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Book Reviews

Huysmans, F., De Haan J., and Van den Broek, A. (2004). *Achter de schermen. Een kwart eeuw lezen, luisteren, kijken en internetten* [Behind the screen. Twenty-five years of reading, listening, watching, and Internet use in The Netherlands]. Den Haag: SCP. ISBN 90-377-0129-9 (297 pp.)

“There is a ... need for more analytic thinking about, and above all more comprehensive and critical inquiry into, communication phenomena and their relation to the way societies function.” (MacBride, 1981: 223). This well-known, although somewhat dated statement of the so-called MacBride commission published in the early 1980s, proves to be prevalent today in a variety of ways. First of all, in providing policy makers and ordinary citizens with insights into the development of communication media within modern society by means of social and/or cultural indicators, and related statistics. Secondly, in terms of the ongoing task of providing fellow researchers with information on development and trends in media and communication in order to solve the problem of designing relevant projects of current communication research.

One of the prerequisites of successful communication research, of course, is the proper documentation and discussion of results, findings and insights of previous research efforts. How else can one learn from previous successes, and profit from past failures? How else are we able to know about relevant developments and trends, which are urgently needed if we are to design our research projects in an adequate manner?

In contrast to these rather self-evident, or even common-place statements, comprehensive overviews of inquiries into the development of communication phenomena and their relation to the way the Dutch society functions have been essentially lacking. Despite the impressive amount of money spent on Dutch communication research – academic or administrative – over the past twenty-five years, comprehensive overviews of developments in media provision, media equipment, and media exposure, and thus, comprehensive overviews of trends in media use have not emerged.

The only recently published study *Behind the screen* (“Achter de schermen”) by Frank Huysmans, Jos de Haan, and Andries van den Broek, all of them affiliated with the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP), has changed this situation significantly. As the Dutch media landscape underwent far-reaching changes in the period between 1975 and 2000, this study focuses “... on the impact of media diversification on the media use of the Dutch since 1975, looking in turn at printed media,

audiovisual media and digital media.” (267). The hardware changes of the Dutch media landscape in the last quarter of the century include the introduction of color television, hi-fi stereo music installations, video recorders, and personal computers with Internet access in Dutch households. The software, or organizational, changes in this period include, among other things, the introduction of commercial radio and television. In regard to three media types – print, AV, and digital media – a distinction is made between media provision, ownership of media equipment, media reach and the time devoted to media exposure.

The authors introduce these concepts thoroughly as follows: “The media provision encompasses the total spectrum of news, background information, leisure, music, etc. Ownership of media equipment relates to the presence of equipment and information carriers in the household. Together, the media provision and media equipment offer a range of options that could not possibly be fully utilized by every individual, and thus choices have to be made. Media reach indicates what proportion of the population uses a particular medium. The time use measure indicates the duration of that use.” (ibid.). This proves to be convenient, as the authors explicitly aim at providing “... policy-makers with a comprehensive overview of the size and profile of the groups using the various media, as well as of changes therein.” (267).

Of course, it is not the right place here, to go too far into the details of this indeed comprehensive overview that is especially intended to close an existing information gap regarding media use in the Netherlands. However, some of the main results will be presented here, since they reveal some expected as well as some surprising trends in media provision, media equipment, and media use. The data, mainly Dutch and European-based studies such as time-budgeting studies, refer to the Dutch population older than 12 years of age.

- The decline in the use of printed media by the Dutch continued during the whole period under investigation, 1975–2000. Despite just a gradual reduction in the number of newspapers “... fewer and fewer households take a newspaper regularly ... and book sales overall have shown a marked decline.” (269). Time spent on reading books, magazines, and newspapers was reduced from an average of 6.1 hours per week in 1975 to an average of 3.9 hours per week in 2000, accounting for 21% (33%) of the total time spent on media and ICT use in 2000 (cf. Table 9.1: 199).
- In regard to AV media, there was an explosive growth in the number of televised program hours during the period 1975–2000. “Leaving aside foreign broadcasters and broadcasters focusing on specific target groups, the number of program hours on Dutch television doubled within the space of a few years.” (270). This growth in AV program-

ming was accompanied by a considerable increase in the amount of technically advanced AV equipment: “The single black-and-white television set was replaced by one or more color TVs with remote control, generally linked to a video recorder, and towards the end of the period increasingly frequently a DVD player, and possibly high-quality sound equipment.” (ibid.). The time spent on TV lags behind the enormous expansion in supply and ownership of AV equipment: “The largest increase in TV use took place in the period up to 1985, i. e., before the increase in the number of (foreign, commercial) broadcasters. The time people now spend watching commercial channels has therefore mainly been at the expense of the time spent watching the public broadcasters.” (ibid.). Time spent on watching TV increased from an average of 10.2 hours per week in 1975 to an average of 12.4 hours per week in 2000. In short, the amount of time spent on watching TV in 2000 represents 66% of the total time spent on media and ICT use (cf. Table 9.1: 199).

- Ownership and use of personal computers and Internet in the period 1975–2000 show a somewhat different development in the Netherlands: “The breakthrough of the PC was driven by its use as a gateway to games, accounting systems and desktop publishing applications. This was later followed by the rise of the Internet; within the space of a few years around the turn of the millennium, the number of Internet users rocketed.”(271). In the Netherlands, as well as in the rest of the world, young people, higher income groups and the highly educated led the way in the purchase of PCs and the use of the Internet. Time spent on computer, Internet and e-mail use increased from an average of 0.1 hours per week in 1985 to an average of 1.8 hours per week in 2000; this accounts for 9% of the total time spent on media and ICT in 2000 (cf. Table 9.1: 199).

One of the surprising developments with regard to media supply, media equipment and media use in the Netherlands – as depicted by the study of Huysmans, De Haan, and Van den Broek (cf. Huysmans and De Haan, 2002) – can be characterized using the following three facts:

- Whereas media supply and media equipment within Dutch households increased considerably in the period 1975–2000, the time spent on media use in general essentially remained stable in this period. In 2000 the average time spent on media use in the Netherlands amounts to 18.7 hours per week (1975: 18.5 hours).
- In 2000 more than 40% of the total leisure time of the Dutch population (45 hours per week) is devoted to the use of the media and ICT, i. e., on average 18.7 hours per week.

- In 2000 approximately 66% of the total time devoted to media use was spent on watching television (1975: 55%). In 2000, watching TV amounts to an average of 12.4 hours per week (1975: 10.2 hours), which makes up 27% of the total leisure time of the Dutch population older than 12 years.

These findings are very much in line with Livingstone's (2002) conclusions, since one of the probably central results of her study on *Young People and New Media* reads as follows: "Despite all the hype about new media displacing old media, for most children television remains far and away the most popular medium ..." (60). Is it possible that we are still overestimating the impact of ICT and New Media on our everyday time budgets?

All in all, it is evident that the present study successfully closes the information gap with regard to trends in media supply and equipment, media exposure and media use in the Netherlands. This is managed against the background of recent societal changes within the Dutch society, while the book also explores comparisons with (data from) European Union member states. It is thus a useful publication, not just for policy-makers but also for the community of communication researchers seeking a comprehensive and critical inquiry into communication phenomena and their relation to the way the Dutch society functions.

References

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Schrøder, K., Drotner, K., Kline, S., and Murray C. (2003). *Researching Audiences*. London: Arnold. ISBN 0-340-76274-8 (422 pp.)

Most of us, even those of us who claim research methodology as an area of expertise, do not read methods textbooks for pleasure. Distaste towards this genre of literature is a reaction to the generally technical