



How sensationalist features affect television news preferences and recognition among young viewers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether including sensationalist features in news stories is an appropriate strategy for news organizations to both attract and inform young adults. An experiment was conducted to examine whether content (negative versus neutral) and packaging (tabloid versus non-tabloid) of television news stories influenced preferences for and recognition of these stories among young viewers (16–21 years old), varying in educational level. Results showed that the use of sensationalist news features might indeed help news producers to attract young viewers to news. However, this holds for content but not for packaging. In addition, negative content improved recognition, but only among higher educated young viewers.

1. Introduction

In today's high choice media environment in the Western world, an important question for TV news producers is how they can continue to fulfill a significant role in providing citizens with news, and therewith can facilitate their functioning as citizens in a democratic society. The rise of new media offers increasing possibilities for audiences to find their preferred media content, resulting in audience fragmentation and selective exposure (cf. Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Sunstein, 2001; Tewksbury, 2005). Particularly young people – the so-called Millennials – seem to drift away from TV news (Aalberg, Blekesaune, & Elvestad, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2016), or at least perceive the news as 'boring' (Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, & Beentjes, 2013). TV news producers thus need to find strategies to succeed in their task to inform these young citizens about significant events in society. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to produce news that is not only informative, but also attractive for a young audience. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how TV news can serve the young audience by both attracting and informing them.

Over the past decades, communication scholars have been studying a number of nontraditional, more entertaining initiatives that are meant to attract audiences to 'serious' news content. Examples are 'entertainment education' (Singhal & Rogers, 2002; Slater & Rouner, 2002), 'serious games' (Connolly, Boyle, MacArthur, Hailey, & Boyle, 2012), and, more closely connected to the news genre, 'soft news programs' like entertainment talk shows, political comedy, and tabloid news (Baum, 2002; Xenos & Becker, 2009). What these initiatives have in common is that they provide a blend of 'serious' (e.g., educational, informative, or even therapeutic) content with a number of features (e.g., strong narratives, action, humor) that are expected to be popular among

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audiences that are otherwise hard to reach. These initiatives appear to be successful. A number of studies within the domain of political communication have shown that late night talk shows and political comedy programs have a positive influence on trust in politicians (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2016), attentiveness to news media content, and political knowledge (Xenos & Becker, 2009). Even more important might be that several studies showed that young viewers do not use these programs as a substitute for traditional news, but rather as a gateway to traditional news (e.g., Feldman & Young, 2008; Young & Tisinger, 2006). To keep them glued to this traditional news, it is, therefore, also important to investigate how traditional news can become more attractive for young viewers.

To address this, the present study investigates whether traditional news programs could benefit from a similar ‘blending’ strategy by including sensationalist news features into their conventional stories. Sensationalist news features are features that have the potential to provoke attention and arousal responses in viewers (cf. Arbaoui, De Swert, & Van der Brug, 2016; Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2008; Lang, Bolls, Potter, & Kawahara, 1999). Examples include *negative content* features, such as news topics and pictures of violence and disasters, and *tabloid packaging*, for instance the use of fast-paced editing, music and sound effects, or decorative editing techniques such as wipes, fades, or dissolves (cf. Grabe et al., 2001; Grabe et al., 2003; Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011; Kleemans, Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, & Eisinga, 2012; Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). Besides the attention-eliciting capacity of sensationalist news, there are also indications that including sensationalist features in TV news – to a certain level – may enhance processing of news (e.g., Grabe et al., 2003). It is, however, unclear whether sensationalist TV news is able to attract and inform young viewers at the same time. We therefore experimentally investigate in one design (a) whether young viewers *prefer* negative content and tabloid packaging in television news, and (b) what they *recognize* from such news.

An important factor to take into account when studying this question is the moderating role of educational background. Past studies on educational differences have consistently shown that – similar to younger people – people with a lower level of education have a lower preference for (cf. Liu & Eveland, 2005) and less knowledge of the news (e.g., Price & Czilli, 1996; Price & Zaller, 1993). Against that background, we ask whether sensationalist news could be particularly helpful in attracting and informing the lower educated youngsters. Therefore, the potentially differential impact of negative news content and tabloid packaging on preferences and recognition will be investigated among both higher and lower educated young viewers.

2. Theory

2.1. Preferences for sensationalist news

Previous research on the impact of sensationalist news features particularly focused on older participants (e.g., Grabe et al., 2003; Grabe, Lang, Zhou, & Bolls, 2000; Grabe, Yegiyani, & Kamhawi, 2008; Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008; Lang, Potter, & Grabe, 2003). Young viewers are different from older viewers on a number of variables, leading to the expectation that they react differently to sensationalist news. Two studies on news preferences (Kleemans et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2005) already provided some indications for the assumption that sensationalist features have a dissimilar impact on younger viewers than on older ones, by showing that younger viewers – in those studies all having a minimum age of 18 years old with a maximum varying between 22 and 26 years old – have a higher preference for negative news content (Kleemans et al., 2012) and tabloid packaging in news (Lang et al., 2005) than older adults. In addition, also the study of Bailey, Fox, and Grabe (2013) showed that young viewers (age range 18–23) have a general tendency to prefer sensationalist news over non-sensationalist news. This preference has been attributed to aging factors (a general higher level of sensation seeking among young adults), a generation effect (being raised in a fast-paced media environment), or both (cf. Bailey et al., 2013; Kleemans et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2005). Hence, it is expected that:

H1a. Young viewers have a stronger preference for news stories containing negative content than for news stories containing neutral content.

H1b. Young viewers have a stronger preference for tabloid packaged news stories than for non-tabloid packaged news stories.

A general theory that may be helpful in predicting educational differences in preferences for content and packaging of news stories is Bourdieu’s (1984) sociological theory of cultural reproduction. Bourdieu’s theory – which focuses on cultural reproduction, that is, the transmission of existing cultural values and norms from generation to generation – has generated an ongoing stream of research into class-related preferences for arts and various forms of mediated culture. Some of these studies applied his theory to predict preferences for television genres, particularly news versus entertainment (Hendriks Vettehen, Konig, Westerik, & Beentjes, 2012; Notten, Kraaykamp, & Konig, 2012). In the present study, we apply the theory to predict even more refined differences *within* television news preferences, i.e., preferences between sensationalist (negative content, tabloid packaged) and non-sensationalist (neutral content, non-tabloid packaged) news stories.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that parents from higher social classes do not only pass on money to their children (economic capital in Bourdieu’s terminology), but also the codes and conventions that are required to understand and appreciate a refined taste that distinguishes elites from non-elites (cultural capital). Because their children use this cultural capital as resource throughout their lives in their struggle for social status, they are likely to reproduce social class distinctions. Bourdieu’s theory is relevant to the present study because in his theory, non-elite taste is characterized by a preference for content and packaging characteristics of cultural products that are capable of instantly arousing the emotions, such as drama, conflict, competition (negative content) and lively action, fast-pacing (tabloid packaging). In contrast, the more refined elite taste is characterized by a certain detachment from direct

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