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THE PUBLIC OPINION IMPLICATIONS OF  
LEISURE TIME AND CHANNEL REPERTOIRE  
IN A MULTICHANNEL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

A telephone survey of 197 respondents measured leisure time activities (television viewing versus all other activities). An analysis of four groups (low TV/low other, low TV/high other, high TV/low other, and high TV/high other) looked for group differences in two types of channel repertoire: broadcast-channel repertoire (BCR) and cable-channel repertoire (CCR). CCR differed between the first and fourth groups (low/low and high/high), but there were no differences in BCR. Age was found to be a significant covariate. These findings support the idea that people who are active in general tend to watch cable channels in particular. The public opinion implications are discussed.

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This study takes a look at a different conceptualization of viewer activity in the newer media environment. The focus here is on leisure time and channel repertoire. Simply put, a person who exhibits high commitment to activities, regardless of their nature, is likely to exhibit a more active approach to particular activities. In this study the particular activity is television viewing and the repertoire of choices that underlie that activity.

Viewer activity has important implications for public opinion research. Audiences for public affairs information, for example, may alternatively seek messages actively, or receive messages passively. Active seeking may present more opportunities for critical acceptance of opinions than mere passive reception. On the other hand, passive reception may result in a viewpoint that examines both pros and cons, because the information is packaged as a balanced whole rather than selectively sought in pieces.

The idea of an active versus a passive viewer has been explored in previous research. Blumler (1979) asserted that viewer activity is not an either-or condition. Several models exist for program choice that explore variables that range from structural at one extreme to individual at the other. Webster and Lichty (1991) put more weight on the structural determinants. Another view, one that follows a uses and gratifications approach, points to individual level explanations.

It is likely that program choice models, too, have no either-or solution.

Channel repertoire is the number of channels that a viewer chooses to watch, without much regard to the total number of channels available. Heeter (1985) incorporates channel repertoire into her choice process model. The Heeter model focuses on ad-hoc choice, however, and does not predict premeditated behavior. The Webster and Lichty (1991) model of audience behavior predicts exposure based on audience factors and media factors. Audience factors are closely tied to structural patterns of audience availability (e.g., leisure time), and media factors are most influenced by programming options. Channel repertoire is implied by these programming options.

This study explores a previously unexplored, hypothetical relationship between channel repertoire and leisure time devoted to television. In addition, there are individual factors suggested by Webster and Lichty that differentiate programming options and channel repertoire. Perse, Ferguson, and McLeod (1994) developed a typology of channel repertoire that associates "cable" repertoire with a less passive audience. Specifically, this present study expects cable-channel repertoire to be higher among groups of viewers who spend much of their leisure time watching television.

### Leisure

Leisure time in America is growing rapidly (Cutler, 1990) and is most often associated with "easy" activities, like watching

television (Spring, 1993b). Television claims 30% of all leisure activities (Spring, 1993a), particularly among older people (Robinson, 1991) and the undereducated (Robinson, 1990).

Commitment to TV viewing and commitment to other activities are opposing forces in terms of time displacement. Time spent watching television is time not spent, for example, listening to the radio or taking a walk. Such displacement, however, does not account for total commitment to all activities because those people with little real or perceived leisure time will claim low commitment to television and low commitment to other activities.

Thus a four-cell grid can be constructed plotting TV use against other leisure time use. One person may watch many hours of TV and still find a great deal of time to pursue other activities. Another person may claim high TV commitment and low commitment to other leisure activities, or another could report their commitment to leisure the other way around. Finally, a person can be relatively uncommitted to any activities, either by choice or by time constraint.

This study expects to find a differential influence of leisure time on channel repertoire with regard to age and education.

#### Method

Procedure and sample. A random-digit-dialing telephone survey was conducted in Spring 1994 among adults living on-campus and off-campus in a university town in the Midwest. Trained interviewers completed 200 calls from a sample of 700. After

excluding business numbers and no answers, the response rate was 70%. The sample was 41.2% male and ranged in age from 18 - 84 ( $M = 28.57$ ,  $SD = 14.92$ ). Education was measured by category from "not a high school graduate" (=1) to "post-graduate/professional" (=5) with the middle category ("some college") accounting for 52.8% of the responses ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ).

Television leisure. Spring (1993b) has noted the difficulty in getting people to remember that they watch television in their leisure time. In this study, respondents indicated how many hours and minutes they viewed "yesterday." Television exposure ranged from 0 to 9 hours a day ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 2.49$ ). The national average is 15 hours per week, or 2.14 per day (Robinson, 1990). Because other activities were recorded in minutes, "television leisure" was converted to minutes ( $M = 181.87$ ,  $SD = 149.36$ ).

New technology use. Of the sample, 48.2% subscribed to cable television. Nearly two-thirds of the sample (66.3%) had access to a VCR where they lived. Of the sample, 74.4% had access to a remote control device where they lived.

Non-television leisure time. In addition to time spent viewing television, respondents were asked how many minutes per day they engaged in various activities: listening to music ( $M = 103.19$ ,  $SD = 112.54$ ), reading ( $M = 104.37$ ,  $SD = 81.24$ ), playing video games ( $M = 10.30$ ,  $SD = 30.55$ ), home computing ( $M = 29.31$ ,  $SD = 59.55$ ), and pursuing a hobby ( $M = 51.04$ ,

$SD = 66.85$ ). The total for "other leisure" ranged from 2 to 940 minutes ( $M = 300.10$ ,  $SD = 185.69$ ).

Total leisure. The sum of "other leisure" and "television leisure" was computed to estimate total leisure. The total ranged from 17 to 1000 minutes ( $M = 466.49$ ,  $SD = 219.67$ ). The median was 450 minutes, or 7.5 hours.

Leisure groups. Four groups were created by splitting TV leisure and other leisure at their median values. Of the valid cases ( $N=197$ ), Low TV/Low Other (=1) accounted for 24.4% ( $N=48$ ), Low TV/High Other (=2) accounted for 26.4% ( $N=52$ ), High TV/Low Other (=3) accounted for 25.4% ( $N=50$ ), and High TV/High Other (=4) accounted for 23.9% ( $N=47$ ). The coding arbitrarily ranked TV leisure as higher than other leisure.

Channel repertoire. Channel repertoire (CR) is defined as the number of channels that a respondent typically watches (Heeter, 1985). For this study, we used two CR measures developed by Perse, Ferguson and McLeod (1994). Broadcast channel repertoire (BCR) is the sum of the broadcast channels and the cable channels that are nearly identical to broadcast channels for which at least some response (in hours) was given using aided recall. These included network affiliates, independent stations, superstations (e.g., WTBS), and cable networks (e.g., USA Network). Broadcast channel repertoire represents exposure to channels that offer much the same content as network programming ("more of the same"). Broadcast channel repertoire had a possible range of 0 to 9 channels, given the capacity of the only cable system in the

sampling area during the survey. Broadcast channel repertoire ranged from 0 - 9 channels ( $\underline{M} = 4.16$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 2.18$ ).

Cable channel repertoire (CCR), on the other hand, is the sum of all cable networks for which at least some response (in hours) was given using aided recall. Cable channel repertoire reflects exposure to channels that offer more specialized content that differs from network programming (e.g., FNN, The Weather Channel, CNN, MTV, etc.). The possible range was from 0 to 35 channels, given the capacity of the only cable system in the sampling area during the survey. Cable channel repertoire ranged from 0 - 23 ( $\underline{M} = 4.47$ ,  $\underline{SD} = 4.97$ ).

Statistical procedure. The data were analyzed using correlations and oneway analysis of variance on SPSS. Age and education were used as covariates. Post-hoc procedures were used to determine which leisure groups differed.

#### Results

The coding of the four leisure groups was a measure of time spent with television. The correlation between leisure group and broadcast-channel repertoire was not significant ( $\underline{r} = .11$ ), but there was an association between leisure group and cable-channel repertoire ( $\underline{r} = .21$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ ).

A oneway analysis of variance in cable-channel repertoire among the leisure groups produced an  $\underline{F}(3, 191)$  ratio equal to 2.92 ( $\underline{p} < .05$ ). No statistical significance was found with an identical test on broadcast-channel repertoire ( $\underline{F}(3, 191) = 1.13$ ,  $\underline{p} = .32$ ). A variety of post-hoc tests (e.g., Duncan, Scheffe,



Student-Newman-Keuls, Tukey) showed that CCR for the "high TV/high other" group ( $M_4 = 5.89$ ) differed from the "low TV/low other" group ( $M_1 = 3.02$ ) at the .05 significance level. The mixed groups ( $M_2 = 4.11$  and  $M_3 = 4.96$ ) did not account for significant variance among the groups.

The covariates age and education also differentiated the groups. Age ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and education ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were both positively related to CCR, but neither correlated significantly with BCR. When both were tested before the effect of CCR, age and education combined to produce significant effects ( $F[2,191] = 3.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The effect of CCR remained significant ( $F[3,190] = 2.74$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Table 1 shows that age was the better demographic predictor and that CCR was the stronger media variable.

#### Discussion

This study found that people who spend the most time with TV are more likely to include cable channels in their viewing repertoire. This relationship between type of leisure and type of channel repertoire could not entirely be explained by television viewing itself because the correlations between BCR and viewing ( $r = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and between CCR and viewing ( $r = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were nearly the same.

The immediate contribution of this exploratory study is to support the hypothesis that people who are active in general, at least in terms of leisure time, have larger (perhaps "more

active") channel repertoires. This "total activity" variable may eventually find its way into a larger model of program choice. It is certainly an individual-level variable, rather than a structural or systemic one.

What implications for public opinion programming can be argued for an active audience that is influenced by the choices made prevalent by cable television? The argument takes the form of the following observations, which are considered here only as four post-hoc assumptions:

1. Widely-viewed cable television channels frequently represent less conventional and more trivialized information than broadcast channels.
2. Widely-viewed broadcast television channels have larger news-gathering organizations, more expertise in presenting, and a less avoidable schedule for public affairs programming.

For example, a viewer of Good Morning America on ABC will receive a mix of information and serious public affairs information along with entertainment that is less salient to public opinion. On the other hand, an active viewer who chooses cable programming at the same time of day can select straight information (CNN), unadorned public affairs (C-SPAN), or pure entertainment (MTV or ESPN). While it is true that a passive viewer will watch sports and entertainment, such an audience seems less likely to seek specific channels that are different from the channel that was "on" the night before (presumably broadcast-type

local network affiliates). Viewers of broadcast-type channels seem more likely to receive their "dose" of serious information than more selective viewers.

3. Highly active viewers, who are more apt to spend time with cable channels, are less likely to watch messages on broadcast channels.
4. Sophisticated programming mechanisms for the examination of public life (debates, investigatory reporting, press forums) -- typically available on broadcast channels -- will receive declining attention from viewers who will be increasingly distracted by trivialized programming.

These final two assumptions are the most speculative of the four presented. The findings of the exploratory study add tentative support to the idea that active viewers are avoiding broadcast channels. Previous studies have shown that viewers with access to VCRs and cable television exhibit less passive viewing styles (e.g., Ferguson, 1992).

Further research is needed to determine whether or not there is a subtle erosion of public attention to serious information, one that is encouraged by trivial information typified by the special channels found in the multichannel cornucopia. Observers such as Postman (1985) argue strongly that public discourse is dying under the weight of spreading trivialization of information. Certainly the mere availability of C-SPAN does not mean many are actually watching it.

There are limitations to the exploratory findings here. This study used telephone questionnaires to enhance sample size.

✓ Robinson (1981) argues that time diaries are a superior technique because suggested categories inflate respondents' estimates to those activities. ✓ Other methods use reminder devices to increase response accuracy (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Leisure has been studied for other purposes, such as testing the displacement theory (Mutz, Roberts & van Vuuren, 1993) and describing audience behavior (Robinson, 1981). This present study falls somewhere between testing theory and describing behavior. The goal was to explore the antecedent behavior of audience availability. Audience availability is a concept linked to a particular program choice, whereas viewer activity describes the likelihood that an individual will exercise a greater range of choice when given the opportunity.

Future research should explore the gratifications of leisure time with television. Perse and Ferguson (1993) found that channel changing itself has an impact on television viewing satisfaction. New technology variables may further enhance the use of leisure time. While the ramifications for public opinion programming are hardly certain, the data suggest that active viewers are more influenced by their attention to cable television than by more traditional venues for public opinion discussion.

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Table 1

## Leisure Group Differences

WILKS' LAMBDA (U-STATISTIC) AND UNIVARIATE F-RATIO  
WITH 3 AND 191 DEGREES OF FREEDOM

VARIABLE	WILKS' LAMBDA	F	SIGNIFICANCE
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BCR	0.98175	1.183	0.3173
CCR	0.95616	2.919	0.0353
AGE	0.93898	4.137	0.0072
EDU	0.99755	0.156	0.9257

BCR is Broadcast-Channel Repertoire  
CCR is Cable-Channel Repertoire

The four leisure groups were:

Low TV / Low Other  
Low TV / High Other  
High TV / Low Other  
High TV / High Other