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Occupational position and consumption of news: A research note

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Abstract

This study explored in what way and to what extent people's occupational position corresponds with the consumption of news and the exposure to political content offered by the traditional mass media TV, radio and newspaper. Empirical data from the 'Media use in the Netherlands, 2000' survey among a representative sample of the Dutch population (Konig, et al., 2005) (N=825) were used. Occupational position was conceptualized as a situational characteristic that indicates different perceptions of people's social context in which diverse aspects of media use may vary. Several characteristics of occupational position were used to indicate employees engagement in the public domain and the size of their public social capital respectively. News was understood as representation of the public domain. Some central indicators of the structure of relevancies, that play a central role in social action theory in general and the 'media use as social action' approach to communication research especially were included as moderating factors.

As was the case in a previous project (Nelissen et al., 2008), the influence of the occupational position in general and the perceived amount of public social capital (or: social network) especially on media use, i.e. consumption of news as well as the exposure to political media content, revealed to be evident. Findings can be interpreted as being in line with the central assumptions on 'audience activity' of audience-centred models in communication research in general and the 'media use as social action' approach especially (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 2001, 2004). It is the subjectively perceived social context, here indicated by occupational position as well as the subjectively held structure of relevancies that are central predictors of media use.

Keywords: occupational position, media use, news media, political content, public domain, social capital.

Theoretical background and previous research

Years ago, Dennis McQuail (1969) pointed out that media use in modern western societies is a much more common, *normal* phenomenon than for instance having a job. Almost everybody uses mass media and their messages and services more or less continuously, whereas only a fraction of the population has a job, and, moreover, they do so just for a certain, limited period of their life (cf. Huysmans *et al.*, 2004).

Both media use and employment, evidently, are important elements of people's everyday life. The question to what extent the fact of being employed and having a job does have consequences for media equipment and media use, is obviously an important one - though it has not always been addressed in a convincing manner as occupational position is often used as a demographic factor along with age, gender, education and income. We conceptualize occupational position as a situational characteristic that indicates different perceptions of people's social context in which diverse aspects of media use may vary. Are

there differences between people who have and who do not have a job regarding their equipment with and their use of communication media? Do media exposure, the motivation for media use, and , for instance, the orientation towards different issues of everyday life vary systematically along the lines of the occupational position? In an earlier empirical study, expectations about the relationship between *employment status* and several aspects of *media use* were derived from two theoretical perspectives (Nelissen, Konig & Renckstorf, 2008).

First, *employment* - according to Schelsky (1965: 235) - indicates that people who have a job are engaged in the *public domain*, whereas people without a job are more or less solely engaged in the *private domain*. Engagement in the public domain can be expected to bring about special orientation towards media of public communication and special attention to issues of the public domain (such as 'politics'). Consequently, the exposure of *those having a job* to media content on public issues should be higher than the exposure of *non-employed* to these issues. The empirical results of our previous study, however, showed hardly any differences between employed and non employed people with regard to different aspects of their equipment with media, their media use and their thematic preferences. The equipment with TV, newspapers and internet, as well as the media exposure did not differ between employed and non employed respondents. Moreover, issues of the *public domain* ('politics') and issues of the *private domain* ('health') got about the same attention from both categories of respondents (Nelissen *et al.*, 2008).

We explained the apparent lack of variation in media equipment, media use and thematic preferences by the fact that the category of *non employed* consisted of people who are no longer employed but were employed in the past, and people who are not yet employed. Ex-workers might still execute 'old' action strategies regarding media use (by still using 'routines' or 'patterns') and their attention to the public domain, whereas not yet employed people may be anticipating on their future employment and may so get acquainted with the public domain in advance. All in all, having a job turned out *not* to be a relevant factor in explaining differences in media equipment, media use and thematic preferences.

Second, *employment* means that one is part of an *organization* - in the context of which employed people make up additional *communication networks*. In accordance with Bourdieu (1984), access to and participation in these networks can be conceptualized as *public social capital* (cf. Franzen & Freitag, 2007). Because participation in these networks requires conversation, participants need to find topics to talk about. That is, they need to establish common ground, which media content on public affairs may provide (cf. DiMaggio, 1987). Therefore, we assumed that exposure to media content on *public affairs* (such as 'politics'), correlates with public social capital. Furthermore, we expected differences in media equipment, media use and thematic preferences among the members of an organization that are related to their *position within the organization*, such as differences between 'executives' and 'non-executives', and differences on the base of *economic* or *cultural occupational status*. It is for example, conceivable that 'executives' experience a stronger need to participate in organizational networks than non-executives, and thus pay more attention to current *public affairs* in the media.

Empirical data from the above mentioned study showed that *occupational position* really predicts attention to the *public domain* (cf. fig. 1). As expected, 'executives' expose themselves more to public affairs media content ('politics') and show higher personal relevance regarding politics, especially as they manage more employees. Moreover, subjectively perceived *private social capital* increases the attention and exposure to private ('health') as well as public affairs ('politics') media content. Evidently, these findings - stressing the role of social networks, or public as well as private 'social capital' in Bourdieu's terms - support the notion of the social embeddedness of media use (Westerik *et al.* 2006, 2007).

The previous study, thus, revealed that [1] the *objective employment position* as such, i.e., having a job or not, did *not* influence media equipment, media use and thematic preferences in a relevant manner, as virtually no differences were found between employed and non-employed respondents. [2] The *occupational position* of respondents (such as being 'executive' or 'non-executive', perceiving a certain amount of 'public social capital'), however, *did* matter when it comes to media use of *political content*, and [3], even variables such as perceived 'private social capital' turned out to be of some importance in predicting exposure to media content on *health issues* and - though to a smaller degree - on *politics* as well (cf. fig.1).

----- insert Figure 1 about here -----

Research questions

These findings lead us to take a closer look at the relation between *occupational position* and the *consumption of news*. Would the use of news turn out to be related to occupational position in a similar manner? News is hereby understood as representation of the *public domain*, perhaps even the most prominent example of public domain and *current public affairs* media content. Therefore, different patterns and levels of attention and exposure to news and to political content in different media (TV, radio and newspaper) among employed respondents were analyzed. The main question was whether different aspects of one's occupational position predict exposure to different media content directly focused on the public domain, like news - and political information in general. In the following two research questions will be addressed.

RQ [1]: To what extent does occupational position correspond with the consumption of news in TV, radio and newspapers ?

RQ [2]: To what extent does occupational position correspond with exposure to political content in TV, radio and newspapers?

Method

Data

To address these research questions we used empirical data from the 'Media use in the Netherlands, 2000' survey among a representative sample of the Dutch population (Konig, et al., 2005) (N=825). In this survey research project a two-stage stratified random sample of the Dutch population, anno 2000, was used (Konig et al., 2005). The cooperation rate was 43.2 percent, resulting in 825 completed interviews. The respondents were interviewed at home. The distribution of marital status and age in the sample were slightly different compared to the population. Married and middle-aged persons were slightly overrepresented in the sample (Konig et al., 2005).

Measurements

Independent variables: Occupational position

Several characteristics of occupational position were used to indicate employees engagement in the public domain and the size of their public social capital respectively.

Executive status was measured by the number of people that are managed and indicates the public social capital of employees. *Working hours* indicates the ratio between employees engagement within de public and within the private domain. *Cultural occupational status* and *economic occupational status* denote the cultural and economic dimension of one's occupational position. The economic dimension of occupational status refers to the extent to which occupational activities are focused on financial and economic affairs (Jacobs, 2000). The cultural dimension of occupational status indicates the level of linguistic competence, cultural knowledge and creative and artistic skills that are needed to fulfil a profession. The occupation of the respondents was first coded using the Classification of Occupations used by the Dutch Central Agency for Statistics (CBS, 1985). This code was then transformed in a score for *cultural occupational status* and a score for *economic occupational status* using the method developed by Ganzeboom, De Graaf en Kalmijn (1987).

Dependent variables: exposure to news media and to political media content.

To measure the exposure to media news and to political media content we combined several data about media exposure (see table 1). We constructed scales for time spent watching TV news, listening to radio news and reading newspapers. Besides that we developed scales for exposure to political media content on TV, radio and newspapers.

----- insert Table 1 about here -----

How employees watch TV news was measured by several items mentioned in Table2. Factor analysis showed that we could distinguish two dimensions. The first dimension was interpreted as *attentiveness during TV newscasts* (Crombach's $\alpha=0,71$). The second dimension was interpreted as *TV news mindedness* (Crombach's $\alpha=0,80$). For both concepts a scale was constructed.

----- insert Table 2 about here -----

Moderating variables: Relevancies such as political attitudes

Some central indicators of the structure of relevancies, that play a central role in social action theory in general and the 'media use as social action' approach to communication research especially (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 2004) were included as well. Political attitudes are measured using items summed up in Table 3. Factor analysis was used for data-reduction purposes. We didn't use list wise deletion as the missing values could not be considered as missing completely at random (MCAR) (Little's MCAR test: $\chi^2 = 960,23$; $df = 859$; $p = 0,01$). Therefore we imputed values for incomplete cases (79 out of 825) with the help of the EM algorithm (Pigott, 2001). Questions 19 and 20 were excluded from the analysis because of low communalities ($< .20$) and factor loadings ($< .35$). Question 18 was excluded because of factor loadings of approximately equal strength.

Factor 1 represents *political cynicism* (Crombach's $\alpha=0,90$) and factor 2 indicates *perceived personal relevance of politics* (Crombach's $\alpha=0,72$).

----- insert Table 3 about here -----

Analysis

In order to explore the correspondence between occupational position and media use, i.e. consumption of news and political media content, we regressed different aspects of occupational position and some control variables; exposure to television, radio and the papers, education, gender, age, household size, and income. Here too, we used the EM-algorithm to impute values for missing data (Little's MCAR test: $\chi^2 = 356.55$; $df = 172$; $p < 0,01$).

Results.

RQ [1]: Occupational position and the consumption of news on TV, radio and newspapers?

Our first research question was: *To what extent does occupational position correspond with the consumption of news in TV, radio and newspapers?* In order to find an empirically based answer, we first look at the correspondence between occupational position and the consumption of news via the media TV, radio and newspaper, as a current representation of the public domain (see table 4). Exposure to news on the radio seems directly linked to executive status. When executives give guidance to more employees, what is understood here as an indication of a higher level of public social capital, they tend to listen to the news more often. Moreover, the executive status also has an indirect effect on exposure to news via television and newspapers through personal relevance of politics. And finally, newspaper readership correlates negatively with cultural professional status, that is, employees with a lower cultural professional status tend to read the papers more often.

----- insert Table 4 about here -----

Executive status has a direct and an indirect (through personal relevance of politics) effect on people's orientation towards TV news. Executives directing more subordinates show a higher score on TV news mindedness. The economic dimension of the occupational position has a negative influence on TV news mindedness: employees with a profession scoring high on the economic occupational status tend to care less about TV news. There appears to be no direct effect of employee characteristics on the level of viewer attentiveness during newscasts. There is, however in indirect effect of executive status through personal relevance of politics.

RQ [2]: Occupational position and exposure to political media content.

The second research question was: *To what extent does occupational position correspond with exposure to political content in TV, radio and newspapers?* Exposure to political content via television and radio is directly and indirectly predicted by executive status, whereas exposure to political content via newspaper, however, is predicted only indirectly; cf. table 4). Employees who give guidance to more subordinates expose themselves more often to broadcasted political media content. In addition, the amount of working hours relates positively to exposure to political content via the radio.

Discussion.

As was the case in the previous project (Nelissen, Konig & Renckstorf, 2008), the influence of the *occupational position* in general and the perceived amount of public *social capital* (or:

social network) especially on media use, i.e. *consumption of news* as well as the *exposure to political media content* revealed to be evident. The social embeddedness of media use (cf. Westerik, et al. 2007), thus, was indicated once again. Hence, the overall most influential single factor turned out to be respondents' *personal relevance of politics* which is an indicator of the personal structure of relevancies; with the exception of exposure to news via *radio* (were the regression coefficient was not significant) this factor was identified as being directly and positively related to news consumption and exposure to political content via the media TV, radio and newspaper (cf. table 4). These findings can be interpreted as being much in line with the central assumptions on 'audience activity' of audience-centred models in communication research in general (cf. McQuail & Windahl, 1993) and the 'media use as social action' approach especially (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 2001, 2004). Here, the media audience members are seen as 'actively' shaping their media use – in relation their subjectively perceived social situation and in accordance with their subjectively held structure of relevancies. Media use, thus, is conceived as social activity, i.e. something more or less self-consciously created by the audience member her/himself, and not as something imposed on her/him. It is this picture that emerges from our empirical study on the relation between occupational position and consumption of news and political media content. Next to age, gender and education, it is the subjectively perceived social context, here indicated by the amount of *public social capital* (or: social networks) as well as the subjectively held *structure of relevancies* that are central predictors of media use.

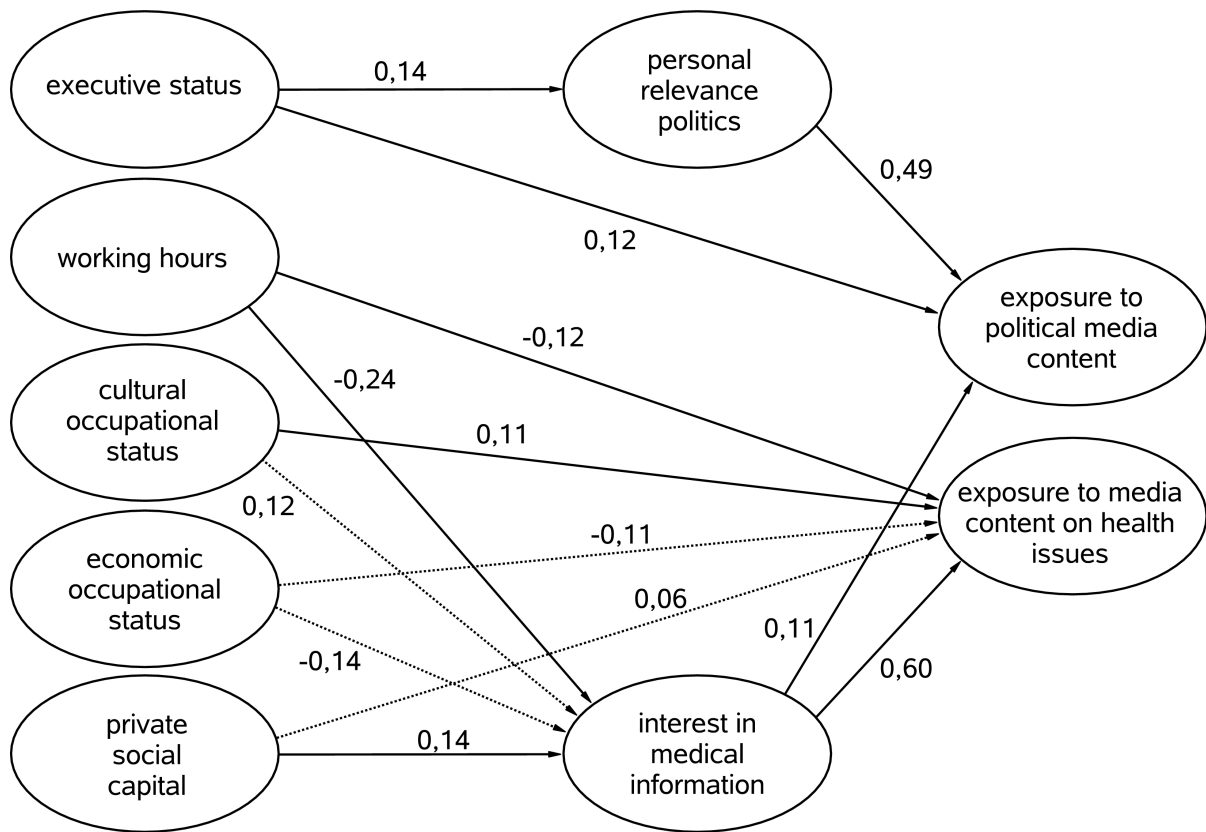
The majority of our regression equations show a poor explained variance. In part, this may be caused by the well known phenomenon of TV news as "*main source*" (Robinson & Levy, 1986) for daily informational input. If people vary relatively little with regard to the amount of news use, there is little to explain. However, our data were collected in 2000. Since then the Internet has grown enormously as a news provider. Television may thus have become less of a main source since then. Future research might therefore show better explained variance.

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Figure 1. Occupational position and media use: relations between exposure to public ('politics') and private ('health') media content and several characteristics of occupational position of employed respondents; standardized regression parameters (Nelissen et al., 2008)



<i>Table 1: Exposure to News media and to political media content</i>	
News media	Political media content
TV <i>How often do you watch news broadcasts on TV?</i>	TV <i>How often do you watch political broadcasts?</i> <i>How often do you watch current affairs programmes?</i> <i>How often do you watch discussion programmes?</i> (Crombach's $\alpha=0.85$)
Radio <i>How often do you listen to news broadcasts on the radio?</i>	Radio <i>How often do you listen to political broadcasts?</i> <i>How often do you listen to current affairs programmes?</i> (Crombach's $\alpha=0.75$)
Newspapers <i>How much time do you spend on reading newspapers?</i>	Newspapers <i>How often do you read about politics?</i> <i>How often do you read about foreign affairs?</i> (Crombach's $\alpha=0.84$)

Table 2: *Factor analysis of attention to TV news*

	Communi- nality	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. While I watch television news my mind wanders about.	0.47	-0.70	0.04
2. While I watch television news I talk about other things.	0.36	-0.61	0.02
3. While I am watching the television news, I read for example a newspaper, a book or a magazine.	0.31	-0.56	0.02
4. I watch the television news attentive from beginning to end.	0.51	0.53	0.33
5. I plan my evening so I won't miss the television news.	0.70	-0.07	0.86
6. I keep track with time not to miss television news.	0.64	0.06	0.78

Note: Oblique rotation; percentage explained variance = 49.8%; KMO = 0.73; correlation between factors = 0.37; n = 810.

Table 3: *Factor analysis: opinions about politics.*

	Communi- nality	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. You can not really trust politicians	0.54	0.73	0.00
2. Local politicians don't care about what people think.	0.50	0.72	0.06
3. Political parties are only interested in peoples votes. not in their opinions.	0.53	0.71	-0.06
4. You can not really trust local politicians	0.47	0.70	0.06
5. I do not think that public officials care much about what people like me think.	0.52	0.70	-0.05
6. Most politicians are profiteers.	0.47	0.66	-0.07
7. Once they are elected members of parliament lose tough with people.	0.39	0.65	0.10
8. People like me have no say at all in what the government does.	0.48	0.64	-0.15
9. Local politicians don't stick to their election promises.	0.37	0.63	0.13
10. Politics is just like a horserace: it is about winning and losing.	0.32	0.56	-0.03
11. Politicians try to solve the most important issues in society.			
Politici proberen de belangrijkste problemen in de samenleving op te lossen	0.30	-0.54	0.03
12. Politicians take care of a fair distribution of welfare in society.	0.22	-0.48	-0.07
13. By voting I can influence what politicians decide about important issues.	0.30	-0.48	0.16
14. In politics the most important question is which party is the biggest.	0.21	0.44	-0.06
15. To what extent are you interested in politics?	0.67	0.01	0.82
16. I always keep myself informed about political developments.	0.40	0.07	0.65
17. To what extent do you think information about politics is useful to you?	0.40	0.19	-0.56
18. Sometimes politics and what the government does seems so complicated that a person like me can not really understand what is going on.	-	-	-
19. Politicians decide about issues that are important to me.	-	-	-
20. By watching the television news, I can see if politicians pursue a good policy.	-	-	-

Note: Oblique rotation; percentage explained variance = 41.7%; KMO = 0.92; correlation between factors = -0.27; n = 825 (746 complete cases).

Table 4

Regression of the use of news and political media content on work related and control variables (standardized regression parameters)

	personal relevance politics	political cynicism	exposure to news via			TV news mindedness	attentive TV news watching	exposure to political content via		
			TV	radio	newspaper			TV	radio	newspaper
personal relevance politics			.20*	.06	.20*	.17*	.12*	.45*	.26*	.45*
political cynicism			-.05	-.01	.04	-.06	-.13*	-.03	-.07	-.06
executive status	.13*	-.05	.09	.12*	-.01	.15*	.06	.10*	.09*	.07
working hours	-.04	.05	-.08	.03	-.01	-.03	-.01	-.05	.13*	-.02
cultural occupational status	.09	-.06	.00	-.07	-.14*	.11	.08	.03	.02	-.08
economic occupational status	-.04	.01	-.08	.02	.03	-.20*	-.13	-.08	-.01	-.00
exposure to TV	.01	.09*	.25*	.01	.03	.13*	.03	.11*	-.01	-.05
exposure to radio	.08	.02	.01	.31*	.01	.05	-.04	.02	.01	-.05
number of televisions	-.04	.06	.08	.05	-.14*	-.03	-.02	-.03	.00	-.06
number of newspapers	.15*	.05	.01	-.08	.32*	.02	-.02	.10*	.02	.23*
education	.19*	-.23*	-.07	.07	.12*	.02	-.09	-.02	.06	.13*
gender ^a	.14*	.01	.01	.08	.04	-.04	.06	.01	.12*	.07
age	.14*	.05	.04	.05	.23*	.12*	-.03	.13*	.18*	.04
number of household members	.02	-.04	-.08	.02	.01	.03	.02	-.10*	.07	.01
income	.11*	-.10*	.06	-.03	.03	.02	.02	.03	-.07	.06
R ²	.18	.13	.15	.15	.30	.10	.05	.32	.24	.45

Note. N = 491.

^a Dummy with reference category female.

* $p < .05$.