretically elaborated over the past few years.

In this paper, we discuss the more or less sensationalist character of PSB news and current affairs programs in the Netherlands over the past decades. The discussion is centered around a number of questions. First, what do we mean when we talk about news or current affairs stories as being sensationalist? Second, how do we have to evaluate sensationalism? Is sensationalism really as negative as often is assumed in public discussions? Third, what do we know about a trend toward sensationalism that is often assumed? Is there a trend? And if yes, how do public broadcasting organizations fare? How do the Dutch fare in international perspective? Is competition really the driving force behind sensationalism? Fourth, and finally, what lessons are there to learn for future PSB news and current affairs programs?

What ‘is’ sensationalism?

In early studies, sensationalism in the news was conceived mostly in terms of story content, such as stories about crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents, and fires (e.g., Adams, 1978). Over the past decades, the concept of sensationalism has gradually become more connected to theoretical notions about human evolution. The most important idea in this respect is that over the course of biological and cultural evolution the human brain has become adapted to the task of continuously surveying the environment for information about situations that are potentially threatening, i.e., the smell of a wild animal; or situations that increase chances of

reproduction, i.e., the occurrence of a potential mate. Because of this predisposition, humans are today still sensitive to certain categories of information, first of all in everyday life, searching their ways in the urban wilderness, but also when they have their eyes on the television screen (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Shoemaker, 1996).

In the scientific literature, three categories of sensationalist news features have been distinguished that humans are evolutionary inclined to attend to. These categories have been derived from theories of information processing that acknowledge psycho-biological roots of human information processing systems (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2006).

The first category, which has been labeled ‘arousing content’ (Grabe et al., 2000, 2003), consists of stories that includes information with survival value. In the context of journalism, traditional indicators of sensationalist news such as stories about crimes, violence, and disasters are the most obvious examples of content with survival value. However, from an evolutionary view, sexual content may also be considered as content with survival value, and it has consequently been considered as part of ‘arousing content’ (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, p. 288).

The second category, which has been labeled ‘tabloid packaging’ (Grabe et al., 2000, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, 2006), refers to the degree to which news stories presents viewers with sudden or unexpected changes of information. The category consists of audiovisual production features, such as cuts, edits, camera movements, the onset of background music, and uncommon editing techniques. The surveying human brain should attend to these changes in order to detect potential threats or chances to survival.

The third category, which recently has been labeled ‘vivid storytelling’ (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2006), includes ways of storytelling that increase the concreteness or proximity of the story in a spatial, temporal or sensory way (cf. Nisbett & Ross, 1980), and that hence should pose more immediate threats or chances to survival. Well-known examples are the insertion of brief comments by laypersons on an issue in news stories (in order to exemplify the public opinion concerning the issue) and the insertion of a report on an individual case history (in order to illuminate a social problem).

Sensationalism: is it good or is it bad?

Looking at public debate, two questions emerge about the way sensationalism ‘works’. The first question is whether sensationalism really has the power to attract large audiences. The second question is whether the inclusion of sensationalist features in news stories interferes with the ways viewers process the story.

Sensationalism as a device to boost audience ratings

At first sight, the ratings of some overtly sensationalist news programs and infotainment oriented programs give the impression that sensationalism may boost audience ratings. However, these data provide little evidence, which raises the question what science could say about the attention grabbing and holding capabilities of sensationalism. Theoretical insights and research findings concerning the questions present a picture that is neither black nor white.

Starting from an information processing theory (i.e., the limited capacity model of mediated message processing, cf. Lang, 2000), it has been predicted that the presence of sensationalist features in news stories increases the viewer's attention to the story, and that in increases both physiological and emotional arousal in viewers. These predictions have been successfully tested in many studies (e.g., Grabe et al., 2000, 2003; Lang, Bolls, Potter, & Kawahara, 1999). However, the findings only concerned short-term fluctuations in attention over the viewing process that were obtained under conditions of forced exposure, i.e., in the laboratory.

Starting from a theory of information exposure (i.e., the activation model of information exposure, cf. Donohew, Puglez Lorch, & Palmgreen, 1998), Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters (2006) recently predicted that the arousal that is elicited by sensationalist news stories does not influence the degree to which viewers like the stories in a linear way. Their findings indicate that viewers value an increase in emotional arousal elicited by news stories in a positive way, but only up to a certain level of arousal. Beyond that optimal level of emotional arousal, they dislike a further increase in emotional arousal elicited by the stories. However, it should be noted that the level of emotional arousal being elicited by a news story is probably not the only variable that explains effects of sensationalism, and further study on the subject is required.

From the same theoretical model that was applied in the Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters (2006) study, another warning may be derived. The activation model argues that humans differ in their need for activation, which may be provided by sensationalist features in news stories. In particular, humans needs for activation decrease as they grow older, and women generally have lower needs for activation than men (Zuckerman, 1979). The model thus implies that levels of emotional arousal elicited by sensationalist news may be positively evaluated by a population of male adolescents, but at the same time be negatively evaluated by a population of elderly people. However, this prediction has not been put to the test yet.

Cognitive effects of sensationalism

Because the categories of sensationalism are based on information processing theories, predictions about the cognitive effects of sensationalism could be tested. As with the question about the power of sensationalism as ratings booster, the theoretical insights and research findings concerning the question about cognitive effects present a diverse picture.

For instance, we already mentioned that the presence of sensationalist features in news stories increases attentiveness during the viewing process, and that it increases levels of arousal. Starting from the limited capacity model of mediated message processing, in some studies it has been argued that these increases do not necessarily entail improved message recall. In line with this, the studies revealed that the use of sensationalist features in news stories may increase message recall and recognition, but that an unrestricted use of sensationalist devices (e.g., the sensational packaging of an already sensational news topic) will overburden the viewer's cognitive capabilities ('cognitive overload'), which will harm the recall of the news messages (e.g., Grabe et al., 2000; 2003; Lang et al., 1999).

Another cognitive effect has been particularly studied with regard to some sensationalist features. Based on theoretical notions concerning 'vividness' (cf. Nisbett & Ross, 1980) and cognitive heuristics (cf. Tversky & Kahnemann, 1974), studies have consistently found that the use of examples in news stories (notably the insertion of brief comments by laypersons on an issue in news stories) draws the attention to only parts of the news content, resulting in distorted comprehension and judgments (for an overview cf. Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Brosius (1993) reported a similar finding with regard to the use of emotional pictures: the emotional visuals drew the attention to only part of the content.

Conclusion

The theoretical predictions and empirical findings so far suggest that the rule 'the more, the better' does not necessarily apply to the capabilities of sensationalism as a rating boosting device. Moreover, high levels of sensationalism may be differentially valued in different populations. However, more research is needed on this subject.

Regarding cognitive effects, the theoretical predictions and research findings so far suggest that sensationalism may help to improve message processing, but also that two pitfalls lay ahead. The first of these is that high levels of sensationalism may overburden the information processing system, the second that some sensationalist features may draw the attention to only parts of the news content, which may produce miscomprehensions and misjudgments.

A trend toward sensationalism?

As already stated in the introduction of this paper, a recurrent assumption in discussions about the quality of news and current affairs programs is that an increasing competition puts pressure on news producers and owners to struggle for an audience. This is in line with the basic microeconomic notion that an increase in competition will put pressure on producers to make their products more attractive to potential buyers. Because sensationalism is widely believed to be capable of attracting large audiences, competition should stimulate sensationalism in these programs.

Regarding the situation in the Netherlands, two studies have recently been published that have provided some indications for increased sensationalism in informational programs. These studies will be discussed below.

Sensationalism in Dutch television news programs

In 1995, there were only two television news programs in the Netherlands: the PSB news program (by NOS), which had been on air since 1956, and a commercial news program (by RTL), which had been on air since 1989. By 2001, the two programs had a new commercial rival (by SBS, since 1999) that also covered both national and international news. Besides, the programs had to face the competition by other newly emerged informational programs, in particular news programs that only covered local or national news stories, and infotainment programs.

In the Dutch television news study, only the television news programs covering both national and international news were considered. A comparison was made between 698 television news stories, part of which were aired in the early spring of 1995 and part of which were aired in the early spring of 2001 (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). The study revealed that Dutch television news programs showed increases in a number of sensationalist features between 1995 and 2001. In particular, the stories featured significantly more dramatic sounds, more use of emotional language, more camera movements because of the use of 'eyewitness cameras' or zooming (in and out), more close-ups, more laypersons commenting on news events, and more individual case histories. On the other hand, the presence of some other features did not change (particularly the presence of a dramatic story content), and the presence of emotional pictures even decreased significantly. Besides, there were substantial differences between newscasts with respect to changes in sensationalism. In all, both the NOS and RTL television news stories appeared to have become somewhat more sensational over the period 1995-2001, but the findings for especially the NOS (the PSB news program) were relatively ambiguous. Also, both the NOS and RTL television news stories could not match the sensational character of the new competitor SBS; a competitor that had to enter

a perhaps almost saturated market, and that eventually failed to reach its targets: in 2003 it disappeared from the screen. In all, the findings indicate that increases in sensationalism were present but not as comprehensive and ubiquitous as some critics seemed to fear (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005, p. 292).

The Dutch study was different from other studies on tendencies toward sensationalism because it started from an elaborated theoretical concept, which resulted in 15 sensationalist features being measured. In contrast, earlier U.S. studies only measured the presence of a dramatic story subject (e.g., Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994; Slattery, Doremus & Marcus, 2001), and the European studies have included only some other features, such as the use of close-ups, the number of camera shots, or the duration of the interviews (Hjarvard, 2000; Hvitfelt, 1994). However, the main conclusion in these studies that sensationalism in television news stories shows increases was confirmed by the Dutch study.

The finding in the Dutch that the most ambiguous findings were found for the PSB news program seems in line with findings in the Swedish study by Hvitfelt (1994). Hvitfelt concluded that the new commercial competitors initiated most changes in news form and content and that the PSB news program after a while followed suit by copying the innovations. However, more research is needed to find out whether this explanation holds for the Dutch situation.

Sensationalism in Dutch Current Affairs Programs

As with television news programs, the market situation of the Dutch current affairs programs changed substantially during the 1990's. In 1992, each of several PSB organizations, most of them historically representing a religious (e.g., Catholic, Protestant) or a political (e.g., socialist, liberal) 'pillar' of Dutch society, aired a current affairs program once a week by the beginning of the 1990's. Each of the weekly current affairs programs had its own day on which it was broadcasted. Between 1992 and 1996, these weekly current affairs programs merged into three daily programs that could threaten each other's ratings. Moreover, because of increasing numbers of television news programs, and the emergence of various infotainment programs, the competitive pressure to the new current affairs programs became considerably larger by the end of the century.

In the Dutch current affairs study, 120 stories that were taken from one of the new current affairs programs in 2001 were compared with 121 stories in 1992 that were taken from the three programs from which the program originated (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2006). The study revealed that the stories in 2001 were on some aspects significantly more sensational than they were in 1992: the average story-length had decreased, the stories were more about domestic issues and more often followed the events of the day, the stories featured more dramatic editing and

close-ups, and they featured more individual case histories. However, no changes were observed on nine other sensationalist features, and the numbers of zoom movements had decreased.

The results of the study are difficult to compare with other studies. We could find only one British study that compared the content of current affairs programs over the years 1977/78, 1987/88, and 1997/98 (Barnett & Seymour, 1999). By and large, the study revealed that over this period the coverage of foreign, political and economical affairs had declined, and that it was virtually abandoned by commercial stations. In contrast, especially police and crime issues were more often covered; story subjects that may be considered sensational. The decline in foreign affairs coverage is in line with findings from the Dutch study. However, the rise of sensational story subjects was not found in the Dutch study.

Conclusion

Although the studies in various countries on sensationalism in television news and current affairs are difficult to compare, some general conclusions may be drawn. First, the findings suggest that a tendency toward increased sensationalism indeed exists. However, the tendency is not observable on the same sensationalist features for every country, type of program, and type of broadcast organization. Second, this conclusion also applies to the PSB news and current affairs programs, although some findings suggest that PSB programs are somewhat reluctant in this respect.

Two conclusions should not be drawn on the studies that are conducted up to now. The first would be that a linear trend toward sensationalism exists. In order to reach such a conclusion, more measurement moments should have been included in the studies. However, the studies conducted so far typically apply two or sometimes three measurement moments.

The second unwarranted conclusion would be that the increasing competition by commercial broadcast organizations is the one and only driving force behind increases in sensationalism. Theoretically, at least two concurrent developments seem to be alternative explanations for parts of the increases: technological innovation, and journalistic routines and values (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). Technological developments may have facilitated the tabloid packaging of news stories, which is one of the sensationalist categories. In accordance, the use of tabloid packaging devices such as the inclusion of eye-witness camera scenes may be explained by a wish to boost audience ratings (the competition explanation) or merely by the availability of a new technology (the technological innovation explanation). Likewise, the emergence of views on journalism such as public journalism (cf. Rosen & Merrit, 1994) may be connected to increases in vivid storytelling, which is another category of sensationalist features. Public journalism

stresses the problems of ordinary citizens as a starting point for journalist practice. In accordance, examples of vivid storytelling such as the insertion of comments by laypersons in news stories and the insertion of individual case histories may again be explained by the desire to boost audience ratings (the competition explanation) or by the desire to stress to role of ordinary citizens (the public journalism explanation). Disentangling the various influences on the presence of sensationalist features in news or current affairs programs may involve analyses of large time series of news stories in which changes in the presence of sensationalist features could meticulously be traced back to developments in competition, technology, or views on journalism. However, even with large datasets at hand, the puzzle will prove hard to solve.

The future of PSB informational programs

The introduction of free newspapers, the cross-media activities of newspaper companies, and most important, the growth of news sites on the internet all contribute to the conclusion that in the first decade of the new century, competition on the news market still continues to increase. What do these development mean to PSB informational programs?

Because of its lesser dependence on advertisement revenues, the PSB programs may feel somewhat less need to struggle for an audience than similar programs by commercial broadcasters, and hence, to further increase the presence of sensationalist features in their programs. The distinct financial structure of PSB and commercial broadcasters may also be an explanation of the finding that in the past, PSB news and current affairs programs seem to have been a bit reluctant in sensationalizing their programs. However, the public task of PSB provides more reasons for further reluctance.

First, the public task of PSB supposes efforts to reach all citizens. As described earlier in this paper, it can be predicted that male adolescents are relatively more attracted to highly sensationalist news because it elicits the high levels of arousal that they generally like. However, highly sensationalist news may also be expected to scare-of women or elderly people because these are generally less in need for high levels of arousal. From this perspective, future television news programs being targeted at young people might become successful in terms of ratings, provided it features emotionally arousing, past-paced and vivid stories. In contrast, the regular PSB newscast, which currently is quite popular among an elder population, should not become too sensationalist. The relatively simple children's television news is not without reason also popular among elderly people.

Second, the public task of PSB supposes efforts to optimize the process of information transfer. As also described earlier in this paper, the use of sensationalist features is not without risks. First, high levels of sensationalism may overburden the information processing system, resulting in poor message recall. Regarding the problems that are directly connected to the limited capacity of the human brain to process information, news producers may also read an article by Lang, Potter, & Grabe (2003), who applied information processing theory and research findings to derive seven rules that are helpful in making news memorable. Roughly stated, PSB news and current affairs programs should refrain from excessive sensationalist news coverage in order to stimulate the viewers processing of information.

Finally, sensationalist features may draw the attention to only parts of the news content, which may produce misconceptions and misjudgments. As Tversky & Kahnemann (1974) have already shown, humans tend to base judgments of situations on the ease with which instances of these situations can be brought to mind. An excessive use of sensationalist features that are easily remembered, for instance the use of extremely emotional pictures in order to illustrate a social problem, may lead viewers to overestimate the severity of the problem. In a similar way, the distribution of opinions by laypersons who are briefly interviewed on an issue, may influence the viewers' judgment of the public opinion (cf. Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). PSB news and current affairs programs should acknowledge the possibility of such effects, for instance by ensuring that sensationalist features are only used as exemplification in a balanced way.

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