

Television News Avoidance: Exploratory Results From a One-Year Follow-Up Study

Jan Van den Bulck

To cite this article: Jan Van den Bulck (2006) Television News Avoidance: Exploratory Results From a One-Year Follow-Up Study, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50:2, 231-252, DOI: [10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_4)

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem5002_4



Published online: 07 Jun 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 603



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)

Television News Avoidance: Exploratory Results From a One-Year Follow-Up Study

Jan Van den Bulck

Drawing on uses and gratifications research on the one hand and structural factors explanations on the other hand, this study looked at 4 types of news viewing: intentional news exposure, unintentional news exposure, unintentional news avoidance, and intentional news avoidance. News exposure and news avoidance were analyzed using both a single question and a summated rating scale. Flemish secondary school children (N = 1,648) answered these questions in February 2003 and February 2004. Self-reported news viewing changed over time. Respondents' self-reported news-viewer type predicted 43% of self-reported news-viewing volume. A one-year follow-up design only added 3% explained variance to the model. A cross-sectional approach to explaining news exposure and news avoidance appears to be both valid and parsimonious.

Many if not most mainstream television channels in most countries broadcast some form of news program. The news is so ubiquitous that no social scientist has probably ever felt the need to explain what kind of genre or type of program he or she was referring to when asking respondents questions about "the news." We all know what is meant by "the news" even though huge differences exist in the way the news is made in different countries, in different political systems, or even by different channels in the same culture.

The news is given an important role in contemporary society. In a recent article about the role and the position of communication media in democracies, Drale (2004) describes one view of democracy as the doctrine assuming that "the media should serve as a public sphere in which all who are interested may participate in public conversation or deliberation. Popular participation is assumed to be a necessary part of legitimate democratic procedure" (p. 223). Some see the news as a positive force in a democratic society. Spencer (2004), for instance, described television news as an active agent in peace negotiations in Northern Ireland. Beaudoin and

Jan Van den Bulck (Ph.D., Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; D.Sc. Erasmus University Rotterdam) is a Professor in the Leuven School for Mass Communication Research at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. His research interests include media effects on social reality perceptions and on health.

Thorson (2004) identified a number of positive effects of news viewing on members of urban communities. Moy, Pfau, and Kahlor (1999) linked television news viewing to positive perceptions of certain democratic institutions. Others have identified potential negative effects of news exposure. Busselle and Crandall (2002), for instance, found correlates of news viewing and issues of racism. Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2004) found that television news viewing predicted fear of crime.

For the news to have an effect on an individual and, by extension, on society, that individual has to have been exposed to the influence of the news. Researchers have shown that attention to news moderates its effects (e.g., Moy et al., 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). The question whether and why people watch the news may therefore be important. The current article discusses the processes explaining why some people watch the news religiously, some watch it less often, and others hardly watch it at all.

Two Approaches to the Program Selection Process

There are two apparently mutually exclusive theories explaining how viewers end up watching or not watching a particular program (Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 148; Webster & Wakshlag, 1983, p. 430; Webster & Wang, 1992, p. 125). The first school of thought stresses the importance of individual needs and preferences and states that what television audience members watch is the result of an active selection process. Such uses and gratifications studies postulate that viewers, acting as rational human beings, will express personal preferences in their choice of programs. The second school of thought starts from an econometric point of view, "treating television programs as neutral 'goods,' supplied to the viewers at no 'cost'" (Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 148). This approach studies audiences at the aggregate level and suggests that audience behavior is explained by structural factors such as the programming strategies of networks. It sees no need to look at individual viewing preferences and motivations to explain viewing behavior. Webster and Wakshlag claimed that up to 80% of viewing behavior can be explained by such structural factors as channel loyalty or the programming strategies of the networks. The contents of the actual programs and, by extension, the preferences of the viewers, do not appear to be important explanatory factors.

Although these perspectives appear to contradict one another, Webster and Phalen (1997) have argued that "surely, some fundamental needs provide the impetus for seeking out news and entertainment. But how these needs ultimately find expression is powerfully affected by the media environment and merits fuller consideration" (p. 97).

What an individual viewer ends up watching at any given moment in time thus appears to be the result of the clash between two distinct forces. A viewer seeking to express and gratify his or her preferences will have to do so within the boundaries drawn up by the structural limitations of the programming context.

Research pitting structural factors against preferences seems to overlook an important third factor that Webster and Wakshlag identified in 1983. Although these

authors mainly discussed preferences and structural factors, they identified the viewer as a separate, or third, entity. Their treatment of the viewer as a factor in selection processes mainly dealt with availability issues, but it is clear that a number of characteristics of the individual viewer other than content preferences influence the selection process.

Individual Factors Influencing Program Selection

The main structural factor concerning the viewer is *availability* (see Webster & Wakshlag, 1983, 1985). A viewer cannot watch a particular program unless he or she is available for viewing. Although the introduction of recording devices may have attenuated the importance of this factor somewhat, availability remains an issue each time a viewer is unaware of what is being broadcast or unwilling or unable to use a recording device. Availability is likely to remain an important factor, explaining, in Eastman's (1998) words, "uninterpretable variance in ratings" (p. 360), although the same author believed that digital technologies may make this factor redundant in the future (p. 363).

Webster and Wakshlag (1983, 1985) identified another important, though often overlooked, factor influencing the extent to which an individual is able to watch certain programs. Many people do not live alone. Their viewing patterns are influenced by the presence of others in their living environment.

A third kind of availability is a product of awareness of options on the one hand and selection habits on the other hand. Heeter (1985) has remarked that "most approaches to selectivity implicitly or explicitly assume perfect viewer awareness of program alternatives" (p. 126). Even if viewers use a program guide to select a program, they may not make an elaborate search of all that is offered. When viewers look for programs by going through a number of channels (either with the remote control or by consulting a TV guide), they usually restrict their search to a limited number of channels, what Heeter has called their "channel repertoire" (p. 133). Interesting or gratifying though they may be, some programs may never be selected simply because they are only available on channels that are not part of the repertoire (cf. Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 157). Some programs may therefore be avoided unintentionally because the channels that broadcast them are avoided consciously, habitually, or by lack of awareness. Viewers often have more than one repertoire (cf. Neuendorf, Atkin, & Jeffres, 2001, p. 469). The repertoire is not necessarily the same every day or every time one wants to view television. Sometimes the repertoire is limited to one channel, a form of channel loyalty networks try to encourage using marketing and "branding" strategies to attract viewers (Lin, Atkin, & Abelman, 2002) and programming strategies to keep them (cf. Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 152). By limiting their repertoire to a number of channels smaller than the total number available to them, viewers are unintentionally avoiding the kinds of programs never aired on their favorite channels. Channel loyalty or the channel repertoire of those viewers will therefore never "pull"

them towards watching those kinds of programs. Other viewers, who do include such channels in their selection repertoire, may occasionally watch such programs, even though they do not necessarily appeal to particular preferences of the viewer: As long as they stay "unobjectionable," there is no need for changing channels. Rosenstein and Grant (1997) have pointed out that habit is an important part of the viewing process. Repertoire formation is probably the area in which habits play a crucial role. If Viewer X has an unusual hobby and by coincidence comes across a program about that hobby while hopping aimlessly from channel to channel, that channel may move into the viewer's primary repertoire or the viewer could develop the habit of switching briefly to that channel at the same time each day hoping for another program of the same type, and so forth. The concept of habit has been discussed in other terms in research on program loyalty and channel loyalty (cf. Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 152).

Structural Factors

Availability is also an important structural factor on the supply side. Webster and Wakshlag (1983) saw it as the most important explanation of television program selection because "variation in total television viewing might ... be a result of differential availability and therefore random with respect to content" (p. 438), a view shared by Rosenstein and Grant (1997). If broadcasters do not air wildlife documentaries or soft porn in a particular culture, then viewers will not be able to watch such programs, even if they have a preference for them (cf. Gunter, 1985; Potter & Chang, 1990). The impact of this factor may have been reduced by recent developments that have broadened the range of available programs in some instances (cf. Eastman, 1998).

Many programming strategies are designed to stop the viewer searching for a more gratifying program on another channel, based on the assumption that viewers are unlikely to change channels as long as what follows does not annoy them. The aim of many programs, therefore, is not so much to please but rather to avoid displeasure. Jeffres (1978) called such programs "least objectionable programs" (LOP). A viewer may end up watching a LOP even though a program that would satisfy his or her needs more fully is being aired on another channel.

Preferences

Structural factors research sometimes gives the impression that viewing behavior is erratic: Barwise, Ehrenberg, and Goodhardt (1982), Gunter (1985, p. 95), Goodhardt, Ehrenberg, and Collins (1987), and Webster and Wang (1992) showed that only between 25% to 50% of the viewers of Episode X of a series also tuned in to Episode X + 1. The authors explain much of this apparent lack of consistency in viewer behavior by referring to availability (of either the viewer or the program). The question remains at what level personal preferences play a role. If uses and gratifications were defined narrowly (as its opponents from the structural factors approach sometimes seem to

do), one would expect a given viewer only to be watching "preferred programs," programs that fully gratify that viewer's needs. In this view the viewer is called "unselective," "passive," or influenced by structural factors as long as he or she watches programs that are less gratifying while a more gratifying program is aired elsewhere. Hawkins et al. (2001, p. 240) have remarked that selectivity should not be studied at the level of individual programs. Even from the uses and gratifications' point of view this defines behavior too narrowly. Hawkins et al. suggest that program type (more commonly known as "genre") would be a better category to start from. People have preferences for types of content, rather than for particular programs. Preferences are expressed even when viewers are not watching a program for which they have a special liking. Rayburn and Palmgren (1984), for instance, showed that a preference for a particular program is reflected in an increase in the likelihood that similar programs will be selected. This is a uses and gratifications approach to the LOP; it stresses that even when people watch a program they would never indicate as their favorite when asked to do so in a survey, they are still being guided by their preferences for similar programs or similar elements of content.

When looking at preferences and gratification of needs it is important to note that watching TV can be the gratification sought, regardless of content. Webster and Wakshlag (1983, 1985) have remarked that the first decision the viewer makes is whether or not to view (cf. Rosenstein & Grant, 1997). This explains why watching a LOP is the "lesser of evils" (Jeffres, 1978): Viewers often prefer watching a less attractive program to not watching at all (Webster & Wakshlag, 1983, p. 437). It also explains apparently pointless channel hopping: As long as the viewer still wants to watch television, he or she may continue to look for something to watch. In that case the viewer cannot find a LOP or will not make a selection even though the need for TV viewing remains large enough to continue the search (cf. Van den Bulck, 1995, p. 157).

Eastman (1998) remarked that "program choice occurs in stages" (p. 360). Brosius, Wober, and Weimann (1992, p. 322) and Jeffres (1978, p. 168) identified a number of levels on which preferences and selective behavior can be expressed: (1) the decision whether or not to watch television, (2) the choice of a channel, (3) the choice of a program type (genre), (4) the choice of a program, and (5) the choice of a particular element of a program. Decisions are made on various levels and the selection process can start anywhere. The channel hopper may have decided to start watching television (Level 1) but may not find anything to watch. Somebody else may watch a particular movie because he or she is in the mood for a romantic story (Level 3). Another person can turn to the news only because he or she wants to know what the weather will be like (Levels 3 and 5), and so forth.

Program Avoidance

Perse (1998) has remarked that it is "unclear whether channel changing reflects an active or a passive audience" (p. 50). Regular channel hopping could be a sign of "inat-

tentiveness" or lack of interest, but it could just as easily be a form of highly selective behavior. The author quotes research showing that channel changing can be an indicator of both selection and avoidance of content. As early as 1974, McLeod and Becker (p. 141) remarked that most gratification studies deal with positive orientations, usually referred to as "gratifications sought" or "gratifications found." Some viewers' selections, however, may be influenced by the "need" to *avoid* certain programs, genres, or even entire channels. As such, the vocabulary of uses and gratifications research should include the concepts of "experiences unwanted" and "experiences avoided." The levels of selectivity referred to by Brosius et al. (1992, p. 322) and Jeffres (1978, p. 168) should therefore also be seen as levels at which avoidance behaviors can occur: (1) not wanting to watch TV, (2) avoiding a particular channel, (3) avoiding a particular program type (genre), (4) avoiding a particular program, and (5) avoiding part of a particular program.

Television News Avoidance as a Special Case

As a result of all the structural variables influencing viewing behavior, researchers have had a hard time finding unequivocal empirical evidence of viewer selectivity (Van den Bulck, 1995). Factor analyses of actual program choice turn out to be remarkably unstable (see Gunter, 1985; Webster & Wakshlag, 1982). Because watching a program is not necessarily an expression of preference and not watching is not always an expression of avoidance, what people watch does not reveal much about their preferences or even their habits.

This appears to be particularly true of watching the news. Weimann, Brosius, and Wober (1992) have shown that there is little variation in news consumption, despite Cohen's (1996) contention that more types of news now appeal to changing needs. McDonald and Reese (1987) asked respondents about the extent to which they saw themselves as reliant on certain news sources but found that even though there appeared to be different subgroups, "curiously, few differences have been shown in the actual media use behaviors of reliant subgroups" (p. 763). When two people watch the same news program, one may watch it because of the program's specific appeal, whereas the other one is simply waiting for another program to come on. This explains their finding that "overall time spent with the news media is roughly the same, regardless of reported medium reliance" (p. 763). The authors believe that instead of asking people whether or not they watch particular program types, researchers should try to assess the extent to which viewers are interested in those programs. "Use of questions about the frequency of viewing certain types of programming may be a misleading indicator of interest or an altogether inappropriate measure of attention paid to that program" (McDonald & Reese, 1987, p. 764). This view was repeated recently by Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) who remarked that exposure to news is not necessarily an expression of attention to news. Given the possibility of involuntary avoidance, one should remark that the reverse also applies: Lack of exposure to news is not necessarily an expression of lack of interest in the news.

Some evidence of avoidance exists. Grupp (1970), for instance, posited what he called the newscast avoidance hypothesis. This hypothesis stated that "political activists' attentiveness to daily newscasts is directly related to their degree of satisfaction with the political developments reported there" (p. 263). Drawing on Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance, Grupp believed that political activists would avoid newscasts that threatened their views or the construction of reality on which they based their opinions. In a different context, Scherer (1989) found that possession of a VCR led to viewer diversification. Those he called the "information poor" started watching more entertainment by avoiding news and other types of nonfiction, whereas the "information rich" did more or less the reverse. In both these studies, viewers appeared to avoid the news consciously. News selection and avoidance processes are summarized in Figure 1.

Method

Participants

Data were collected in February 2003 (baseline) and February 2004 (follow-up) by means of a standardized, self-administered questionnaire. At baseline, respondents were selected from a sample of 1st- and 4th-year students in 15 secondary schools in the Flemish Community of Belgium. When a school agreed to cooperate, all students from the 1st and the 4th year were included in the sample. Secondary education begins at the mean age of 12.

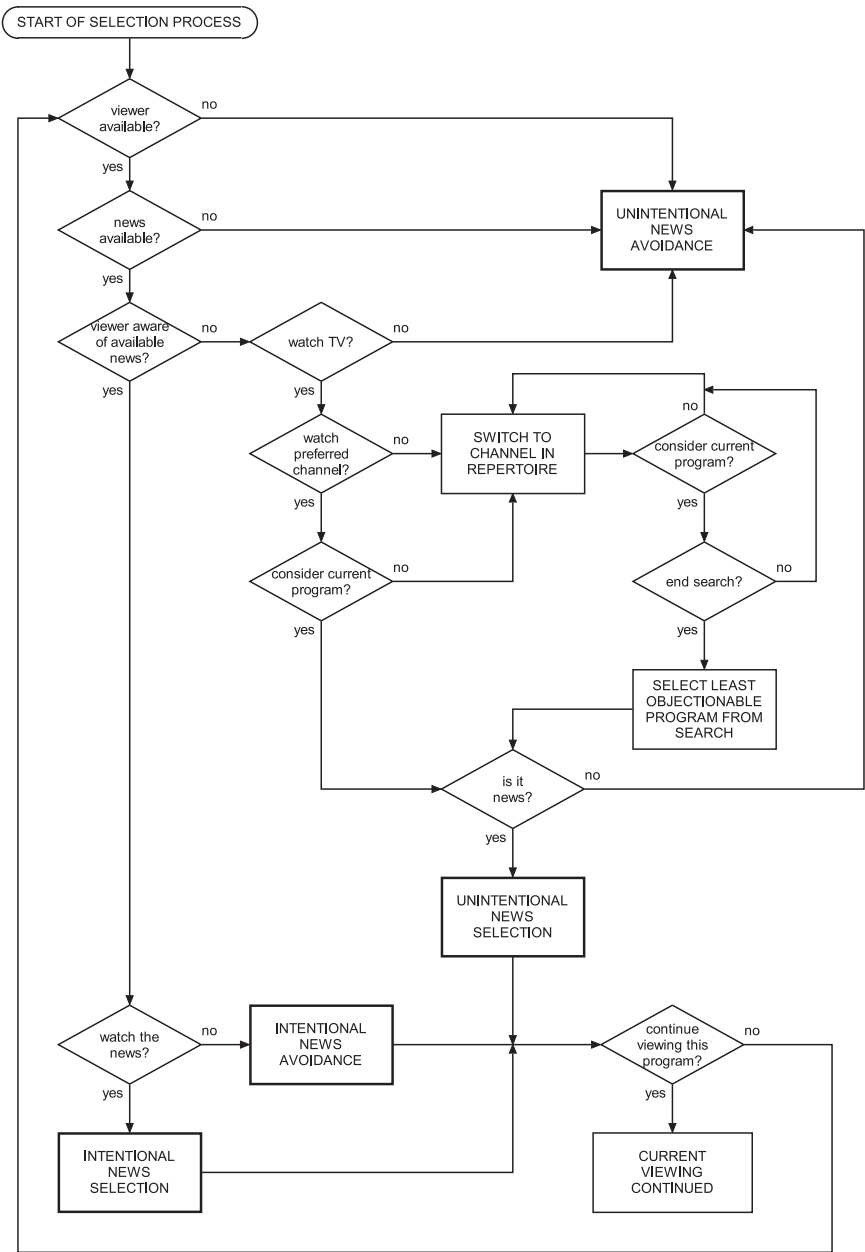
In 2004, the same schools were contacted for a follow-up questionnaire. Two schools, representing 323 students, declined to participate in the follow-up study. In the remaining schools, all students who participated in 2003 were asked to complete the questionnaire again. Some 572 students who participated in 2003 were no longer part of the sample in 2004 because they were sick or otherwise absent on the day of the study or because they had changed schools. In total 1,648 students filled out both questionnaires. In 2003, 52.3% of these respondents were 1st-year students, and 47.7% were 4th-year students. In 2004, 54.6% of the respondents were boys, and 45.4% were girls.

Questions

News Attitude Questions. Fifteen questions tried to tap into structural factors and individual preferences leading to selection or avoidance of news. Respondents answered on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply to me at all*) to 4 (*totally applies to me*). The questions were taken from Van den Bulck (2001).

News Model Questions. A separate question forced respondents to choose one option best describing their viewing behavior. It was designed to reflect the four possi-

Figure 1
Flowchart Representation of News Selection and Avoidance



bilities described in Figure 1. The four options were (a) intentional news exposure ("I watch the news regularly because I think it is important"), (b) unintentional news exposure ("I watch the news regularly, but usually because I come across it accidentally by switching channels"), (c) unintentional news avoidance ("I don't watch the news much because often I don't get around to it"), and (d) intentional news avoidance ("I don't watch the news much because I don't really want to watch it"). For use in hierarchical regression analyses this variable was also recoded into three dummy variables for each wave. Intentional news avoidance was the reference category. The dummy variables thus became (a) intentional news selection, (b) unintentional news selection, and (c) unintentional news avoidance. The variable was 1 if the respondent had put him- or herself into this category and 0 if he or she had given another answer.

News-Viewing Volume. To get an estimate of how often they watched the news, a question was added to a list of genres in which the respondents had to answer how often they watched each genre. The news was listed as a separate genre. Answer categories were on a 5-point scale: 1 (*never*), 2 (*a couple of times a year*), 3 (*a couple of times a month*), 4 (*a couple of times a week*), and 5 (*pretty much every day*).

General Television Exposure. General TV-viewing levels were estimated by giving the respondents a timeline beginning at 7 a.m. and ending at 1 a.m. They were asked to cross each half hour of the day in which they usually watched television. There were seven timelines, one for each day of the week. The answers were summed to form an estimate of weekly viewing volume.

Background Variables. Background variables included gender, age, and level of education. In Flanders, most children start their secondary schooling at age 12. The curriculum consists of six grades. There is a distinction between three levels: general education, often called "humaniora" (with the main emphasis on arts, languages, and basic science); technical education; and vocational training. Because these levels are indicative of job prospects and access to higher learning, they can be seen as three levels of education, with humaniora as the highest and vocational training as the lowest.

Follow-Up Design. All variables were included in the questionnaires for both data collection moments.

Results

TV Viewing and News Consumption

Baseline. At baseline (i.e., 2003), 13.5% of the respondents reported never watching the news, 12.3% reported that they watched it a couple of times a year, 19.8% watched it a couple of times a month, 31.9% watched it several times a week,

and 23.6% claimed to watch it every day. There was a small but significant difference between boys and girls. Girls watched the news a little less often (Spearman's $p = -.09$, $p < .0001$). There was no significant difference in reported news-viewing volume by age, school year, or level of education.

Average TV-viewing volume was 22 hours per week ($SD = 12$ hr). Boys watched more TV than did girls (boys: $M = 24$, $SD = 13$; girls: $M = 20$, $SD = 10$), $t(2544) = 8.979$, $p < .0001$. First-year students watched more than 4th-year students (1st year: $M = 24$, $SD = 12$; 4th year: $M = 21$, $SD = 12$), $t(2542) = 5.504$, $p < .0001$. Children in the highest level of education ("general": $M = 21$, $SD = 11$) watched significantly less than children in the second level ("technical": $M = 24$, $SD = 13$), who in turn watched less than children in the third level ("vocational": $M = 27$, $SD = 15$), $F(2, 2542) = 61.4$, $p < .0001$.

Follow-Up. At follow-up (i.e., 2004), 11.7% of the respondents reported that they never watched the news, 14.1% reported watching it a couple of times a year, 23.6% watched it a couple of times a month, 28.1% watched it several times a week, and 22.5% claimed to watch it every day. There was a small but significant difference between boys and girls (Spearman's $p = -.11$, $p < .0001$) and between 2nd- and 5th-year students, with the latter watching the news a little more often (Spearman's $p = .10$, $p < .0001$). There was no significant difference in reported news-viewing volume by level of education.

Average TV-viewing volume was 22 hours per week ($SD = 11$ hr). Boys watched more TV than did girls (boys: $M = 24$, $SD = 12$; girls: $M = 21$, $SD = 10$), $t(2277) = 6.073$, $p < .0001$. Second-year students watched more than did 5th-year students (2nd: $M = 25$, $SD = 11$; 5th: $M = 20$, $SD = 11$), $t(2284) = 11.370$, $p < .0001$. Children in the highest level of education ("general": $M = 21$, $SD = 11$) watched significantly less than children in the second level ("technical": $M = 23$, $SD = 12$), who in turn watched less than children in the third level ("vocational": $M = 26$, $SD = 13$), $F(2, 2263) = 34.1$, $p < .0001$.

Evolution in News Exposure From Baseline to Follow-Up. News viewing was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*every day*). At baseline, the mean answer was 3.42 ($SD = 1.29$); in the follow-up, the mean answer was 3.35 ($SD = 1.27$). The correlation between both measurements of news viewing was high ($r = .578$, $p < .0001$). A paired samples t test showed that the mean difference (.068) was significant at the $p < .05$ level, $t(1604) = 2.321$, $p = .021$. At follow-up, respondents watched the news slightly less often.

News Selection and Avoidance

By asking the respondents to indicate which type of news viewer they were, an attempt was made to identify four types of news viewers: (a) those actively looking for news (intentional news selection), (b) those who watch the news for structural reasons (unintentional news selection), (c) those who avoid the news unwittingly for structural

reasons (unintentional news avoidance), and (d) those who actively avoid the news (intentional news avoidance).

Baseline. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents felt they were intentional news viewers, 23.0% watched the news for structural reasons, 21.1% said they were involuntary avoiders, and 27.9% identified themselves as intentional news avoiders.

Table 1 shows the news-viewer types by gender, year, and level of education. Boys claimed they were intentional viewers more than girls did, whereas girls reported more unintentional avoidance (Cramer's $V = .13, p < .0001$). More of the 1st-year students reported intentional news avoidance than did 4th-year students (Cramer's $V = .10, p < .0001$). Viewing styles were different for different levels of education (Cramer's $V = .06, p = .006$). Surprisingly, the higher the level of education, the lower intentional news viewing was; the higher levels reported more unintentional avoidance. The lowest level reported the highest level of intentional news viewing *and* the highest level of intentional news avoidance (see Table 1).

Follow-Up. At follow-up, 25.7% of the respondents felt that they were intentional news viewers, 21.6% watched the news for structural reasons, 24.5% said they were involuntary avoiders, and 28.3% identified themselves as intentional news avoiders.

Table 1 shows the news-viewer types by gender, year, and level of education. Again, more boys than girls were intentional news viewers, whereas many more girls than boys were unintentional avoiders (Cramer's $V = .16, p < .0001$). More 2nd-year

Table 1
News Exposure Types by Gender, School Year, and Level of Education
at Baseline (2003) and Follow-Up (2004)

Period	Intentional News Selection		Unintentional News Selection		Unintentional News Avoidance		International News Avoidance	
	Baseline	Follow-Up	Baseline	Follow-Up	Baseline	Follow-Up	Baseline	Follow-Up
Boys	32.6	30.5	22.4	22.7	16.9	19.8	28.1	27.0
Girls	22.1	19.5	23.8	20.4	26.4	30.4	27.1	29.8
Cohort								
1	26.3	20.8	23.8	21.6	17.9	21.6	32.1	36.1
2	29.6	30.9	22.3	21.6	24.1	27.7	24.0	19.9
LOE								
General	27.0	27.2	23.1	20.3	23.2	25.9	26.7	26.6
Technical	30.0	22.6	22.3	26.4	19.3	25.5	28.4	25.5
Vocational	29.5	23.8	23.3	20.9	14.9	18.7	32.3	36.7

Note: Row percentages sum to 100% within each time period. Cohort 1 = 1st-year secondary school at baseline, 2nd-year at follow-up; Cohort 2 = 4th-year secondary school at baseline, 5th-year at follow-up; LOE = level of education.

students reported intentional news avoidance than did 5th-year students, whereas 5th-year students scored higher on intentional viewing and unintentional avoidance (Cramer's $V = .19, p < .0001$). Viewing styles were different for different levels of education (Cramer's $V = .08, p < .0001$). Students in the highest level of education were intentional news viewers more often; vocational training students were intentional avoiders most often, but unintentional avoiders least often. Technical students were unintentional news viewers most often.

Evolution in News Selection and Avoidance From Baseline to Follow-Up. A rough ordinal scale going from intentional news exposure to intentional news avoidance results if the four news avoidance items are ordered as (a) intentional exposure, (b) unintentional exposure, (c) unintentional avoidance, and (d) intentional avoidance. Spearman's rho of the two measurements (baseline vs. follow-up) was $r = .53, p < .0001$. A paired samples t test showed that the mean difference (.079) was significant at the $p < .01$ level, $t(1562) = 2.798, p = .005$. At follow-up, respondents avoided the news slightly more often. This trend is also evident in Table 2, which shows what type of viewer respondents called themselves in 2004 compared to their answers in 2003.

Latent Constructs of News Viewing and Avoidance

Fifteen questions tried to tap into the four types of news viewing or avoidance illustrated by Figure 1. Two factor analyses, one on the results of the baseline and the other on the results of the follow-up, were run using principal axis factoring as the extraction method and varimax rotation as the rotation method. If the eigenvalue was used as a criterion for selecting factors, the two data collection periods appeared to yield two different solutions. The eigenvalue of the fourth factor at baseline was, however, only marginally lower than the eigenvalue for the same factor at follow-up. Table 3 shows that a very similar solution was reached in both periods in a four-factor solution. This approach appeared to be warranted on theoretical grounds because the central thesis of this study is that four types of news viewing exist. Because in one of the two periods, but not in the other, some factor loadings were in the borderline region just above or just below the often used .40 cutoff point, factor scores were computed rather than factor based scores. By using the Anderson–Rubin estimation method, uncorrelated factor scores were obtained with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

A closer look at the factor loadings (see Table 3) suggests that the four factors represent the four types of news viewing. The questions appeared to be better suited for measuring intentional viewing and avoidance than unintentional viewing and avoidance: Both the eigenvalues and the Cronbach's alphas of the intentional news avoidance factor and the intentional news selection factor were high, whereas the eigenvalues and the Cronbach's alphas of the unintentional news avoidance factor and the unintentional news selection factor were very low.

Table 2
News Selection and Avoidance in 2004, Compared to 2003

News Selection or Avoidance 2003	News Selection or Avoidance 2004				Total
	Intentional Selection	Unintentional Selection	Unintentional Avoidance	Intentional Avoidance	
Intentional selection					
<i>n</i>	258	80	28	66	432
%	59.7	18.5	6.5	15.3	100.0
Unintentional selection					
<i>n</i>	73	133	76	85	367
%	19.9	36.2	20.7	23.2	100.0
Unintentional avoidance					
<i>n</i>	28	64	240	76	408
%	6.9	15.7	58.8	18.6	100.0
Intentional avoidance					
<i>n</i>	38	60	87	171	356
%	10.7	16.9	24.4	48.0	100.0
Total					
<i>n</i>	397	337	431	398	1,563
%	25.4	21.6	27.6	25.5	100.0

Predictive Value of Latent Constructs and Theoretical News Types

Cross-Sectional Prediction of News Exposure. Two hierarchical regression analyses were run to examine the extent to which both the latent variables and the news types variable predicted news exposure. In all analyses, three demographic control variables (gender, age group, and level of education) and overall TV-viewing volume were entered in the first step. TV viewing was added as a control variable because, as argued in the theory section, some authors have remarked that heavy TV viewers tend to be heavier viewers of most genres. The news types variable was a categorical variable consisting of four answer categories. To enter this variable in a hierarchical regression analysis, it was recoded into three dummy variables using the coding scheme described in the Method section. Because it appeared to be most likely that intentional avoiders would have the lowest rating on the news exposure variable, this was taken as the reference category. The independent variable was the news exposure variable measured at follow-up because this would make it possible to compare the regression models with a conditional change model by adding variables from the baseline measurement in further steps.

Table 4 shows the results of the cross-sectional hierarchical regression models. The control variables explain about 3% of the variance in the news exposure variable. Of

Table 3
News Selection and Avoidance: Latent Variables

	Baseline (2003)				Follow-Up (2004)			
	Intentional News Avoidance	Intentional News Selection	Unintentional News Avoidance	Unintentional News Selection	Intentional News Avoidance	Intentional News Selection	Unintentional News Avoidance	Unintentional News Selection
When the news comes on, I switch to another channel	.678	-.439	.022	.071	.704	-.430	.089	-.034
There is so much on TV that I seldom watch the news	.575	-.366	.269	.152	.590	-.291	.342	.118
Usually the news isn't interesting enough to watch	.568	-.206	.086	-.018	.573	-.286	.105	.006
If the news annoys or bothers me I immediately change channels	.540	-.123	.232	.023	.439	-.136	.310	.096
Some days I really don't want to watch any news	.426	-.078	.405	-.039	.396	-1.35	.418	-.030
There is always a program that interests me more than the news	.394	-.142	.147	.044	.527	-.184	.125	.012

I switch on the TV especially to watch the news	-.387	.645	-.104	-.132	-.446	.603	-.174	-.063
A TV evening isn't complete if I haven't watched the news	-.197	.553	-.158	-.061	-.287	.525	-.188	-.063
I watch the news on several channels	-.116	.512	.001	.154	-.120	.538	-.067	.124
If I come across the news by accident I watch it	-.292	.481	.089	.166	-.286	.536	.024	.235
I often watch more than one news show on the same channel	-.085	.468	-.026	.140	-.171	.578	-.135	.000
I often forget to watch the news	.140	-.053	.601	.130	.079	-.125	.597	.113
By watching my favorite shows I often miss the news	.161	.004	.420	.212	.162	-.046	.419	.144
I only watch the news if there is nothing better	.175	.006	.186	.576	.216	-.040	.125	.720
I watch the news in between two other programs if nothing else is on	-.114	.300	.115	.568	-.132	.223	.165	.589
Eigenvalue	4.247	2.008	1.042	.964	4.779	1.888	1.027	1.000
R ²	14.2	12.9	6.3	5.6	15.4	13.6	7.2	6.7
α	.80	.75	.53	.52	.83	.80	.53	.59

Note: All factor loadings larger than .40 are in bold.

Table 4
Cross-Sectional Two-Step Hierarchical Regression

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Standardized β	ΔR^2	Standardized β	ΔR^2
Control variables				
Study year	.045*		.011	
Gender	-.006		-.016	
Level of education	-.031		.013	
Hours of TV viewing per week	.092***	.032***	.093***	.034***
Step 2				
Dummy 1: Intentional news exposure	.734***			
Dummy 2: Unintentional news exposure	.481***			
Dummy 3: Unintentional news avoidance	.233***	.433***		
Intentional news selection factor			.518***	
Unintentional news selection factor			.078***	
Unintentional news avoidance factor			-.087***	
Intentional news avoidance factor			-.442***	.434***
Model <i>F</i>	172.4		159.4	
<i>df</i>	7, 1583		8, 1449	
Durbin-Watson statistic	1.903		1.980	
Adjusted R^2	.430***		.465***	

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .0001$.

the control variables, only age group and overall television viewing have any predictive value. Older respondents appeared to watch the news a little more often. As the literature predicts, heavier viewers of television tend to be somewhat heavier viewers of the news.

In the first model, the three dummy variables were entered. All three dummy variables were significant and their betas were positive, which means that each of these viewer types watched the news significantly more often than viewer types belonging to the reference category (intentional news avoiders). The dummy variables explained 43% of the variance. In the second model, the four factors from the factor analyses, as measured at follow-up, were entered in Step 2. These four factors also explained 43% of the variance. Table 5 shows what happens when the four factors are added to the model with the dummy variables. Adding the factors explained an additional 9% of the variance over and above the variance explained by the dummy variables.

Prediction of News Exposure at Time 2 Using Variables Measured at Time 1. The respondents answered the questions regarding their television news viewing twice in an interval of 12 months. Answers to the news exposure variables were added in con-

Table 5
Multistep Hierarchical Regression

	Model		Colinearity Diagnostics	
	Standardized β	ΔR^2	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor
Step 1: Control variables		.025***		
Study year	.005		.780	1.281
Gender	.019		.902	1.108
Level of education	.019		.792	1.263
Hours of TV viewing per week	.063**		.780	1.282
Step 2: News-viewers types follow-up		.417***		
Dummy 1: Intentional news exposure	.288***		.275	3.634
Dummy 2: Unintentional news exposure	.210***		.454	2.204
Dummy 3: Unintentional news avoidance	.076**		.493	2.030
Step 3: News-viewing attitudes follow-up		.091***		
Intentional news selection factor	.300***		.487	2.053
Unintentional news selection factor	.068**		.770	1.299
Unintentional news avoidance factor	-.041*		.789	1.267
Intentional news avoidance factor	-.267***		.447	2.237
Step 4: News exposure baseline		.066***		
News exposure	.348***		.500	2.001
Step 5: News-viewers types baseline		.003*		
Dummy 1: Intentional news exposure	-.006		.276	3.623
Dummy 2: Unintentional news exposure	-.019		.435	2.301
Dummy 3: Unintentional news avoidance	-.056*		.531	1.884
Step 6: News-viewing attitudes baseline		.004*		
Intentional news selection factor	-.089**		.443	2.256
Unintentional news selection factor	.006		.795	1.258
Unintentional news avoidance factor	.023		.832	1.202
Intentional news avoidance factor	.067*		.477	2.094
Final model F	103.9			
df	19, 1283			
Durbin-Watson statistic	1.907			
Final adjusted R^2	.600***			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. *** $p < .0001$.

secutive steps to build an increasingly complex model. Step 1 is the null or nonselective model in which only the control variables are entered. Even though both structural and uses and gratifications processes influence overall TV viewing, it was nonetheless entered as a control variable because it is a measure of nonselective viewing. Step 1 had very little explanatory or predictive power ($< 3\%$). Furthermore, only overall television viewing remained significant as other steps were added to the model.

The second step added the dummy variables, based on the respondents' answers to a single question. This single variable added about 42% to the explained variance. Adding the four factors based on 15 questions designed to tap into the same processes explained an additional 9% of the variance. News exposure as measured at Time 1, measured in the same way as the dependent variable, explained about 7% of the variance, when added to the model in Step 4. Adding the dummy variables based on the news exposure types variable as measured at baseline explained only an additional 0.3% of the variance. Only the unintentional news avoidance dummy variable appeared to be significant. Finally, the news exposure factors as measured at baseline explained 0.4% of the variance. Only the intentional news exposure and the intentional news avoidance factors appeared to be significant.

The final model explained 60% of the variance of the news exposure variable. Even though the collinearity diagnostics predictably deteriorated with every additional step, the Durbin-Watson statistic, measuring autoregression, remained comfortably close to 2.

Discussion

Three types of theories explaining television program choice can be found in the literature. The nonselectivity hypothesis assumes that most people enjoy most of what the television mainstream has to offer. Even if they make choices, these do not lead to significantly different TV diets. The second theory assumes that people watch certain programs because they have certain needs. What people watch is an attempt to gratify those needs. The third theory states that powerful structural factors such as program or viewer availability exert such a big influence that the impact of personal choice on viewing behavior is virtually irrelevant.

The current study proposed that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Both structural factors and individual preferences influence the program selection process. Applied to the analysis of news exposure, this means that on theoretical grounds a distinction can be made between four types of news viewers: First, some people watch the news because they make a conscious choice to watch the news. In this case, personal preferences offer a better explanation of exposure than structural factors do. The second type of viewer watches a lot of news but does so unintentionally. These people watch the news because they do not mind watching it and because structural factors occasionally pull them towards the news. The third type watches the news rarely, not because they do not want to but because structural factors pull them away from the news. Finally, a fourth type of viewer does not like the news and consciously seeks to avoid watching it.

These four types of news viewing were explored in two ways. First, by asking people to choose which of these four types of viewing best described their news viewing. Second, by asking people to what extent they agreed with 15 questions regarding news exposure. These questions tried to translate the same four viewer

types into latent constructs. An exploratory factor analysis showed that four factors could be defined that coincide with the four types of news viewing outlined previously. These factors remained fairly stable over time: The second measurement using the same variables and the same respondents 12 months later yielded a very similar result. Nevertheless, only two of the four factors had a decent Cronbach's alpha. This can mean two things. First, the strongest factors were the two factors expressing intentional news viewing or intentional news avoidance. It is possible that intentional behaviors, expressing preferences rather than structural constraints, are easier to measure. Structural processes are by definition independent of the individual: Although availability issues are different depending on the situation of an individual viewer, it is not the viewer who decides whether or not a particular channel will make particular programs available for viewing. As a result, structural factors may not be measurable using traditional summated rating scales. Second, it is also possible that the scale used in this study was inadequate. It was taken from a pilot study with a limited number of atypical respondents (see Van den Bulck, 2001). Consequently, there is probably a lot of room for improvement. For instance, many of the items did not load on the factor one might have expected: "When I come across the news by accident I watch it," for instance, loaded on the intentional news selection factor. The question could have been an indicator of least objectionable program selection ("I watch because I don't mind watching the news; there is nothing else on anyway") but instead seems to have tapped into consciously enjoying the news ("I like watching the news so much that I watch it even when I come across it by accident").

Whether one measures news selection or avoidance by asking a single question or by asking 15 questions, both approaches appear to explain or predict actual news exposure rather well. The literature suggests that overall TV viewing is a good predictor of exposure to most types of programs because heavy viewers tend to watch a lot of everything. Although overall TV viewing did remain a significant predictor of TV viewing in all models, both approaches based on the four theoretical explanations of viewing and nonviewing explained about 43% of the variance of total (self-reported) news exposure. It is clear that these two approaches tap into similar processes: Adding the summated rating scale factors to the results based on the answers to the single question only added another 9% to the overall explained variance. If it is possible to improve the rating scale by increasing the Cronbach's alpha of the two unintentional factors, this percentage may increase.

This study collected the same data from the same respondents twice, one year apart. It is interesting to note that news exposure and news avoidance changed a lot over 12 months. This may seem remarkable as most literature on longitudinal research warns that inertia or absence of change appears to be typical of most social behavior (see Menard, 2002, p. 72, for an overview), even though a number of studies on viewing behaviors have found that viewing patterns either do not exist or are very unstable over time (see Van den Bulck, 1995, for an overview). These observations are confirmed by the hierarchical regression analysis reported in Table 5. News expo-

sure at Time 1 only explains an additional 7% of news exposure at Time 2 if the answers to the same variables at Time 2 are also included in the model.

Thirty-seven variables are used in the model in Table 5 and that is not counting the 252 variables used to compute estimated weekly TV viewing. Although this model predicts 60% of the variance in the dependent variable, a much more parsimonious model with just one variable (expressed as three dummy variables in the table) would explain about 43% of the variance of the same variable. Each additional step in the model appears to offer little or no gain. The data also suggest that for explaining or predicting news viewing, follow-up studies may not be very productive. The best result was obtained using the equivalent of a cross-sectional study. By adding the summated rating scale, the explained variance increased to 53%. The question of whether an additional 6% or 7% warrants the cost and effort of a second data collection period is a question worth asking.

The current study attempted to investigate the concept of news avoidance both theoretically and empirically. On theoretical grounds, four types of news viewing were distinguished, as summarized in Figure 1. These four types appeared to be valid distinctions: They predicted news exposure along the lines of the theory. Although the four types of viewing were good predictors of self-reported news exposure, future research should address a number of other issues. First, it would be interesting to see whether and to what extent news exposure and avoidance types extend to viewing of other news-like programs, such as current affairs programs or talk shows. Second, the follow-up data presented in this study show a lack of stability over time. It would be interesting to find out whether the same patterns of avoidance and selection can be found for other genres (e.g., crime viewing, soap operas, etc.) and whether these genres show more or less stable results over time. Third, other uses of the viewer types should be explored. It was remarkable to note that 27.6% of the respondents identified themselves as intentional news avoiders at follow-up, whereas only 11.7% claimed that they never watched the news in reply to the more conventional news exposure variable. It is possible that most people cannot escape watching the news at least occasionally. This finding appears to support the McDonald and Reese (1987, p. 764) remark that frequency questions are probably not a good measure of attention. Fourth, the news selection and avoidance questions may play a role in effects research. Slater (2004) remarked that studying and operationalizing exposure to content is one of the most essential foundations of effects research. The validity of much effects research depends on the question of whether the viewer was actually exposed to the message he or she is believed to be influenced by. Charting program selection processes validly and reliably is therefore very important. This remark only pertains to the question of exposure or avoidance. Other authors have remarked that other processes play an important part. Kim and Rubin (1997) for instance analyzed whether media effects were moderated by audience activity. Similarly, Henning and Vorderer (2001) found a relationship between exposure and need for cognition. The issue of being exposed to or avoiding television content might be relevant for several ongoing discussions in the field of media effects research. Fifth, television news viewing or avoid-

ance should be studied in relation to other types of media and news consumption. Dutta-Bergman (2004) offers a recent overview of the discussion between those believing that new media displace older media as total time spent with the media is unlikely to change versus those who believe that different media are often complementary (as Dutta-Bergman, 2004, argues). It would be interesting to see whether viewers claiming to avoid television news also avoid other news sources or whether some form of displacement takes place. Finally, the current article used a quantitative methodology. The distinction between active and passive processes in viewing and in program selection have also been analyzed by using qualitative methods such as focus groups (e.g., Adams, 2000) or narrative diaries (e.g., Massey, 1995), and so forth. Given the conclusion that unintentional behaviors may be difficult to study using self-reports, the use of qualitative data might shed a different light on the findings of this article.

References

- Adams, W. J. (2000). How people watch television as investigated using focus group techniques. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44, 78–93.
- Barwise, P., Ehrenberg, A. S. C., & Goodhardt, G. J. (1982). Glued to the box? Patterns of TV repeat viewing. *Journal of Communication*, 32, 22–29.
- Beaudoin, C. E., & Thorson, E. (2004). Social capital in rural and urban communities: Testing differences in media effects and models. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81, 378–399.
- Brosius, H.-B., Wober, M., & Weimann, G. (1992). The loyalty of television viewing: How consistent is TV viewing behavior? *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 36, 321–336.
- Busselle, R., & Crandall, H. (2002). Television viewing and perceptions about race differences in socioeconomic success. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46, 265–282.
- Cohen, A. (1996). News needs, new uses and new gratifications in news research. *Journal of Behavioral and Social Sciences*, pp. 1–10.
- Drale, C. (2004). Communication media in a democratic society. *Communication Law and Policy*, 9, 213–235.
- Dutta-Bergman, M. J. (2004). Complementarity in consumption of news types across traditional and new media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48, 41–60.
- Eastman, S. T. (1998). Programming theory under stress: The active industry and the active audience. *Communication Yearbook*, 21, 323–377.
- Goodhardt, G. J., Ehrenberg, A. S. C., & Collins, M. A. (1987). *The television audience, patterns of viewing, an update*. Aldershot, England: Gower.
- Grupp, F. W. (1970). Newscast avoidance among political activists. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34, 262–266.
- Gunter, B. (1985). Determinants of television viewing preferences. In D. Zillmann & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Selective exposure to television* (pp. 93–112). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Hawkins, R. P., Pingree, S., Hitchon, J., Gorham, B. W., Kannaovakun, P., Kahlor, L., et al. (2001). Predicting selection and activity in television genre viewing. *Media Psychology*, 3, 237–263.
- Heeter, C. (1985). Program selection with abundance of choice: A process model. *Human Communication Research*, 12, 126–152.
- Henning, B., & Vorderer, P. (2001). Psychological escapism: Predicting the amount of television viewing by need for cognition. *Journal of Communication*, 51, 100–120.

- Holbert, R. L., Shah, D. V., & Kwak, N. (2004). Fear, authority, and justice: Crime-related TV viewing and endorsements of capital punishment and gun ownership. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81, 343–363.
- Jeffres, L. (1978). Cable TV and viewer selectivity. *Journal of Broadcasting*, 22, 167–177.
- Kim, J. K., & Rubin, A. M. (1997). The variable influence of audience activity on media effects. *Communication Research*, 24, 107–135.
- Lin, C. A., Atkin, D. J., & Abelman, R. (2002). The influence of network branding on Audience affinity for network television. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 42(3), 19–32.
- Massey, K. B. (1995). Analyzing the uses and gratifications concept of audience activity with a qualitative approach: Media encounters during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake disaster. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 39, 328–358.
- McDonald, D. G., & Reese, S. D. (1987). Television news and audience selectivity. *Journalism Quarterly*, 64, 763–768.
- McLeod, J. M., & Becker, L. B. (1974). Testing the validity of gratification measures through political effects analysis. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 137–164). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Menard, S. (2002). *Longitudinal research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moy, P., Pfau, M., & Kahlor, L. (1999). Media use and public confidence in democratic institutions. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43, 137–158.
- Neuendorf, K. A., Atkin, D., & Jeffres, L. W. (2001). Reconceptualizing channel repertoire In the urban cable environment. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45, 464–482.
- Perse, E. M. (1998). Implications of cognitive and affective involvement for channel changing. *Journal of Communication*, 48(3), 49–68.
- Pinkleton, B. E., & Austin, E. W. (2004). Media perceptions and public affairs apathy in the politically inexperienced. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7, 319–337.
- Potter, W. J., & Chang, I. C. (1990). Television exposure measures and the cultivation hypothesis. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 34, 94–103.
- Rayburn, J. D., & Palmgren, P. (1984). Merging uses and gratifications and expectancy-value theory. *Communication Research*, 11, 537–562.
- Rosenstein, A., & Grant, A. (1997). Reconceptualizing the role of habit: A new model of television audience activity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41, 324–344.
- Scherer, C. W. (1989). The videocassette recorder and information inequity. *Journal of Communication*, 39(3), 94–103.
- Slater, M. D. (2004). Operationalizing and analyzing exposure: The foundation of media effects research. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81, 168–183.
- Spencer, G. (2004). The impact of television news on the Northern Ireland peace negotiations. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26, 603–623.
- Van den Bulck, J. (1995). The selective viewer: Defining (Flemish) viewer types. *European Journal of Communication*, 10, 147–177.
- Van den Bulck, J. (2001). News avoidance: The paradox of viewer selectivity. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research Monographs*, 2, 173–184.
- Webster, J. G., & Phalen, P. F. (1997). *The mass audience: Rediscovering the dominant model*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Webster, J. G., & Wakshlag, J. J. (1982). The impact of group viewing on patterns of television program choice. *Journal of Broadcasting*, 26, 445–455.
- Webster, J. G., & Wakshlag, J. J. (1983). A theory of television program choice. *Communication Research*, 10, 430–446.
- Webster, J. G., & Wakshlag, J. J. (1985). Measuring exposure to television. In D. Zillmann & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Selective exposure to television* (pp. 35–62). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Webster, J. G., & Wang, T. Y. (1992). Structural determinants of exposure to television: The case of repeat viewing. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 36, 125–136.
- Weimann, G., Brosius, H.-B., & Wober, M. (1992). TV-diets: Towards a typology of TV viewership. *European Journal of Communication*, 7, 791–515.