

Chapter 3

News Audiences: How Strong Are the Public's Interests in the Public Interest?

IT IS AN OLD DEBATE: Do the media provide people with the information they want or the information they need? This familiar question ignores the wide content variations in the publications and programs that make up “the media” and the large differences in interests among the demographic groups that constitute “the people.” This chapter analyzes the variations in demand for news about government and politics across different types of media outlets and different sets of individuals.¹ The analysis focuses on the implications of the first of the five Ws: Who cares about a particular piece of information?

The basic logic of the spatial model of media content discussed in [chapter 1](#) is clear. Tastes for different types of information vary among individuals. Programs and publications will offer combinations of hard news (e.g., coverage of government decisions) and soft news (e.g., sports or celebrity profiles) to satisfy reader and viewer demands. Interests in information are correlated with the age and gender of consumers. This means that programs targeted at particular information interests may be segmented by age and gender, so that some program audiences will be dominated by particular demographic groups.

These simple assumptions about news audiences generate clear predictions about how economics will influence news content. Consider the case of the network evening news programs. The audience for these programs consists largely of viewers aged 50+. Advertisements for products on those programs are used disproportionately by consumers aged 50+. When producers on these programs are making decisions about what stories to cover, however, it is the interests of younger viewers (particularly younger female viewers) that matter. Two economic concepts, advertiser value and marginal viewers, help explain this. Advertisers are often willing to pay more for viewers 18–34 or 35–49 for a variety of reasons. Their purchasing decisions may be more easily influenced, and they may be harder to reach since they watch less television than older viewers.² Since females 18–34 are particularly likely to make the purchasing decisions in their households, they are a highly valued demographic group by advertisers. This means that programmers will try to attract younger viewers to the network evening news, in part to increase news advertising revenues and in part to add these viewers to the audience that stays with the network into the prime-time schedule.

Though viewers 18–34 make up 18.3% of the regular viewers of network evening television, they constitute 38.1% of the marginal viewers (i.e., those who report that they sometimes watch the programs). In the provision of news stories, programmers may often take

the interests of the average viewer for granted since these (generally older) viewers are unlikely to go elsewhere. In models of product quality, it will often be the desires of the marginal consumers that producers pay attention to since those consumers are by definition making a close decision about consuming the product.³ This means that at the margin, network evening news producers will consider the interests of viewers 18–34 in determining what topics to cover in the news. The results in this chapter bear out these predictions about the demand for news. In terms of the number of stories presented about a set of public affairs topics in 2000, or time devoted to these topics, the networks focused on stories that interested particular demographic groups. The higher the interest in a topic among those 18–34, especially women, the greater the number of stories or time devoted by the network evening news shows. Economics predicts that the networks will factor in who cares about a topic when deciding whether it is newsworthy, since advertisers place different values on individuals and since particular individuals are likely to be the marginal viewers. The evidence presented here confirms this link between viewer interests and content selection.

The segmentation of news audiences by interests, the correlation of these interests with age and gender, and the targeting of demographic groups by news outlets and advertisers also help explain many popular criticisms of the media. When asked whether “people who decide what to put on TV news or in the newspapers are out of touch with people like me,” people 50+ are more likely to agree with this than younger readers or viewers, and men are more likely to agree than women. Young women are the least likely to agree with this statement, while older men are the most likely to agree. In a world where advertisers place a higher value on attracting the attention of women than of men and pay more for audiences filled with younger rather than older consumers, one would expect that at the margin news outlets will offer content of more interest to young women than older men. This should mean that young women will be the least likely to say that the media are not responsive to their interests. In the survey data, this translates into 10.7% of women 18–34 reporting that the news media are “out of touch” with their interests versus 23.9% of men 50+.

Perceptions of media bias also have roots in economic concerns. When individuals are asked to place themselves on a scale of liberalism and conservatism, those 18–34 are more liberal than those 50+, women are more liberal than men, and women 18–34 report the highest ratings as liberals. If a media outlet selects or covers issues to attract younger or female viewers, one can expect that content will on the margin relate to liberal concerns. Survey responses again bear out these predictions. Younger viewers and female viewers are less likely to report that they see political bias in news coverage. Women 18–34 are the least likely to report that they see political bias, which is what one would expect if some news outlets were shaping content to attract these particular viewers. Of those survey respondents who identify themselves as “very liberal,” only 25.3% perceive a “great deal” of political bias in news coverage. In contrast, among those who say they are “very conservative,” 44.5% report there is a great deal of bias.

Political bias in media content is similar to product differentiation.⁴ The survey data in this chapter do not provide a direct measure of how media content varies. The surveys do ask

individuals to rate themselves on a conservative-liberal scale, with 1 being very conservative and 6 being very liberal. The respondents also rated particular programs on a scale ranging from very biased to completely objective. To construct an indirect measure of media content, I calculate the mean ideological ratings of the program audiences. By treating the ideology of the audience as an indicator of the ideological content of the program, I develop an indicator of where programs are located on the ideological spectrum. In this sense media outlets can be seen as choosing an ideological location, much like firms in other industries choose particular combinations of attributes to differentiate their products. If the audience ideology is a proxy for the “ideological content” of the program, then the audience means should capture how dispersed news outlets are in terms of political ideology. If readers and viewers define bias by the distance between a program’s content and their ideology, then they should be more likely to see a program as biased if its audience’s ideology is farther from their own political beliefs.

The analyses of audience ideologies suggest that media outlets do differ in their ideological content and that viewers react to this based on their own political beliefs. If programs are defined by the mean ideology ratings of their consumers, in one survey concerning sources of information about campaigns and candidates, the most conservative audience belongs to religious radio programs such as *Focus on the Family* and the most liberal audience is for late night talk shows such as those hosted by David Letterman and Jay Leno. In another survey, audience ideologies range from Fox News Cable Channel as the most conservative to magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, or *The New Yorker* as the most liberal. Many of the mean audience ideologies for the mass media outlets are clustered near the value for the national audience. The mean ideology on a 1–6 scale for the national nightly network news audience was a 3.28, which mirrors the mean rating of the survey respondents.

Readers and viewers respond to programs and publications as if they view media bias as a function of how different a program is from their ideology. With most of the media outlets registering a mean ideology in the 3s, it is not surprising that survey respondents who rate themselves as a 3 on the ideological scale do not view these programs as very biased. Respondents who rate themselves as very conservative (1) or very liberal (6) are much more likely to view the outlets as very biased. For a given program, those who are very conservative are more likely than those who are very liberal to rate the program as biased. This is consistent with the earlier suggestion that programs may tilt content toward liberal views to gain marginal consumers who are younger (and therefore more liberal). As the mean ideology of a program audience grows more liberal, respondents who rate themselves as very liberal are less likely to view the source as very biased. This suggests that perceptions of media bias do relate to different brand locations outlets choose when they cover politics.

Variations in tastes in most markets do not attract public scrutiny; whether consumers prefer khakis to blue jeans is not often a question covered in policy debates. Differences in tastes in news coverage, however, attract more attention since they are related to differences in political activity. The audience data analyzed here show that interests in politics are correlated with actions in politics. Some news outlets provide high levels of public affairs information

and attract viewers who are active in politics. Among those who are regular consumers of *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS, 60.8% reported that they always vote, 41.5% indicated they were following the 2000 presidential election closely, and 55.9% were able to identify correctly Alan Greenspan as the chairman of the Federal Reserve. Among those who are regular consumers of *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*, 31% reported that they always vote, 20% indicated they were following the 2000 presidential election closely, and 24.7% were able to identify Alan Greenspan correctly. These differences are indicative of the segmentation of the audiences for public affairs information. Individuals who report that they regularly vote indicate that they follow news about government closely. People who vote some of the time follow news about politics some of the time, while those who rarely vote are the least likely to follow such news.

How to evaluate the links between the market for news and the operation of politics is the topic of [chapter 9](#). This [chapter \(3\)](#) provides analyses on three related questions: the overlap between the interests of marginal voters and marginal viewers; the ability of marginal voters to draw a political map of where candidates stand in politics; and the degree that less-informed voters are satisfied with their political choices after they are made. The analysis here shows that marginal voters are interested in news about crime, health, or the local community more than they are interested in news about political figures and events in Washington. To attract the attention of marginal consumers, most news outlets face greater incentives to cover crime, health, local community events, and even entertainment news rather than news about political events. The good news is that the interests of marginal voters often coincide with the interests of the marginal consumers that news outlets are trying to attract. The bad news, from the perspective of informed discourse, is that these interests do not focus on public affairs.

Though many survey respondents do not express a strong interest in politics, they still may learn enough about politics to make “informed” political decisions.⁵ The analysis here shows that marginal voters are able to determine who stands where in politics. When respondents were asked to rate politicians such as Clinton, Gore, Bradley, Jackson, Bush, McCain, and Buchanan on a 6-point ideology scale, the candidate ratings reported by regular voters were nearly the same as those reported by marginal voters. The only statistically significant difference in the mean ratings was the placement of Bill Bradley, who was given a 3.88 by regular voters and a 3.55 by marginal voters. The differences in ratings between those who were following the 2000 election very closely, versus only fairly closely, were similarly small. This suggests that even in a world where readers and viewers consume programs with great differences in hard news content, those who make some attempt to learn about politics or take some action to participate may possess enough information to place candidates on a left-right political scale.

Another way to view the operation of the political information market is to see whether less-informed voters regret their decisions. It could be the case that voters without much political information choose candidates whose actions later disappoint them. If voters had been better informed, the reasoning goes, they would have made different selections and hence been less likely to be surprised or disgruntled when politicians are elected and choose

policies. The survey data here indicate that less-informed voters are not more likely to be disappointed. The analysis examines those respondents who indicated that they voted for President Clinton in 1996. If this set of voters is divided into groups based on levels of political information (i.e., ability to identify Bush, Bradley, and McCain), those who are least knowledgeable did not report higher levels of disapproval for Clinton's performance. They were less likely to register a response to the question of approval or disapproval, which would be consistent with their lack of political knowledge overall.

In markets where consumers have widely divergent preferences, one often hears the phrase "there's no accounting for tastes." While this may be true, in a news market where accountants track tastes it does matter who cares about what types of information. This chapter explores the differences in audience interests for types of news and analyzes the implications of the variations of news interests across demographic groups.

Tastes across Programs and Demographic Groups

Managers in broadcasting and print outlets have many data sources on who follows particular types of news: Nielsen Media Research ratings reports; other surveys of local or national viewers; studies done by media consulting firms; and information from focus group discussions about how readers and viewers react to a given program or publication. Most of these data never emerge in the public domain. Fortunately, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducts regular surveys on media consumption and makes the individual-level survey responses available through the Internet. This chapter uses three Pew surveys conducted in 1999 and 2000 to explore patterns in media consumption and reactions to the media.⁶

A basic assumption in the spatial competition model of news provision is that consumers have different interests in types of news and that news outlets will form to cater to these different interests. Table 3.1 shows that media outlets serve audiences that vary widely in interests. The table reports how the percentage of respondents following a given type of news differs across news audiences.⁷ Media outlets are clearly segmented by reader or viewer interests. In terms of following political figures and events in Washington, D.C., outlets with reputations for hard news content and analysis have audiences with the highest percentage following this type of news; C-SPAN (48.6%); *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (39.6%); and magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker* (39.1%). Programs with reputations for soft news have audiences with some of the lowest percentage of readers or viewers following events in Washington: *The National Enquirer*, *Sun*, and *Star* (21.5%); daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (21.1%); programs such as *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted* (21.0%); and other daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (19.1%).

Outlets with audiences interested in following international affairs very closely are similarly predictable. Those with the highest fraction interested in international affairs were

NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (40.1%), C-PSAN (38.5%), and magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker* (36.0%). Outlets whose audiences expressed the least interest in international affairs were those for personality magazines such as *People* (16.1%), courtroom programs such as *Judge Judy* or *Divorce Court* (15.9%), and daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (11.8%). The gaps in audience interests are even stronger for business and finance news. Programs and publications with a brand image specializing in business and economics have the highest audience percentages that follow this information very closely. For business magazines such as *Fortune* or *Forbes*, 56.5% of regular consumers report they follow business and finance news very closely. For CNBC, which offers cable viewers programs covering Wall Street and other business topics, 34.2% of the regular viewers follow this type of news very closely. At the other end of the interest spectrum, viewers of daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (12.1%) or *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (10.8%) report very little interest in business and finance news.

A high percentage of audience members across different media outlets report that they follow news about people and events in the local community very closely. The wide variation in the nature of events one might follow in a local community may mean this category signifies different things to particular survey respondents. A high percentage of viewers of *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted* (43.2%) and courtroom shows such as *Judge Judy* or *Divorce Court* (44.1%) report a strong interest in local people and events, which for these viewers may involve stories about local conflicts and disputes. Consumers of daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (42.4%) or *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (40.9%) may be interested in local human interest stories. Regular viewers of *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (42.4%) also follow local events closely, though these may be events that fall into hard news categories.

TABLE 3.1
Media Audience Tastes

Regular Consumers of	% of Row Respondents Following a Type of News Very Closely							
	Political Figures/ Events in D.C.	International Affairs	Business/ Finance	People/Events in Local Community	Crime	Health	Entertainment	Culture/ Arts
Daily Newspaper	21.1	17.2	17.5	30.5	32.0	32.6	16.6	11.6
National Nightly Network News	28.4	22.6	19.7	35.0	38.9	40.4	17.3	11.8
Local TV News	20.3	16.5	14.8	35.1	38.6	34.9	16.9	9.9
CNN	27.4	24.3	23.6	33.9	39.6	35.6	18.8	14.5
C-SPAN	48.6	38.5	26.4	32.8	40.7	46.1	21.8	21.9
National Public Radio	22.0	24.0	20.4	31.5	27.6	34.9	17.2	17.5
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	39.6	40.1	21.2	42.4	47.9	47.0	23.5	21.8
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	23.9	18.8	15.4	34.8	40.8	39.8	18.5	11.5
Shows Such as <i>Cops</i> , <i>America's Most Wanted</i>	21.0	20.0	12.6	43.2	56.4	38.3	30.3	11.5
CNBC	31.1	27.5	34.2	33.5	40.9	46.2	20.2	15.6
Fox News Cable Channel	26.2	22.0	18.3	37.8	46.7	34.9	22.4	11.4
MSNBC	33.2	27.1	30.2	32.7	39.9	41.4	18.9	13.1
Shows Such as <i>Entertainment Tonight</i> , <i>Access Hollywood</i>	27.7	19.9	14.9	43.2	54.9	36.1	52.5	15.7
<i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , <i>Early Show</i>	23.5	17.7	14.4	37.7	37.6	42.3	18.2	12.4
Weather Channel	20.5	16.3	15.5	33.8	39.2	37.3	19.7	10.7
Sports News on ESPN	22.5	18.0	19.5	31.9	37.7	31.6	23.9	12.4
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	20.2	19.1	16.6	29.0	35.3	32.3	16.5	13.5
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake</i> , <i>Jerry Springer</i>	21.1	16.5	12.1	40.9	58.4	36.3	42.4	14.2
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie O'Donnell</i> , <i>Oprah</i>	19.1	11.8	10.8	42.4	43.7	45.6	27.6	11.4
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i>	22.9	15.9	13.4	44.1	55.5	42.6	28.6	14.4
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>U.S. News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	28.9	29.5	24.2	31.9	32.5	40.9	17.0	22.3
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune</i> , <i>Forbes</i>	34.4	33.8	56.5	32.8	30.8	33.1	15.6	18.8
<i>The National Enquirer</i> , <i>Sun</i> , <i>Star</i>	21.5	19.5	15.1	38.8	46.4	46.3	44.8	14.4
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	23.8	16.1	13.3	39.4	48.5	45.2	40.4	18.5
Magazines Such as <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , <i>Harper's</i> , <i>The New Yorker</i>	39.1	36.0	26.7	38.0	27.0	45.7	20.2	42.1

Crime news rates highly among nearly all media audiences. The programs with the highest percentages of audience members who report they follow crime news very closely are those associated with soft news or entertainment: daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (58.4%); programs such as *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted* (56.4%); courtroom programs such as *Judge Judy* or *Divorce Court* (55.5%); and shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* or *Access Hollywood* (54.9%).⁸ The outlets with the lowest audience interest in crime news are National Public Radio (27.6%) and magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker* (27.0%). Health news is of strong interest to readers and viewers across the hard news/soft news spectrum. Viewers of *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (47%), CNBC (46.2%), and C-SPAN (46.1%) follow health news very closely. Consumers of *The National Enquirer*, *Sun*, or *Star* (46.3%), daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (45.6%), and personality magazines such as *People* (45.2%) also express a strong interest in health news.

The choice of some outlets to specialize in soft news, drama, and entertainment is evident in the high percentage of audience members for these programs following entertainment news. As implied by the program titles, *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* attract regular

viewers with the highest interest in entertainment news; 52.5% of their regular viewers report that they follow this type of information very closely. Outlets with similarly intense audience interest in entertainment news include *The National Enquirer*, *Sun*, or *Star* (44.8%), daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (42.4%), and personality magazines such as *People* (40.4%). Programs and publications with the lowest interest in entertainment news include National Public Radio (17.2%), daily newspapers (16.6%), and business magazines (15.6%). Interest in culture and arts news is relatively lower across outlets, reaching its lowest expression among regular viewers of local news (9.9%). The exception is for the publications that provide coverage of culture and the arts. Among regular consumers of magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker*, 42.1% follow culture and arts news very closely.

These results show that tastes for different types of news vary widely across media outlets. To examine whether preferences for a given type of news lead to the consumption of a particular news outlet, I conducted the following analysis. For each news program or publication in the survey I developed a model of an individual's decision to consume the outlet as a function of whether the person reported following very closely different types of news: news about political figures and events in Washington, sports, business and finance, international affairs, local government, religion, people and events in the local community, entertainment, consumer news, science and technology, health, crime, and culture and the arts. I divided the survey respondents into six subsamples based on the age and gender categories frequently used in the media industry: females 18–34, 35–49, and 50+, and the same for men. I then ran for each sub-sample a logit model for each media outlet predicting whether a person consumed the program or publication based on the types of news the individual followed very closely.

In [Table 3.2](#), I report which news variable types had coefficients that were positive and statistically significant at the .10 level (or better) in predicting consumption in at least five of the six demographic groups. This is a stringent screen for capturing what interests lead to consumption of a media product. The theory in [chapter 1](#) indicates that some media outlets provide a portfolio of information types. They do not develop a reputation for providing predominantly a single type of news. Different demographic groups may consume the product for different reasons, for example, one set of readers may consume the daily newspaper for sports coverage while another reads it for local community news. The question I examine in [table 3.2](#) is whether there are interests across demographic groups that are associated with consumption of a product. The outlets that are television channels provide a variety of programs, so one would not expect them to have a particular news category that consistently predicts their consumption. Thus for the CNN, CNBC, Fox News Cable Channel, and MSNBC there is no particular news category that predicts their consumption. Daily newspapers and National Public Radio provide a portfolio of stories, so again there is no particular type of news interest that predicts their consumption across all demographic groups.

The link between audience interest and consumption across demographic groups is evident for a number of programs in [table 3.2](#). Those who follow political figures and events in

Washington, D.C. are more likely, controlling for other interests, to consume the network nightly news and C-SPAN. Interest in people and events in the local community predicts consumption of local news, local all-news cable, *Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *Early Show*, and programs such as *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*. The broad popularity of health news is evident in the link between a strong interest in health news and consumption of the network nightly news and the network morning programs. Though local news programs are often criticized for their coverage of crime, table 3.2 shows that for at least five of the six demographic groups examined those who follow crime closely are more likely to consume local news regularly. Audience preferences for some type of crime news were thus linked to consumption of this product.

TABLE 3.2
News Interests That Predict Media Product Consumption

<i>Media Product</i>	<i>Type of News Followed Very Closely</i>
Daily Newspaper	
TV News Program	
News on Radio	
National Nightly Network News	Political Figures and Events in Washington, D.C., Health
Local TV News	People and Events in the Local Community, Crime
CNN	
Local All News Cable	People and Events in the Local Community
C-SPAN	Political Figures and Events in Washington, D.C.
National Public Radio	
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	
<i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , <i>Early Show</i>	People and Events in the Local Community, Health
Shows Such as <i>Cops</i> , <i>America's Most Wanted</i>	People and Events in Local Community, Crime
CNBC	
Fox News Cable Channel	
MSNBC	
Weather Channel	
Sports News on ESPN	Sports
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	Science and Technology
Shows Such as <i>Entertainment Tonight</i> , <i>Access Hollywood</i>	Entertainment
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake</i> , <i>Jerry Springer</i>	Crime
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie O'Donnell</i> , <i>Oprah</i>	
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i>	Entertainment, Crime
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>US News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune</i> , <i>Forbes</i>	Business and Finance
<i>The National Enquirer</i> , <i>Sun</i> , <i>Star</i>	Entertainment
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	Entertainment
Magazines Such as <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , <i>Harper's</i> , <i>The New Yorker</i>	Culture

Note: Within each demographic group, a logit was run predicting program consumption by an individual based on indicators for 13 different news interests. The interests whose coefficients were positive and statistically significant at the .10 level or lower in at least 5 of the 6 demographic group samples are reported here.

An interest in crime news is also a predictor of regular viewing for a number of programs with brand name reputations for showing acts of violence or verbal conflicts. People interested in crime news were more likely to be regular consumers of programs such as *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*, daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer*, and courtroom shows such as *Judge Judy* or *Divorce Court*. Interest in entertainment news also broadly predicted consumption of a number of soft news outlets such as *Entertainment Tonight* or *Access Hollywood*, *The National Enquirer*, *Sun*, or *Star*, personality magazines such as *People*, and courtroom programs.

There were also news interests in the survey that were only associated with predicting consumption of outlets targeted to appeal to specialized audiences. Following business and finance news predicted consumption of business magazines across the demographic groups analyzed. An interest in science and technology predicted viewership of documentaries on the History Channel or Discovery channel. Regularly viewing ESPN was, unsurprisingly, predicted by a strong interest in sports news. Though the number of respondents saying that they followed culture and arts news very closely was relatively low, those who did were more likely to consume magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker*.

Taken together, tables 3.1 and 3.2 show that interests in news categories vary widely across media outlets. Consumption of some programs is predicted across demographic groups by a strong interest in a given type of news. Within each demographic group, for example, a person interested in sports would be more likely to view ESPN or a person interested in crime would be more likely to watch *Cops* or *America's Most Wanted*. The proportions of individuals across the age and gender categories that have specific interests in crime or sports vary in systematic ways. Men of all age groups register higher interest in sports, for example, and women are more likely to follow health news. The correlation of news interests and political interests with age and gender forms the second part of the story of how audience demands affect news content.

Advertisers divide the adult population into groups based on age and gender. They often place a higher value, other things being equal, on reaching younger viewers or female viewers. Table 3.3 analyzes the variations in news interests by the demographic categories used by programmers and advertisers.⁹ Of the thirteen types of news covered in the Pew survey, four attracted sufficient attention so that at least a quarter of the respondents reported they followed the news category "very closely." Crime news was the most popular news category, with 29.6% of the total respondents saying they followed this very closely. This was followed in overall popularity by health (28.6%), sports (26.9%), and people/events in the local community (25.8%). News about political figures and events in Washington came in eighth in overall interest, with 16.8% of respondents saying they followed this type of information very closely. International affairs news came in tenth, attracting the close attention of 14.5% of the overall audience.¹⁰

When readers and viewers are considered as a total audience, strong interests in crime and health news and moderate interests in domestic and international affairs are apparent. This way of analyzing the audience for news misses, however, the great differences in interests across

age and gender categories. Table 3.3 shows that for interests in political events in Washington or international affairs, older respondents are more likely to follow this type of news than younger viewers and men are more likely to report they are following these categories than women. Only 8.4% of women 18–34 indicate that they follow political news from Washington very closely, versus 26.6% of men 50+. The same pattern of stronger interest among older respondents and among male respondents holds for business and finance news. Interests range from 5.6% of women 18–34 following this type of news very closely versus 24.7% of men 50+.

TABLE 3.3

News Interests by Demographic Groups

	<i>% of Column Respondents Following a Type of News Very Closely</i>						
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Females 18–34</i>	<i>Females 35–49</i>	<i>Females 50+</i>	<i>Males 18–34</i>	<i>Males 35–49</i>	<i>Males 50+</i>
Political							
Figures/Events in Washing- ton, D.C.	16.8	8.4	9.1	21.0	13.4	21.0	26.6
Sports	26.9	17.3	10.4	14.4	48.7	38.4	35.7
Business/ Finance	13.7	5.6	8.1	10.6	13.5	20.6	24.7
International Affairs	14.5	7.1	8.2	13.4	14.1	19.8	24.6
Local Govern- ment	20.5	11.3	18.3	25.5	11.3	24.1	31.0
Religion	21.2	14.6	19.7	32.6	14.9	21.0	21.3
People/Events in Local							
Community	25.8	25.5	26.6	32.6	16.4	25.6	26.5
Entertainment	15.3	21.7	12.0	13.2	22.4	12.0	10.8
Consumer News	12.0	10.8	10.1	12.1	8.9	14.3	15.7
Science and Technology	18.4	10.9	11.9	11.2	27.3	25.6	25.3
Health	28.6	31.8	32.0	40.4	14.8	22.6	26.8
Crime	29.6	37.6	31.0	29.0	25.0	29.1	26.4
Culture/Arts	9.8	10.3	10.2	11.0	10.1	9.1	7.5

For other types of news different patterns of age and gender interests emerge. Men are much more interested in sports than women, and younger viewers more interested than older respondents. Men 18–34 report the highest percentage (48.7%) following sports news closely. For news about the local community, women are more likely to follow this type of information closely than men. Entertainment news attracts the attention primarily of younger viewers, while science and technology is much more popular among men than women. For health news, women report higher interests than men and older viewers register more interest than younger respondents. Among those 18–34, 31.8% of females versus 14.8% of males follow health news closely. Women 50+ report the highest percentage (40.4%) following health information closely. While crime coverage is popular among all demographic groups, it is followed most closely by female viewers. It is the only news category where women 18–34 report the highest percentage (37.6%) of viewers following a topic very closely.

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The differences in absolute levels of interests and ranking of interests are most apparent when one compares the preferences of women 18–34 to those of men 50+. For women 18–34 there are four news categories for which 20% or more of the respondents follow the type of news very closely. For nine of the thirteen news categories examined at least 20% of men 50+ reported they followed the news category very closely. The top four news categories for women 18–34 were (in order) crime, health, people/events in the local community, and entertainment. The top four news categories for men 50+ were sports, local government, health, and political figures/events in Washington.

Table 3.4 explores in more depth how tastes for political news vary. When asked whether they followed what was going in government and public affairs, 17.3% of women 18–34 indicated they did this most of the time. For men 50+, 63.0% reported following government news most of the time. Within each age group category, the percentage of women following political news most of the time was at least ten percentage points lower than the percentage of men who reported this. Older respondents in general were much more likely to say they followed the news about government and public affairs most of the time. Women 50+ reported the second highest percentage (48.5%) of respondents following this news most of the time. For females 18–34, females 35–49, and males 18–34, a plurality of respondents reported that they followed government news “some of the time.” Nearly a quarter of men 18–34 and women 18–34 reported that they followed news about government and public affairs “only now and then.”

These differences in attention to political news translate into markedly different levels of knowledge about some aspects of politics.¹¹ When asked to identify which party had a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, older respondents and males were more likely to know that it was the Republican party. Among women 18–34, 42% gave the correct answer versus 73.8% of men 50+. **Table 3.4** also shows the results of a news quiz of three questions requiring respondents to identify George W. Bush as the governor of Texas, Bill Bradley as a former senator from New Jersey, and John McCain as a cosponsor of campaign finance reform legislation. Older respondents were more likely to answer these questions correctly than younger respondents; men were more likely to identify the candidates correctly than women. More than half of women 18–34 (52.2%) failed to identify any of the three candidates correctly, versus 7.8% of men 50+. Among males 50+, 26.7% identified all three candidates correctly, compared with 3.2% of women 18–34.

TABLE 3.4

Who Follows Political News?

	% of Column Respondents						
	Total	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?							
Most of the time	39.6	17.3	32.4	48.5	28.7	46.4	63.0
Some of the time	34.8	41.5	40.5	33.8	36.0	32.3	24.6
Only now and then	16.7	25.8	18.2	12.5	22.3	14.9	7.4
Hardly at all	8.6	15.4	8.9	4.7	12.5	6.3	4.4
Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Repre- sentatives?							
Republican Party	54.8	42.0	45.0	52.9	48.8	66.2	73.8
Number of correct answers to 3 questions about which presidential candidate is governor of Texas, a former senator from New Jersey, or cosponsor of a campaign finance reform bill:							
0	30.3	52.2	28.6	29.9	35.8	28.3	7.8
1	36.1	32.2	40.6	41.0	35.2	30.9	35.7
2	20.9	12.4	21.8	15.9	20.5	25.5	29.9
3	12.7	3.2	9.0	13.2	8.5	15.3	26.7

Aside from variations in the attention paid to public affairs, demographic groups based on age and gender also differ in the worldviews they use to analyze political events. When asked to place themselves on the six point scale (where 1 is very conservative and 6 very liberal), a plurality of each demographic group responded by choosing a 3 on this scale. Yet there are clear ideological differences across these groups (see [table 3.5](#)). Only 7.7% of women 18–34 rated themselves as very conservative, compared to 18.2% of women 50+. Females 18–34 reported the highest percentage of respondents (15.0%) identifying themselves as very liberal, followed by males 18–34 (13.9%). People over 50 were the least likely to identify themselves as very liberal.

Ideological differences based on age and gender were also apparent in the percentages of respondents who identified themselves as supporters of particular issues. [Table 3.5](#) reports the percentage of a demographic group that indicated a particular description was “perfect” for them. Within each age group women were more likely than men to say they were supporters of the women’s movement. Among females, 30.9% of women 18–34 reported they were supporters of the women’s movement versus 20.0% of women 50+. Women were more likely than men to say they were supporters of the pro-life movement. Within each age grouping, men were much more likely to identify themselves as supporters of the National Rifle Association. Identification as a supporter of the civil rights movement was higher among younger survey respondents and among women. Females 18–34 registered the highest percentage identifying as supporters of the civil rights movement (32.3%), while males 50+ reported the lowest percentage (19.9%). Older respondents were much more likely to say that “patriot” was a perfect self-description. Among those 50 or older, 44.0% of women and 42.1% of men said they were patriots. This compares to 17.4% of women 18–34 and 28.5% for men 18–34.

TABLE 3.5

Distribution of Ideologies across Demographic Groups

	% of Column Respondents						
	Total	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Self-Rating:							
1 Very Conservative	13.5	7.7	15.0	18.2	12.0	15.4	11.7
2	14.7	13.8	8.7	13.3	17.8	16.7	17.8
3	28.2	22.8	28.7	28.2	29.7	27.2	32.6
4	15.3	17.4	14.9	12.0	15.6	18.8	13.9
5	9.5	14.0	14.9	9.0	6.4	7.8	5.2
6 Very Liberal	11.2	15.0	12.0	7.5	13.9	10.5	9.0
Self description as:							
Supporter of the women's movement	20.8	30.9	24.3	20.0	15.9	16.4	17.5
Supporter of the pro-life movement	22.7	24.8	26.3	25.6	17.2	22.4	19.4
Environmentalism	17.3	13.5	17.9	22.7	15.7	17.6	15.1
National Rifle Association supporter	15.5	8.8	8.3	13.6	21.3	22.6	18.8
Supporter of the civil rights movement	26.0	32.3	29.8	24.9	26.4	22.8	19.9
Patriot	34.1	17.4	30.7	44.0	28.5	39.4	42.1

The Pew survey results show that the audiences of media outlets vary by news interests and that interests in news (and views of the world) vary by age and gender. Putting these results together implies that media audiences will show some segmentation by age and gender. The demographic breakdown of respondents in the Pew (2000b) media survey was 16.0% female 18–34, 15.6% female 35–49, 20.4% female 50+, 15.9% male 18–34, 15.8% male 35–49, and 16.2% male 50+. Table 3.6 reveals that some media outlets and programs have audiences whose composition resembles the general population. Local television news programs appeal to all demographic groups, so the demographic breakdown of the local news audience is similar to that of the full sample. This is also true to a degree for National Public Radio, the Fox News Cable Channel, MSNBC, and news magazines such as *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Newsweek*. All these outlets provide a portfolio of stories or program types, with the end result that they attract audiences across age and gender categories.

Table 3.6 shows that programs that have brand reputations for providing particular categories of news are segmented by age and gender. The audience for the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, which has a strong reputation for providing hard news, draws the majority of its viewers from those over 50. Women 50+ comprise 33.1% of its audience, with the next most numerous group being males 50+ (24.2%). C-SPAN has a similarly high fraction of older viewers (25.8% females 50+, 23.7% males 50+). The national network nightly news programs also draw a majority of their viewers from females 50+ (32.1%) and males 50+ (22.7%). Programs that skew younger tend to focus on entertainment or conflict. The audience for shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* contains 23.7% females 18–34 and 18.5% males 18–34. Daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer* garner the majority of their viewers from those between 18–34, with females 18–34 comprising

28.5% of the audience and males 18–34 accounting for 26.9%. The outlets with the highest percentage of females 18–34 in their audiences (31.1%) are personality magazines such as *People*.

Gender segments other media audiences. The audience for sports news on ESPN is largely male. Males 18–34 comprise 29.2% of the ESPN news audience, followed by males 35–49 (24.0%) and males 50+ (21.0%). The readership of business magazines such as *Fortune* and *Forbes* is predominately male (23.0% males 18–34, 23.3% males 35–49, and 23.8% males 50+), though the presence of younger females in the business workplace is reflected in the fact that women 18–34 comprise 15.9% of the business magazine audience. The viewers of daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* and *Oprah* are predominantly female (25.3% females 18–34, 21.3% females 35–49, and 31.9% females 50+). News magazine programs such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* contain a high proportion of women 50+ (27.5%) and women 35–49 (18.2%). A similar pattern holds for the network morning programs *Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *Early Show*, where women 50+ comprise 29.9% of the audience and women 35–49 account for 20.6%. Females 50+ also account for a large fraction of the audience of courtroom shows such as *Judge Judy* and *Divorce Court* (30.2%) and of the readership of the *National Enquirer*, *Sun*, and *Star* (35.0%).

TABLE 3.6

Media Audience Demographics

Regular Consumers of	% of Row Product's Regularly Consuming Audience Accounted for by Demographic Group					
	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Daily Newspaper	12.9	14.7	22.5	14.0	16.5	19.4
TV News Program	15.0	15.3	23.4	13.4	15.3	17.7
News on Radio	14.4	17.5	16.8	14.2	20.1	17.1
National Network Nightly News	9.1	12.7	32.1	9.2	14.2	22.7
Local TV News	14.1	15.4	23.8	12.5	15.5	18.8
CNN	12.2	13.9	21.0	14.3	19.2	19.4
Local All News Cable	16.2	15.1	26.2	12.3	13.3	16.9
C-SPAN	7.0	9.0	25.8	15.5	19.0	23.7
National Public Radio	12.8	17.3	17.4	14.3	19.3	18.9
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	8.0	6.8	33.1	11.5	16.4	24.2
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	14.7	18.2	27.5	9.5	12.7	17.5
<i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , <i>Early Show</i>	14.1	20.6	29.9	8.1	12.9	14.3
CNBC	9.0	12.9	21.2	16.7	20.1	20.1
Fox News Cable Channel	15.2	13.7	21.0	13.1	19.6	17.5
MSNBC	15.8	15.1	17.4	13.6	18.1	20.1
Weather Channel	11.8	12.9	23.5	12.9	17.8	21.1
Sports News on ESPN	9.5	7.7	8.5	29.2	24.0	21.0
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	14.6	15.0	15.2	16.1	19.6	19.5
Shows Such as <i>Cops</i> , <i>America's Most Wanted</i>	16.1	16.6	20.7	18.6	18.3	9.7
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i>	13.6	16.9	30.2	13.0	11.5	14.8
Shows Such as <i>Entertainment Tonight</i> , <i>Access Hollywood</i>	23.7	12.4	20.8	18.5	13.2	11.4
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake</i> , <i>Jerry Springer</i>	28.5	11.4	9.9	26.9	9.9	13.5
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie O'Donnell</i> , <i>Oprah</i>	25.3	21.3	31.9	5.4	9.0	7.1
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>U.S. News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	17.3	15.0	18.7	15.0	13.3	20.8
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune</i> , <i>Forbes</i>	15.9	7.3	6.7	23.0	23.3	23.8
<i>The National Enquirer</i> , <i>Sun</i> , <i>Star</i>	17.7	14.8	35.0	6.9	14.2	11.4
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	31.1	18.5	23.7	12.6	7.2	7.0
Magazines Such as <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , <i>Harper's</i> , <i>The New Yorker</i>	10.9	11.2	23.7	8.2	28.2	17.8

Table 3.7 offers another way to examine the same data by exploring what percentage of each demographic group consumes a particular media product. Some news outlets are part of the regular consumption patterns for all age and gender groups. Within each of the six demographic categories, at least 40% of respondents report that they are regular consumers of a daily newspaper, watch television news programs, listen to news on the radio, or watch local television news programs. Within these products, consumption by older respondents is still higher. For daily newspapers, 50.3% of females 18–34 are regular consumers versus 69.0% for females 50+ and 75.0% for males 50+. For local television news programs, 43.8% of men 18–34 are regular viewers versus 64.8% of males 50+ and 65.1% for females 50+. The network nightly news still captures at least 40% of viewers over 50. Among females 50+ 47.1% regularly watch the network nightly news, as do 41.9% of males 50+. Viewing the national news is not a part of most younger respondents' lives. For females 18–34 16.9% report regularly watching the network evening news, which is similar to the 17.3% figure for men 18–34.

Some products can attract at least a quarter of the viewing audience among one

demographic while failing to reach this level of viewership in others. Sports news on ESPN is a regular part of media consumption by males. Among males 18–34, 41.5% report regularly viewing the sports news on ESPN, as do 35.0% of males 35–49 and 28.5% of males 50+. The highest consumers among females are those 18–34, where 13.3% regularly watch ESPN news. News magazines such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* have a regular audience among females 35–49 (35.8%), females 50+ (41.4%), and males 50+ (33.2%). The morning network shows are similarly popular among women 35–49 (26.1%) and females 50+ (29.0%).

A diverse set of products generates moderate consumption levels across demographic groups. National Public Radio is consumed by between 12% and 19% of each demographic group. Programs such as *Cops* or *America’s Most Wanted* garner close to 18% of each demographic group, except males 50+ (11.0% of whom regularly watch these programs). There are small percentage point variations across demographic groups for some products because they are only consumed by a small percentage of the audience. These include C-SPAN and magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, and *The New Yorker*.

TABLE 3.7
Percentage of Demographic Group Regularly Consuming Media Product

Regular Consumers of	% of Column Respondents						
	Total	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Daily Newspaper	62.5	50.3	58.8	69.0	55.0	65.1	75.0
TV News Program	74.7	69.7	72.8	85.6	62.9	72.1	82.0
News on Radio	46.4	41.6	52.0	38.2	41.3	58.9	49.1
National Network Nightly News	29.9	16.9	24.4	47.1	17.3	26.8	41.9
Local TV News	55.8	48.9	54.9	65.1	43.8	54.6	64.8
CNN	21.1	16.1	18.8	21.7	18.9	25.7	25.3
Local All News Cable	29.2	29.5	28.2	37.5	22.5	24.6	30.5
C-SPAN	3.8	1.7	2.2	4.8	3.7	4.6	5.6
National Public Radio	15.3	12.3	16.9	13.1	13.8	18.7	17.9
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	4.6	2.3	2.0	7.5	2.4	4.8	6.9
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes, 20/20, Dateline</i>	30.7	28.1	35.8	41.4	18.2	24.7	33.2
<i>Today Show, Good Morning America, Early Show</i>	19.8	17.5	26.1	29.0	10.0	16.2	17.5
CNBC	11.2	6.3	9.4	11.7	11.7	14.5	13.5
Fox News Cable Channel	17.9	17.0	15.9	18.5	14.6	22.5	18.7
MSNBC	9.8	9.6	9.6	8.4	8.3	11.4	11.7
Weather Channel	31.7	23.2	26.6	36.6	25.6	36.3	39.9
Sports News on ESPN	22.6	13.3	11.3	9.5	41.5	35.0	28.5
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	37.2	33.8	36.3	27.8	37.5	46.8	43.4
Shows Such as <i>Cops, America's Most Wanted</i>	17.7	17.8	18.6	17.9	20.7	20.2	11.0
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy, Divorce Court</i>	11.9	10.1	12.8	17.6	9.7	8.7	10.9
Shows Such as <i>Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood</i>	8.6	12.7	6.9	8.8	9.9	7.3	5.8
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake, Jerry Springer</i>	7.5	13.3	5.4	3.6	12.6	4.7	6.2
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie O'Donnell, Oprah</i>	10.4	16.4	14.2	16.3	3.5	5.9	4.6
News Magazines Such as <i>Time, U.S. News, Newsweek</i>	12.5	13.4	12.0	11.4	11.7	10.4	16.0
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune, Forbes</i>	4.7	4.7	2.2	1.6	6.9	7.0	7.0
<i>The National Enquirer, Sun, Star</i>	2.8	3.0	2.6	4.7	1.2	2.5	1.9
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	6.2	11.9	7.3	7.2	4.9	2.8	2.7
Magazines Such as <i>The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, The New Yorker</i>	2.2	1.5	1.6	2.5	1.1	3.9	2.4

Outlets focused on entertainment or human interest stories often have the highest percentage of consumption among females 18–34. This group has the highest percentage of regular consumers for programs such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* (12.7%), daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (13.3%), daytime talk programs such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah* (16.4%), and personality magazines such as *People* (11.9%). This demo-graphic also registers the second highest readership of news magazines such as *Time*, *US News*, and *Newsweek* (13.4%).

Targeting Viewers through Content Selection

What do you need to know to cast an informed vote for president ? What happened in your

local community today? Did your favorite sports team win? What did the television actor you watch each week do at his movie premiere? The Pew survey data show that interests in these questions vary widely across demographic groups and that media outlets vary in the types of audience interests they serve. To see how economic considerations affect the selection of topics covered in the media, consider the case of the national network evening news programs. The high fixed costs of gathering and assembling news means that you cannot turn on the television and receive a broadcast tailored only to your interests. The current technology of broadcasting also means that stories offered on a program such as *NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw* are offered in the same sequence to all viewers. A news director trying to assemble stories based on what viewers need to know faces the difficulty of defining what political and social issues are important in the decisions viewers will face. A news director driven ultimately by profit faces a similarly difficult balancing act in answering the question, What combination of topics will yield the most valuable audience for my program? Two economic concepts, marginal viewers and advertiser value, help explain the way audience demands affect content selection in network news.

The network evening news programs have a core audience of faithful viewers and a set of marginal viewers, those who may tune into the news or choose another program depending on what has happened in the world or what types of news the networks choose to focus on. In some sense the news directors can take the interests of average viewers for granted. If the news programs do not stray too far from the expected presentation of hard and soft news, the average viewers will remain with the program. The problem for the network news programs is how to attract the marginal viewers, those by definition that do not like the presentation of news enough to tune in regularly. The news directors will select a mix of stories aimed at capturing the marginal viewers while not alienating the average viewers. The result will be a mix of news stories that may leave average viewers somewhat frustrated and marginal viewers somewhat placated.

Table 3.8 shows the tension between the interests of average and marginal viewers for the nightly network news shows. In this table I call those who say they regularly view the network news the average viewers, while those who say they sometimes view are called the marginal viewers. A majority of the regular viewers are over 50 (54.8%) and female (53.9%).¹² The marginal viewers are much younger. Females 18–34 account for 20.6% of those who sometimes view the national news, and males 18–34 account for 17.5% of these sometime viewers. In contrast, females 18–34 are only 9.1% of the regular audience and males 18–34 only 9.2% of the regular viewers. These demographic differences translate into predictable and sharp differences between the interests of marginal and average viewers. The marginal viewers are not as attached to the news. When asked how much they enjoyed keeping up with the news, 68.1% of average viewers responded that they did “a lot” versus only 37.0% for the marginal viewers. A majority of marginal viewers said that they followed national or international news closely “only when something important or interesting is happening.” Marginal viewers were also more likely to report that they watched the news with “my remote in hand” and switched channels when they were not interested in a topic.

What captures the interests of occasional viewers differs from the type of news favored by loyal viewers. The marginal and average viewers have the same top-two news interests, crime and health, which may explain the prevalence of these news categories on the network evening news. The two sets of viewers differ markedly, however, in their interest in politics. For the average viewer of network news, news about political figures and events in Washington ranked fifth out of thirteen news types. This same category of news ranked tenth among marginal viewers. Political news about Washington was followed very closely by 28.4% of the average viewers, versus 12.3% of the marginals. Sports ranked sixth and entertainment news ranked twelfth among the regular viewers. These topics ranked much more highly among marginal viewers, who ranked them third and eighth among the thirteen news topics. When politics is covered on the nightly news, the worldviews with which audiences react to stories also differ slightly across the average and marginal audiences. The occasional viewers are slightly more likely to report that they are moderate or very liberal than those who watch the programs regularly.

If news directors are assembling an audience by selecting topics, economics predicts they may at the margin try to pull in the occasional viewer rather than try to make the core viewer happier. A second reason news directors may treat viewers differently is because of the different values that advertisers place on individuals. In the television advertising market, companies are often willing to pay more to reach young adults (e.g., 18–34) than older adults (e.g., 50+) and more to reach women than men. Women 18–34 command a high advertising premium, in part because they frequently make the purchasing decisions of their households, as I've noted previously. When news directors are assembling stories, they may take advertiser values into account when deciding which marginal viewers to try and attract. The value of attracting ten thousand more viewers age 35–49 versus 50+ depends in part on the price they can charge for these different sets of viewers and the degree that advertisers may change what products they advertise on a show when the audience changes. For example, ten thousand viewers age 35–49 might not raise the amount that a company with a product used by those age 65 or higher would pay to advertise on the program. That advertiser would prefer to reach ten thousand more viewers age 65 on the evening news. At some point, however, ten thousand more viewers age 35–49 might make companies aiming at these consumers willing to advertise on the evening news. The network would also prefer ten thousand more viewers age 35–49 than ten thousand more viewers 65+ to remain in the audience for the prime-time schedule, since this is a demographic targeted by advertisers in prime time.

Though the weekday network evening news programs have a combined average audience of 30.3 million, a particular advertiser may only be interested in reaching a segment of that viewing audience. An advertiser purchases the attention of the audience members likely, with a nudge, to buy their product. Table 3.9 contains information about who consumes the products marketed on network evening news programs. For 1999 I picked a random weekday in each month and used the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to determine what products were advertised on the three national network evening news programs.¹³ I then matched these products with information from Mediamark Research 1998 survey reports that describe who

consumes particular products. For the 521 ads that I could match with consumer demographics, [table 3.9](#) reports the mean percent of a product's consumers that come from a particular demographic group. The table also reports the percentage of ads where the percentage of product users in the demographic group is higher than the percentage of that group in the overall survey pool.

TABLE 3.8
Average versus Marginal Viewers of Network Nightly News

	% of Row Respondents					
	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Regularly View	9.1	12.7	32.1	9.2	14.2	22.7
Sometimes View	20.6	17.4	16.2	17.5	16.6	11.8
	Very Conservative	Conservative	Moderate	Liberal	Very Liberal	Don't Know/ Refused
Regularly View	7.2	32.5	37.4	14.0	4.9	4.0
Sometimes View	5.1	30.3	39.3	13.0	6.3	3.0
	Follow Type of News Very Closely					
	Political Figures/Events in DC	Sports	Business/ Finance	International Affairs	Local Government	Religion
Regularly View	28.4	28.4	19.7	22.6	30.3	25.0
Sometimes View	12.3	26.8	11.6	12.7	18.0	22.4
	Entertainment	Consumer News	Science and Technology	Health	Crime	Culture/ Arts
Regularly View	17.3	18.2	20.5	40.4	38.9	11.8
Sometimes View	15.7	9.5	16.8	28.8	29.0	9.3
	% of Row Respondents					
How much do you enjoy keep- ing up with the news? A lot.	I follow intl. news closely only when something important/ interesting is happening.	I follow natl. news closely only when something important/ interesting is happening.	I follow the local community news closely only when something important/ interesting is happening.	I often watch the news with my remote in hand, flipping to other channels when I'm not interested.		
Regularly View	68.1	55.1	34.2	30.0	29.7	
Sometimes View	37.0	66.3	51.7	40.7	37.1	

TABLE 3.9
Consumption of Products Advertised on Network Television News

<i>Demographic Group</i>	<i>Mean % of a Product's Consumers Accounted for by Consumers in a Particular Demographic Group</i>	<i>% of Ads with a Higher % of Product Consumers in a Particular Demographic Group than the Survey % in the Group</i>	<i>% Survey Respondents in a Particular Demographic Group</i>
Age			
18–24	8.7	11.7	12.7
25–34	18.5	27.4	21.0
35–44	22.3	42.2	22.3
45–54	18.7	59.7	16.7
55–64	12.6	50.5	10.9
65+	19.3	41.7	16.4
18–34	27.1	21.8	33.7
18–49	59.8	36.5	65.5
Male	35.2	25.1	47.9
Female	64.8	55.1	52.1
Income			
<\$10K	7.2	30.2	8.1
\$10K–19K	13.4	31.4	13.7
\$20K–29K	13.3	29.1	13.9
\$30K–39K	12.4	34.3	12.9
\$40K–49K	10.8	33.4	11.3
\$50K–59K	9.8	45.7	9.6
\$60K–74K	12.0	61.7	10.7
\$75K+	21.3	45.2	19.6
Education			
Not HS Graduate	16.8	22.5	18.6
HS Graduate	33.9	47.8	33.2
Attended College	26.5	43.5	26.4
College Graduate	22.8	41.2	21.7

Note: Based on a sample of 521 ads shown during the evening news programs on ABC, NBC, and CBS in 1999. Product usage demographics come from Mediamark Research 1998 survey reports.

The data in [table 3.9](#) suggest that advertisers on the network evening news programs are targeting older consumers, females, those with moderate-to-high incomes, and viewers with relatively higher educations. If one compares the mean percentage of a product's users with those in the general survey population, it becomes clear that the consumers of products advertised on the evening news are likely to be older. The mean percentage of product users in the category 65+ was 19.3%, versus 16.4% of survey respondents in this category overall. The age categories 45–54 and 55–64 also had a higher mean percentage of advertised product users than their percentage in the survey population. On average the purchasers of products advertised on the network news were female; the mean percentage of female product users was 64.8%. For the income categories \$50,000–59,999, \$60,000–74,999, and \$75,000+, the mean percentage of product users in these categories was higher than the general population percentage. This was also true for the percentage of product users who attended college or graduated from college.

Another way to see the association between advertising and targeted viewers is to calculate the percentage of ads where the fraction of product users in a demographic group is higher than the fraction in the general population. The second column in [table 3.9](#) reports this

calculation. This makes clear that while older consumers are a target demographic, consumers in slightly younger demographics are also the target of some advertisements on these programs. For those age 35–44, 42.2% of the ads were for products where this age group accounted for a higher percentage of users than they did for the general population. For nearly 60% of the ads, consumers 45–54 accounted for a higher percentage of product users than they did of the general population. For those 55–64 this percentage was 50.5%, and for those 65+ it was 41.7%. Of the network ads analyzed, 55.1% had a higher percentage of female users than the percentage of females in the survey respondents. At least 45% of the ads had higher product user percentages for the income groups \$50–59,999, \$60–74,999, and \$75,000 +. At least 40% of the products had higher percentages of product users than percentage of survey respondents for high school graduates, those who attended college, and college graduates.

If news directors worry about marginal viewers and advertiser values, then the identity of who cares about a particular story will matter as the network evening programs are assembled. The concentration of occasional viewers among those 18–34 and the value, especially of females 18–34, of these consumers to advertisers suggests that their interests will influence content choices. One way to forge a compromise between the interests of average viewers, who are interested in politics, and marginal viewers, who are less interested, is to cover the political issues of interest to younger viewers. [Tables 3.10](#) and [3.11](#) explore demographic interests across issues by reporting the percentage of a demographic group listing a particular policy area as a top priority for the president and Congress in 2000. [Table 3.11](#) gives the percentage of respondents for the total sample and for each demographic group rating each issue as a top priority, while [table 3.10](#) uses these percentages to rank the twenty issues by order of priority for each of the groups. Improving the educational system ranked as the top priority in the total sample and among five of the six demographic groups, with 77.0% of those surveyed listing it as a top priority. Dealing with global trade issues garnered the lowest percentage in the overall sample listing it as a top priority (30.1%) and ranked near the bottom in each demographic group.

TABLE 3.10
Ranking of Topics as Top Priorities by Demographic Group

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	<i>Total</i>	<i>Females 18–34</i>	<i>Females 35–49</i>	<i>Females 50+</i>	<i>Males 18–34</i>	<i>Males 35–49</i>	<i>Males 50+</i>
Improving the educational system	1	1	1	6	1	1	1
Keeping the economy strong	2	3	4	4	2	2	3
Reducing crime	3	2	5	1	3	7	6
Taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound	4	9	2	2	4	3	2
Taking steps to make the Medicare system financially sound	5	5	3	5	6	4	4
Regulating HMOs and health care plans	6	10	6	10	12	10	7
Dealing with the problems of the poor and needy people	7	7	9	7	9	11	13
Providing health insurance to the uninsured	8	6	7	8	17	8	9
Adding prescription drug benefits to Medicare coverage	9	12	10	3	10	13	10
Protecting the environment	10	11	14	11	5	6	14
Reducing federal income taxes for the middle class	11	15	13	12	11	5	5
Dealing with the problems of families with children	12	4	12	16	8	9	15
Dealing with the moral breakdown of the country	13	14	16	9	15	14	11
Working to reduce racial tensions	14	13	11	14	14	15	16
Strengthening gun control laws	15	8	8	13	16	18	19
Paying off the national debt	16	18	17	15	13	12	12
Improving the job situation	17	16	15	17	7	17	20
Increasing the minimum wage	18	17	18	19	19	19	18
Reforming the campaign finance system	19	20	20	18	20	16	8
Dealing with global trade issues	20	19	19	20	18	20	17

TABLE 3.11

Percentage of Demographic Group Rating Topic as a Top Priority

	% of Column Respondents						
	Total	Females 18–34	Females 35–49	Females 50+	Males 18–34	Males 35–49	Males 50+
Improving the educational system	77.0	84.2	84.8	67.4	76.6	70.0	80.7
Keeping the economy strong	70.7	69.7	70.3	70.9	75.7	64.9	72.6
Reducing crime	69.6	77.7	66.5	80.3	68.9	59.3	61.5
Taking steps to make the Social Security system financially sound	68.6	58.5	72.7	77.4	62.0	64.8	74.7
Taking steps to make the Medicare system financially sound	63.9	62.6	71.4	69.6	50.0	63.2	66.0
Regulating HMOs and health care plans	55.5	57.0	61.4	60.0	42.0	51.6	60.1
Dealing with the problems of the poor and needy people	54.7	61.5	57.0	66.7	44.3	51.5	46.2
Providing health insurance to the uninsured	54.7	62.0	59.3	64.9	34.3	54.3	52.8
Adding prescription drug benefits to Medicare coverage	54.6	52.7	56.3	71.9	42.9	50.3	48.7
Protecting the environment	54.3	54.5	45.8	58.8	60.6	60.0	44.9
Reducing federal income taxes for the middle class	53.7	45.5	49.1	58.7	42.1	60.9	64.6
Dealing with the problems of families with children	52.4	65.6	55.0	50.2	47.4	52.8	44.2
Dealing with the moral breakdown of the country	48.2	48.5	44.0	62.3	37.2	47.3	48.2
Working to reduce racial tensions	46.3	48.5	55.3	52.9	38.0	39.4	43.5
Strengthening gun control laws	46.1	60.2	57.1	55.3	35.4	36.1	29.9
Paying off the national debt	43.6	29.1	39.9	52.6	38.8	50.7	47.8
Improving the job situation	41.5	45.0	45.7	47.2	50.0	37.4	22.4
Increasing the minimum wage	34.4	40.6	38.5	34.7	26.1	35.6	31.0
Reforming the campaign finance system	32.1	16.1	21.7	37.8	18.2	38.8	58.3
Dealing with global trade issues	30.1	24.9	26.3	31.4	26.3	29.7	41.6

Though respondents across demographic groups agree that improving the education system is a top priority for the president and Congress and dealing with global trade issues is not, there are wide variations across demographic groups in their rankings of areas as top priorities. For women 18–34 reducing crime ranked second in the percentage of that demographic rating the issue as a top priority. Women 50+ ranked reducing crime as the top issue. The relative concern for men about crime is lower, with males 35–49 ranking this seventh among their priority list and males 50+ ranking it sixth. Differences in priorities are very evident across age groups. Taking steps to make the social security system sound ranked second for males and females 50+, while women 18–34 placed this ninth on their list. Adding prescription drug benefits to Medicare garnered the third highest percentage listing it as a top priority among females 50+, while this ranked twelfth for females 18–34. Dealing with the problems of families with children was fourth on the list for women 18–34, but ranked sixteenth for women 50+ and fifteenth for men 50+.

Differences in opinion across gender categories are also evident in [table 3.10](#). Females 18–34 and 35–49 placed strengthening gun control laws as eighth out of the twenty issues

examined. Men 18–34 ranked this issue sixteenth and men 35–49 placed it eighteenth. Improving the job situation was seventh for men 18–34 and sixteenth for women 18–34. Dealing with the problems of the poor and needy was seventh among women 18–34 and thirteenth among males 50+. Reforming the campaign finance system was nineteenth in the overall sample and twentieth among women 18–34 or 35–49. Men 50+, however, placed this issue eighth overall in their rankings.

If viewers are more interested in seeing stories about issues they feel are a top priority and if program directors care about attracting particular viewers, the issue rankings provide evidence about what topics may attract particular demographic groups. Females 18–34 care relatively more about reducing crime, dealing with the problems of families with children, and strengthening gun control laws. News directors in search of these viewers will add more stories or devote more time to the issues they care about. Table 3.12 confirms the prediction that the network evening news programs select stories in part based on the interests of those marginal viewers highly valued by advertisers, particularly women 18–34. For each of the twenty issues examined in table 3.10 I counted the number of stories and total time devoted to these stories, in 2000, on each of the three network evening news broadcasts. I then modeled the number of stories and story time devoted to each area as a function of the percentage of each demographic group listing the issue as a top priority for the president and Congress. I combined the twenty observations for each network so that the sample totaled sixty observations. I included dummy variables for ABC and NBC (with the omitted network being CBS) in case there were persistent differences in how each network treated policy issues.

Table 3.12 suggests that networks do base story decisions on audience interests, and that they do select stories in part based on which demographic group may be interested in the policy area. In terms of total stories, the higher the percentage of women or men 18–34 who list an issue as a top priority the greater the number of stories devoted by a network evening news program to the area in 1999. An increase in one percentage point of women 18–34 listing the issue as a top priority translates into 1.28 more stories about the issue on the evening news broadcast, while a one percentage point increase in the percentage of men 18–34 listing the issue as a top priority generates .89 more stories. It may be the case that greater coverage causes individuals to rank an issue as a top priority.¹⁴ To guard against this effect, I separate the sample into those who view the network news regularly and those who do not (i.e., the non-network news viewers). Differences between these two samples can also be interpreted as the reaction of programmers to the interests of regular network news viewers and potential network news viewers (i.e., marginal viewers). For both the network news viewers and the non-network news viewers, higher interest among women and men 18–34 translates into more stories. In all three analyses, higher interest among women 50+ translates into less coverage. This may reflect the tight time constraint of twenty-two non-advertising minutes that each half-hour news program faces, so that adding stories of interest to older women would crowd out more profitable stories of interest to other demographic groups.

A similar pattern of coverage catering to the interests of young viewers holds when the total time devoted to each issue in 2000 is examined. For the full sample, a one percentage

point increase among females 18–34 listing an issue as a top priority translates into 3.08 more minutes of coverage about the topic on a network evening news broadcast. A one percentage point increase among males 18–34 translates into 2.59 more minutes. Higher interest among women 50+ results in less time devoted to the issue. When the sample is divided into network news viewers and non-network news viewers, the same pattern (made apparent with story counts) appears for total story time. Among the regular network news audience, higher interest among females and males 18–34 results in more time devoted to the issue. Among non-network viewers, the same is true, perhaps because these are the most prized of the potential viewers. Higher interests among females 50+ results in less time devoted to an issue.

TABLE 3.12
Impact of Viewer Interests on Network Evening News Content

<i>Total Stories on Network about Topic, 2000 (N = 60)</i>			
	(1) Full Sample	(2) Network News Viewers	(3) Non-Network News Viewers
% Top Priority for:			
Females 18–34	1.28*** (0.44)	0.56* (0.29)	1.29*** (0.44)
Females 35–49	–0.85 (0.53)	–0.42 (0.36)	–0.90 (0.56)
Females 50+	–0.84** (0.35)	–0.73* (0.38)	–0.84** (0.35)
Males 18–34	0.89*** (0.31)	1.17*** (0.33)	0.89*** (0.31)
Males 35–49	0.20 (0.59)	–0.28 (0.50)	0.27 (0.49)
Males 50+	0.17 (0.32)	0.11 (0.29)	0.14 (0.25)
ABC	3.58 (6.02)	4.60 (6.46)	3.58 (6.02)
NBC	3.20 (6.01)	3.20 (6.45)	3.20 (6.01)
Adjusted R ²	0.45	0.37	0.45
<i>Total Story Minutes on Network about Topic, 2000 (N = 60)</i>			
	(4) Full Sample	(5) Network News Viewers	(6) Non-Network News Viewers
% Top Priority for:			
Females 18–34	3.08** (1.26)	1.40* (0.82)	3.04** (1.27)
Females 35–49	–1.81 (1.53)	–0.90 (1.03)	–1.84 (1.62)
Females 50+	–2.48** (1.01)	–2.06* (1.10)	–2.49** (1.01)
Males 18–34	2.59*** (0.89)	3.19*** (0.94)	2.59*** (0.90)
Males 35–49	0.62 (1.69)	–0.49 (1.42)	0.94 (1.40)
Males 50+	0.49 (0.94)	0.26 (0.84)	0.31 (0.72)
ABC	17.12 (17.24)	20.52 (18.55)	17.11 (17.26)
NBC	23.97 (17.21)	23.97 (18.52)	23.97 (17.23)
Adjusted R ²	0.46	0.37	0.45

Note: Dependent variable in the OLS regressions 1, 2, and 3 is the total number of stories in 2000 about a topic on a particular network evening newscast (i.e., ABC, NBC, or CBS). Specifications 4, 5, and 6 use the total number of minutes devoted to a topic during 2000 by a network evening newscast. Each specification also included an intercept. Standard errors are in parentheses. *** = statistically significant at the .01 level, ** = statistically significant at the .05 level, * = statistically significant at the .10 level.

Audience Reactions

The correlation of audience interests with age and gender, the different advertiser values placed on the attention of specific demographic groups, and the targeting of content based on economics help explain the reactions to the media by age and gender listed in [table 3.13](#). The analysis of the evening network news suggests that news directors pay particular attention to the interests of females 18–34 in fashioning political coverage. The greater value in general attached to younger versus older consumers and females versus males suggests that satisfaction with the media should vary by demographic group. When asked whether the “people who decide what to put on television news or in the newspapers are out of touch with people like me,” women 18–34 are the least likely to agree completely with this statement (only 10.7% register this opinion). Males 50+ were the most likely to agree completely with this statement, with 23.9% voicing this sentiment. The difficulty of holding the attention of younger viewers is reflected in the percentage of respondents agreeing that they often watch the news with a remote control in hand and switch channels when not interested in a news topic. Females 18–34 had the highest percentage of complete agreement with this statement (45.3%), followed by males 18–34 (44.7%). Females 18–34 also reported the highest percentage for wishing they had more time to follow the news (30.6%).

When asked whether they “enjoy keeping up with the news,” the preferences evident from the earlier audience analysis emerge again. Older readers and viewers are more likely to respond that they enjoy keeping up with the news a lot, and men are more likely to report this than women. For males 50+, 59.9% say they enjoy this a lot, as do 54.4% of females 50+. This compares to 32.7% for males 18–34 and 28.9% for females 18–34. Younger respondents and females are more likely to say that they only follow the news when “something important or interesting is happening.” For international news a majority in each demographic group, with the exception of men 50+, report they only follow this type of news closely when something important or interesting is happening. This is true for 75.3% of women 18–34 versus 48.8% of men 50+. The age and gender gap is also evident for national news. For females 18–34, 62.5% say they only follow national news closely when something important or interesting is happening, versus 39.2% of males 50+. Only males 18–34 report a majority (53.1%) saying that they follow local news closely only when something important or interesting is happening.

Media Bias as Product Differentiation?

[Chapter 2](#) emphasized that nonpartisan coverage in nineteenth-century newspapers emerged as a commercial product. By assembling a larger audience a newspaper could charge advertisers higher rates and take advantage of economies of scale in paper production. Though objectivity

now forms part of the creed of modern journalism, perceptions of media bias still persist. Often complaints about media bias are expressed in terms of conspiracy, corporate control, or class conflict. The evidence presented here on audience interests and the targeting of demographic groups provide another explanation, that perceptions of media bias arise in part from the economics of news markets. When asked to place themselves on a scale of liberalism and conservatism, individuals age 18–34 are more likely to say they are very liberal than those age 50+. Women in each age category on average are more liberal than men. Females 18–34 report the most liberal mean ideology rating for the six adult demographic groups examined. This implies that if news outlets try to attract younger, female, or especially young female readers/viewers, they may end up covering issues or adopting perspectives that are attractive to liberals.

TABLE 3.13
Media Satisfaction

	<i>% of Column Respondents</i>						
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Females 18–34</i>	<i>Females 35–49</i>	<i>Females 50+</i>	<i>Males 18–34</i>	<i>Males 35–49</i>	<i>Males 50+</i>
How much do you enjoy keeping up with the news? A lot	44.9	28.9	42.7	54.4	32.7	47.5	59.9
Do you feel overloaded, or do you like having so much information available? Overloaded	29.4	23.2	28.4	38.3	19.9	27.7	36.5
% who completely agree that:							
I find that I often watch the news with my remote control in hand, flipping to other channels when I'm not interested in the topic.	35.9	45.3	31.1	26.5	44.7	37.8	32.8
I wish I had more time to follow the news.	20.6	30.6	25.2	18.2	18.3	19.8	12.5
People who decide what to put on TV news or in the newspapers are out of touch with people like me.	18.1	10.7	15.0	20.8	15.4	21.6	23.9
% who say I . . .							
Follow international news closely only when some- thing important or in- teresting is happening	64.5	75.3	70.2	61.7	68.4	63.5	48.8
Follow national news closely only when some- thing important or in- teresting is happening	49.7	62.5	54.6	42.4	59.8	42.2	39.2
Follow the local commu- nity news closely only when something im- portant or interesting is happening	40.3	45.9	37.1	33.3	53.1	38.7	35.9

The opinions of media bias reported in [tables 3.14](#) and [3.15](#) are consistent with media bias

arising from economic targeting of content to attract liberal demographic groups. Younger survey respondents are less likely to say there is a “great deal” of political bias in news coverage. Females in each age group are slightly less likely than men to see a great deal of political bias. Young females 18–34 are the least likely demographic to report that there is a great deal of political bias in news coverage. Those who report that they are very conservative are the most likely to see bias in the media (i.e., 44.5% see a “great deal”). Survey respondents who identify themselves as very liberal are least likely to see a great deal of political bias in news coverage and are most likely to report that there is “not too much” or “not at all.”

TABLE 3.14
Media Bias Opinions

	% of Row Respondents to the Question: To what extent do you see political bias in news coverage?			
	A Great Deal	A Fair Amount	Not Too Much	Not at All
Ideology Rating				
1 Very Conservative	44.5	33.7	14.3	7.5
2	39.4	36.0	20.6	4.1
3	34.6	39.9	21.0	4.4
4	27.9	46.3	21.8	4.0
5	30.5	43.6	21.3	4.6
6 Very Liberal	25.3	43.5	23.1	8.1
Demographic Group				
Females 18–34	29.0	43.7	22.7	4.6
Females 35–49	35.0	40.3	16.4	8.4
Females 50+	34.0	32.1	25.8	8.2
Males 18–34	31.5	45.7	18.1	4.7
Males 35–49	37.5	35.1	20.3	7.2
Males 50+	34.4	40.1	21.3	4.2

TABLE 3.15
Perceived Bias in Presidential Race Coverage

	% of Row Respondents to the Statement: Coverage of presidential race by news organizations shows . . .		
	Democratic Bias	Republican Bias	No Bias
Republicans	43.4	7.9	48.7
Democrats	9.9	24.1	66.1
Independents	20.3	16.9	62.8

If news outlets are using certain political issues to target young female viewers, the analysis in [table 3.10](#) suggests they will cover issues such as reducing crime, dealing with the problems of families with children, and strengthening gun control laws. Coverage of these issues, some of which are traditionally associated with Democratic candidates, can further lead some viewers to conclude that the media are biased.¹⁵ [Table 3.15](#) indicates that among Republicans, 43.4% reported in January 2000 that coverage of the presidential race to that point by news organizations showed a Democratic bias. Among Democrats, 24.1% saw a

Republican bias in news coverage of the presidential race. Independents are slightly more likely to see a Democratic bias (20.3%) than a Republican bias (16.9%). A plurality of each group (48.7% for Republicans, 66.1% for Democrats, and 62.8% for independents) saw no bias overall in coverage.

Political bias in media content can be seen as akin to product differentiation. Individuals may have worldviews or ideologies, which we can think of as their political preferences. Media outlets choose combinations of topics and approaches to issues that may reflect these worldviews. To an individual, a media outlet will develop a reputation for presenting the news in a manner that may be close or distant from the individual's ideology. The farther a product is from an individual's worldview, the more likely the person will be to say that the media outlet is biased. The Pew survey data do not provide direct measures of media content. The survey did ask respondents to rate themselves on a 1–6 conservative-liberal scale where 1 represents very conservative and six represents very liberal. The same survey had respondents rate particular publications and programs on a scale that ranged from very biased to completely objective. I use these two measures to explore how distance from a program's approach to politics affects a person's view of that program's objectivity. To construct a proxy for a program's ideology, I calculate the average of the ideology ratings reported by its audience members. This allows me to construct a spectrum showing the ideological location of particular programs. If readers and viewers define bias by how distant they are from a show's ideological location, then they should be more willing to say that a program is biased if the program's mean ideology is farther from their own worldviews.

Tables 3.16 and 3.17 show that there is a dispersion among the audience ideologies of programs that corresponds to the brand images outlets have in their approach to politics. In the survey where respondents ranked their ideologies on a six-point scale, the program audience for religious radio shows such as *Focus on the Family* had the most conservative rating (a mean of 2.95) and the late-night talk shows such as those hosted by David Letterman and Jay Leno had the most liberal rating (3.62).¹⁶ The audience for a program here is defined by those who say they regularly learn about a presidential campaign/candidate from the outlet. Note that the percentage saying they learn about the presidential race from the late-night talk shows (9.5%) is similar to the percentage saying that they learn about the race from National Public Radio (11.7%). The mean audience ideology for the network news, 3.28, is the same as that for the total respondents. This is also true for other mass media outlets such as CNN and MSNBC. Younger respondents report more liberal ideologies than older ones, women in general are more liberal than men, and young females 18–34 have the most liberal rating (3.68).

Table 3.17 shows a similar dispersion when survey respondents rated themselves on a five-point scale. The outlet with the most conservative audience was the Fox News Cable Channel (2.66), while magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, or *The New Yorker* had the most liberal audience mean (3.29). Mass media outlets such as the daily newspaper or morning television programs such as *Today Show* or *Good Morning America* had mean audience ratings (2.81) equal to the mean for the sample as a whole (2.81). Outlets with younger or more female audiences predictably had audience means that were closer to the

liberal side of the spectrum. Personality magazines such as *People* and daytime talk shows such as *Rosie O'Donnell* or *Oprah*, for example, had audience means of 2.91.

The parallel between media bias and product differentiation depends on two “ifs”: 1) If the mean ideology of its audience describes a program’s approach to politics, then one can use the audience ratings to describe a program’s ideological location and 2) If individuals define media bias by the distance of an outlet from their own ideology, then views about whether a program is biased or objective should depend on the ideology of the respondent and the location of the program. Table 3.18 shows that perceptions of media bias do operate as if there are ideological differences among media outlets. The media outlets listed in the table are ordered by the audience ideology mean reported in Table 3.16. The average audience ideology ratings range from 3.17, for the Sunday network talk shows such as *This Week* and *Meet the Press*, to 3.57 for cable political shows such as *Crossfire* and *Hardball*. With all of the outlets registering an audience mean ideology in the 3s, respondents who rate themselves as a 3 on the scale do not view most of these outlets as very biased. Individuals who rate themselves as very conservative (1) or very liberal (6) are much more likely to rate programs averaging a 3 as very biased.

TABLE 3.16
Ideological Ratings by Media Audience

	<i>Audience Mean of Ideology Scale Rating (1–6)</i>	<i>% Adults Regularly Learning about Presidential Campaign/Candidate from Outlet</i>
Religious Radio Shows Such as <i>Focus on the Family</i>	2.95	6.7
Talk Radio	3.16	15.3
Sunday NetworkTalk Shows Such as <i>This Week, Meet the Press</i>	3.17	15.4
MTV	3.21	4.7
Daily Newspaper	3.21	40.0
Local TV News	3.22	47.6
PBS Shows Such as <i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Washington Week in Review</i>	3.27	12.3
Cable News Networks Such as CNN, MSNBC	3.28	34.5
National NightlyNetwork News	3.28	44.6
National Public Radio	3.31	11.7
Morning TV Programs Such as <i>Today Show, Good Morning America</i>	3.34	17.8
News Magazines Such as <i>Time, U.S. News, Newsweek</i>	3.38	14.7
Comedy Shows Such as <i>Saturday Night Live, Politically Incorrect</i>	3.39	6.0
C-SPAN	3.44	9.2
Internet	3.45	9.2
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes, 20/20, Dateline</i>	3.46	29.1
Cable Political Shows Such as <i>Crossfire, Handball</i>	3.57	14.4
Late Night TV Shows Such as <i>David Letterman, Jay Leno</i>	3.62	9.5
Females 18–34	3.68	
Females 35–49	3.44	
Females 50+	3.03	
Males 18–34	3.30	
Males 35–49	3.19	
Males 50+	3.11	
Total Sample	3.28	

TABLE 3.17
Ideological Ratings by Media Audience

	Audience Mean of Ideology Scale Rating (1–5)	% Adults Regularly Consuming
Fox News Cable Channel	2.66	17.6
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune</i> , <i>Forbes</i>	2.71	4.8
News on Radio	2.75	46.3
C-SPAN	2.76	3.8
Local TV News	2.76	55.6
National Nightly Network News	2.76	30.0
Weather Channel	2.77	31.5
CNN	2.77	21.2
CNBC	2.77	11.2
News Magazines Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	2.77	30.6
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	2.78	36.7
Local Cable News	2.80	29.1
Daily Newspaper	2.81	62.4
<i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , <i>Early Show</i>	2.81	19.9
<i>The National Enquirer</i> , <i>Sun</i> , <i>Star</i>	2.82	2.7
MSNBC	2.86	9.8
Sports News on ESPN	2.86	22.2
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i>	2.89	11.8
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>US News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	2.89	12.4
Shows Such as <i>Entertainment Tonight</i> , <i>Access Hollywood</i>	2.90	8.5
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	2.91	6.1
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie O'Donnell</i> , <i>Oprah</i>	2.91	10.3
Shows Such as <i>Cops</i> , <i>America's Most Wanted</i>	2.92	17.7
National Public Radio	2.95	15.3
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	3.00	4.7
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake</i> , <i>Jerry Springer</i>	3.13	7.4
Magazines such as <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , <i>Harpers</i> , or <i>The New Yorker</i>	3.29	2.2
Females 18–34	3.07	
Females 35–49	2.83	
Females 50+	2.72	
Males 18–34	2.98	
Males 35–49	2.71	
Males 50+	2.60	
Total Sample	2.81	

TABLE 3.18
Media Bias Evaluations by Ideology of Respondent

Outlet	% of Column Respondents Rating Outlet as Very Biased		
	1 Very Conservative	3	6 Very Liberal
Sunday Network Talk Shows Such as <i>This Week</i> , <i>Meet the Press</i>	25.9	11.4	25.8
Daily Newspaper	29.0	18.5	25.3
Local TV News	30.9	9.0	21.0
PBS Shows Such as <i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i> , <i>Washington Week in Review</i>	27.4	8.1	22.3
Cable News Network Shows Such as CNN, MSNBC	25.7	5.9	15.0
National Nightly Network News	37.4	10.3	16.6
National Public Radio	30.0	10.3	17.3
Morning TV Programs Such as <i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i>	29.1	9.6	16.3
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>U.S. News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	39.9	15.5	22.1
C-SPAN	27.9	4.7	18.4
TV Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	25.6	12.1	18.4
Cable Political Shows Such as <i>Crossfire</i> , <i>Hardball</i>	26.8	20.8	33.3

For nearly every program, those who are very conservative are more likely than those who are very liberal to rate the program as very biased. One would expect this if programs trying to garner younger or female consumers used liberal content to attract these viewers. This pattern is evident in reactions to the network nightly news. Only 10.3% of respondents rating themselves as a 3 viewed the network news as very biased. Among very liberal respondents 16.6% shared this view. For those who said they were very conservative, however, 37.4% rated the network news as very biased. As the mean ideology of a program's audience increased (i.e., became more liberal), liberals were less likely to see the program as very biased. The one outlet that was viewed as very biased by at least 20% of all three groups were cable political shows such as *Crossfire* and *Hardball*. Even though this set of shows attracted the most liberal viewing audience for those evaluated in the table, 33.3% of the very liberal respondents saw these outlets as very biased. Overall, these results suggest that perceptions of media bias relate to the ideological brand locations that outlets choose when they cover political issues.

Viewing and Voting

In idealized descriptions of democracy all citizens take an active role in keeping up with public affairs and voting. Voter turnout rates in presidential elections and Nielsen ratings for hard news programming show that voting and viewing fall short of this idealized world. The good news from table 3.19 is that relative rates of following political news are related to relative rates of political participation and learning. It is the case that those who participate more in politics are more likely to consume news about politics. Among those who report that they always vote, 58.8% say that they follow what is going on in government and politics most

of the time. Among those who say that they vote “nearly always,” the group I refer to as marginal voters, 38.8% report following government/politics news most of the time and 41.5% some of the time. As participation in voting drops off, interest in the news also declines. For those who vote part of the time, a majority say they follow news about government and public affairs some of the time or now and then. Among those who seldom or never vote, a majority say they follow government and public affairs news only now and then or hardly at all. Those who follow politics more are also more likely to know more. When asked to identify the political party that had a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1999, 64.8% of those who always vote and 61.8% of those who vote nearly always gave the correct answer of the Republican Party. There is a sharp drop-off for those who vote only part of the time (42.6%), seldom (38.0%), or never (23.8%).

TABLE 3.19

Political Interests and Actions

	% of Column Respondents				
	How often would you say you vote?				
	Always	Nearly Always	Part of the Time	Seldom	Never
Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs?					
Most of the time	58.8	38.8	20.2	12.1	10.7
Some of the time	28.8	41.5	43.8	33.4	27.7
Only now and then	9.4	15.5	26.5	30.9	24.7
Hardly at all	2.8	4.2	8.8	22.6	36.3
Do you happen to know which political party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives?					
Republican Party	64.8	61.8	42.6	38.0	23.8
Demographic Group					
Females 18–34	9.2	14.9	21.1	28.7	29.9
Females 35–49	14.6	19.1	14.8	15.6	15.9
Females 50+	29.2	17.6	10.0	7.0	10.3
Males 18–34	9.8	13.7	22.5	30.7	28.6
Males 35–49	15.4	20.7	18.2	11.8	11.1
Males 50+	21.8	14.0	13.4	6.3	4.3

The same demographic patterns evident in interests in political news appear in voting. Those 50+ makeup a majority of those who say that they always vote. Men and women 18–34 make up a majority of those who seldom vote or never vote. Among the marginal voters (i.e., those who say they nearly always vote), males 35–49 constitute the highest demographic percentage (20.7%) followed by females 35–49 (19.1%). Though females 18–34 constitute 9.2% of those who always vote and males 18–34 comprise just 9.8%, these young adult demographic groups constitute a higher percentage of marginal voters. Women 18–34 are 14.9% of marginal voters, and men 18–34 constitute 13.7%.

The segmentation of the media market into news outlets that offer widely different types of

news means that there are clear differences in the political interests and activities of program audiences.¹⁷ Table 3.20 shows that programs associated with hard news content attract audiences that are politically active and knowledgeable, while those associated with soft news attract viewers who are less interested in and active in politics. Only two outlets had at least 40% of their audiences report that they were following the presidential election very closely, C-SPAN (46.1%) and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (41.5%). These outlets, which concentrate on politics, are notable because they are noncommercial and because they only appeal to a small segment of viewers (i.e., 3.8% of respondents are regular C-SPAN viewers, and 4.6% regular viewers of the PBS evening news program). C-SPAN also registered the highest percentage of viewers able to identify Alan Greenspan as the chairman of the Federal Reserve system (71.5%).

NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and C-SPAN also had the top two percentage of audience members that reported they always voted (60.8% and 54.3% respectively). The other outlets where at least 50% of audience members said they always voted included news magazines such as *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Newsweek*, business magazines such as *Fortune* and *Forbes*, and MSNBC and National Public Radio. The percentage of audience members who said that they followed the presidential election very closely for most of these outlets was 30%. A high percentage of the audiences members could identify Alan Greenspan (e.g., 67.9% of the readers of the business magazines).

At the other end of the news spectrum there are a set of programs and publications where audience members do not consistently vote, are less interested in election news, and do not know who Alan Greenspan is. Outlets where less than 35% of the audience members report that they always vote are personality magazines such as *People* (34.0%), *The National Enquirer*, *Sun*, and *Star* (33.2%), shows such as *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted* (31.0%), and daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* (26.9%). These outlets have a lower percentage of audience members who say they follow the presidential election news very closely. Personality magazines such as *People* register the lowest percentage of audience members (19.6%) following the election very closely. Readers and viewers of these outlets are much less likely to know who Alan Greenspan is. Viewers for daytime talk shows such as *Ricki Lake* or *Jerry Springer* are the least likely to be able to identify the chairman of the Federal Reserve system, with only 18.0% correctly identifying him.

The audience data here demonstrate that with a wide variety of news outlets, some readers and viewers choose programs where audiences express an interest in politics, participate through voting, and know about the details of government. Other readers and viewers choose to consume outlets whose audiences do not follow politics, do not vote as often, and do not know as much about the government. Evaluating the relationships between the economics of the news market and the operation of politics is the topic of chapter 9. The Pew audience data here do allow me to analyze three relevant questions: 1) How do the interests of marginal voters versus marginal viewers overlap? 2) Do marginal voters know who stands for what in politics? and 3) Are less informed voters satisfied with their political choices after they are made.

TABLE 3.20

Political Action by Program Audience

Regular Consumers of	% of Row Respondents			
	Always Vote	Nearly Always Vote	Follow Presidential Election Very Closely	Can Identify Alan Greenspan
Daily Newspaper	44.5	25.0	21.6	51.0
National Nightly Network News	49.0	27.4	30.9	53.2
Local TV News	42.2	25.5	22.1	46.0
CNN	48.4	24.2	28.4	56.4
C-SPAN	54.3	26.4	46.1	71.5
National Public Radio	50.7	22.6	22.9	51.7
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	60.8	18.6	41.5	55.9
News Magazine Shows Such as <i>60 Minutes</i> , <i>20/20</i> , <i>Dateline</i>	45.9	24.8	25.1	47.1
Shows Such as <i>Cops</i> , <i>America's Most Wanted</i>	31.0	23.0	20.0	24.7
CNBC	46.2	24.5	26.5	54.4
Fox News Cable Channel	46.7	20.6	26.0	37.8
MSNBC	50.9	22.3	29.0	52.5
Shows Such as <i>Enter- tainment Tonight</i> , <i>Access Hollywood</i>	35.5	24.5	29.6	25.9
<i>Today Show</i> , <i>Good Morning America</i> , <i>Early Show</i>	43.5	27.7	24.6	45.0
Weather Channel	43.4	20.9	20.7	38.6
Sports News on ESPN	43.7	23.3	27.5	45.0
Documentaries on Channels Such as History Channel, Discovery Channel	43.3	26.6	22.4	46.8
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Ricki Lake</i> , <i>Jerry Springer</i>	26.9	16.3	20.9	18.0
Daytime Talk Shows Such as <i>Rosie</i> <i>O'Donnell</i> , <i>Oprah</i>	42.1	20.7	21.3	31.0
Courtroom Shows Such as <i>Judge Judy</i> , <i>Divorce Court</i>	39.1	20.2	23.5	28.1
News Magazines Such as <i>Time</i> , <i>US News</i> , <i>Newsweek</i>	53.6	24.2	31.2	62.6
Business Magazines Such as <i>Fortune</i> , <i>Forbes</i>	51.2	27.5	30.0	67.9
<i>The National Enquirer</i> , <i>Sun</i> , <i>Star</i>	33.2	21.6	26.5	22.7
Personality Magazines Such as <i>People</i>	34.0	22.8	19.6	37.9
Magazines Such as <i>The Atlantic</i> <i>Monthly</i> , <i>Harper's</i> , <i>The New Yorker</i>	48.6	29.3	30.5	69.1

News programmers select topics to attract marginal viewers. Campaigns choose issues to attract marginal voters. Table 3.21 examines the degree that the interests of marginal viewers and voters coincide for different news programs. The table lists the percentage of respondents following a particular type of news very closely for six different news types. The results

demonstrate that for most programs the things that marginal consumers are interested in also reflect the interests of marginal voters. Since marginal voters are by definition those who may or may not vote, it is not surprising that following political events in Washington, D.C. is not high on their list of interests. Among marginal voters and the marginal consumers of all seven outlets examined, crime and health are the top-two types of news followed most closely and news about local people and events rank third. In terms of political events in Washington, this ranks fourth in interest level for marginal voters. This also ranks fourth among NPR and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* marginal consumers. These two outlets face relatively higher incentives to talk about political events in Washington, D.C. than the other news outlets, with 20.2% and 29.6% of their marginal consumers following this type of news very closely. Among marginal voters, 15.6% follow political events in Washington very closely. The marginal consumers of the network nightly news and local television news express less interest in politics than the marginal voters. Political events in Washington rank sixth among network news marginal viewers (12.3% following very closely) and fifth among local news marginal consumers (11.6%). For all outlets except NPR and *NewsHour*, the percentage of marginal consumers following health or crime is nearly double the percentage following political news from Washington.

TABLE 3.21

The Interests of Marginal Voters and Marginal Viewers

	% of Column Respondents Following a Type of News Very Closely							
	Marginal Consumers of							Marginal Voters
	National Nightly News	Local TV News	CNN	National Public Radio	NewsHour with Jim Lehrer	News Magazine Shows Such as 60 Minutes, 20/20, Dateline	Today Show, Good Morning America, Early Show	
Political Figures/Events in Washington, DC	12.3	11.6	17.7	20.2	29.6	14.0	14.7	15.6
International Affairs	12.7	10.7	13.9	18.7	25.1	12.2	13.3	13.5
People/Events in Local Community	24.6	15.5	26.3	30.0	29.7	25.6	27.5	24.7
Entertainment	15.7	13.2	16.6	14.4	18.5	15.9	17.0	14.5
Health	28.8	23.1	30.5	31.9	37.4	25.9	32.0	28.6
Crime	29.0	20.9	31.0	32.3	30.3	27.5	31.9	27.4
2000 Presidential election	13.6	13.7	18.2	22.4	29.5	16.3	17.8	16.1
Stock market ups and downs	15.6	14.4	20.0	20.8	28.7	17.2	15.7	18.7
Debate over whether Elian Gonzales should be returned to his father	23.3	17.1	32.6	29.0	42.6	31.7	31.1	26.7
Elian Gonzales being returned	27.0	21.4	30.8	29.5	39.9	27.4	34.4	27.8
One-year anniversary of shootings at Columbine High School	21.0	14.6	18.3	17.3	23.6	17.2	23.2	14.0
Protests at World Bank and International Monetary Fund	6.2	3.7	3.8	6.6	9.9	3.6	8.4	4.2
Government recommendation to break up Microsoft	12.5	14.1	15.2	22.8	27.7	14.0	17.6	15.2

The particular stories followed by marginal consumers also reflect the low interest in

electoral politics among marginal voters and the marginal viewers of most programs. Relative to marginal voters, the marginal consumers of NPR and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* report higher interest in hard news topics such as the 2000 presidential election, stock market movements, protests at the World Bank, and the Microsoft antitrust case. Lower percentages of the marginal consumers of network evening news and local television news report following the presidential election, stock market, or Microsoft case than the percentages of marginal voters following these stories. The Elian Gonzales case generated the highest interest among each of the viewing groups examined.¹⁸ Among network evening news marginal viewers, 27% reported following the return of Elian Gonzales very closely versus 13.6% following the 2000 presidential election. Overall these results indicate that for most news outlets the interests of marginal consumers are similar to those of marginal voters, so that programmers trying to give marginal viewers what they want will also provide marginal voters with stories they like. This means incentives for providing political news about Washington will be relatively lower, however, since marginal viewers and voters express less interest in these stories. NPR and *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* are exceptions to this pattern, since their marginal consumers express relatively higher interest in political news. The survey data indicate overall that few viewers choose regularly to watch these outlets.

Even if readers and viewers are not following the news of politics very closely, the aggregate amount of coverage across different outlets they consume, their conversations with friends, and the paid political advertising they observe may give them enough information to participate well in politics. Table 3.22 offers evidence on a rough test of political knowledge—Can a person sort out who stands for what in American politics? When asked to rate seven political figures on a six-point scale (where 1 was very conservative and 6 very liberal), respondents were remarkably consistent in their placement of the politicians. Those who followed news about the candidates in the 2000 presidential election “very closely” and “fairly closely” ranked the candidates in the same order from right to left: Buchanan, Bush, McCain, Bradley, Gore, Clinton, Jackson. Those who said they followed the election “not too closely” came up with a similar ranking, though they ranked Clinton as more liberal than Jackson. If I compare the mean ideological ratings of each candidate for those who follow the election very closely versus fairly closely, the only two that show statistically significant differences are those for Bradley and Jackson.

TABLE 3.22
Maps of Politics by Interest and Activity

	Mean Ideological Ratings by Row Respondents of							
	Clinton	Gore	Bradley	Jackson	Bush	McCain	Buchanan	Self
A. Follow news about candidates for the 2000 presidential election								
Very Closely (N = 205)	4.17	3.97	3.93	4.65	2.86	2.92	2.75	3.25
Fairly Closely (N = 347)	4.28	3.96	3.70*	4.36*	2.97	3.09	2.62	3.16
Not Too Closely (N = 265)	4.34	3.79	3.68**	4.18***	3.12**	3.17*	2.65	3.36
Not at All Closely (N = 148)	4.22	3.65	3.35	4.11	3.12	3.25	3.21	3.41
B. How often would you say you vote?								
Always (N = 406)	4.32	3.92	3.88	4.50	3.02	3.12	2.62	3.17
Nearly Always (N = 303)	4.32	3.94	3.55***	4.37	2.94	2.96	2.75	3.27
Part of the Time (N = 133)	4.07	3.70	3.61*	4.02***	3.04	3.18	2.85	3.32
Seldom (N = 58)	4.43	3.76	3.48	4.07	2.83	3.12	2.77	3.23
Never (N = 60)	3.88	3.70	3.97	3.75	3.53	3.45	3.31	3.69

Note: For each rating in A, the mean for respondents following the election very closely was compared to that for those following fairly closely and those following not too closely. In B, the mean for respondents who report they always vote was compared to those who vote nearly always and those who vote part of the time. In these difference of mean tests, *** = statistically significant at the .01 level, ** = statistically significant at the .05 level, * = statistically significant at the .10 level.

The political roadmaps used by people who always vote versus those who “nearly always vote,” the group I call the marginal voters, are also remarkably similar. Voters and marginal voters rank the seven politicians in the same order from right to left. In difference of means tests, only the mean ideological rating for Bill Bradley shows a statistically significant difference between the evaluations of voters and marginal voters. For those who report that they vote only “part of the time,” their ranking of candidates is the same as that of those who always vote, except that those who participate less rate Clinton as more liberal than Jackson. In terms of differences of means for ideological ratings between those who always vote and those who vote only part of the time, there were only two differences that were statistically significant (i.e., Bradley and Jackson). These results indicate that relative to those who follow elections very closely or always vote, those who demonstrate less enthusiasm for political news or vote less frequently can still draw a map of where candidates stand on a conservative-liberal spectrum.

Another way to judge how well the market for political information works is to see if less-informed voters express more dissatisfaction with their choices after the fact. If there are problems with the amount of knowledge that voters have when they make their candidate selection, those with less information might be more likely to choose candidates that disappoint them once in office. The Pew data in [table 3.23](#) indicate that the less informed are not more likely to be less satisfied in their political decisions. Those respondents who reported voting for Clinton in 1996 are sorted into four categories based on the number of correct survey answers given in identifying Bush, Bradley, and McCain. When asked in January 2000 whether they approved of the way Bill Clinton was handling his job as president, the percentage of respondents reporting disapproval was very similar across all respondent knowledge categories. Those who failed to get any candidate identifications correct reported the lowest percentage disapproving (8.3%), while those who got all identifications correct reported the highest percentage disapproving (11.7%). It is the case that those with the least

knowledge had a lower percentage registering approval for the president, but this is because they had the highest percentage who responded “don’t know” to this question. This unwillingness to rate the president may reflect the lack of political knowledge made evident on the candidate test. It is still the case that the Clinton voters with the least political knowledge do not express more regret, that is, disapproval of his job handling.

TABLE 3.23

Ex Post Regret among Clinton Voters

	% of Column Respondents			
	Number of Correct Answers Given Identifying Bush, Bradley, and McCain			
	0	1	2	3
Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as President?				
Approve	72.1	86.1	86.1	86.4
Disapprove	8.3	9.4	9.7	11.7
Don't Know/Refused	19.6	4.6	4.2	1.9

Conclusions

Tastes vary by age and gender. Differences in preferences for clothing or cars between women 18–34 and males 50+ do not generate headlines or public debates. Differences in tastes for news across demographic groups do generate public debate. The high fixed costs of gathering, producing, and distributing news mean that the varieties of information products offered in the market will be limited. In this sense, the tastes of others will affect the categories and combinations of news available to you.¹⁹ Individuals also care about the media consumption of others because of the potential for news consumption to influence political beliefs and actions.

This chapter makes apparent the importance of who cares about a particular piece of information. The highly segmented media market offers a wide variety of combinations of hard and soft news. The competition for marginal consumers among outlets, and the value placed on younger or female viewers by advertisers, helps explain a number of criticisms of the media. Network news programs target the issues they cover to attract young viewers. This leaves older viewers less satisfied with coverage than younger viewers. Since the issues used to attract young female viewers may be those associated with liberalism, this means that programs driven by profit maximization may appear to be biased because of attempts to attract viewers highly valued by advertisers. Though readers and viewers express more interest in crime, health, and local events than in the political news from Washington, D.C., enough information appears to seep through so that regular and marginal voters can draw similar roadmaps of where candidates stand in politics. The following chapter explores further how the differences in interests across demographic groups affect media content in the national

television market.