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## 17 Sensationalism in television news

### A review

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Sensationalism in television news is frequently discussed in public debate. In most instances, it is conceived as a negative by-product of market-driven journalism. Market-driven journalism is believed to have pressurized newsmakers to use sensationalism as a means to attract the attention of the audience. Against this background, an increasing number of academic studies have paid attention to sensationalism, especially in the area of television news. This chapter provides a review of these studies. The review starts with a historical account of the way in which the academic concept of sensationalism has evolved over the past decades. Next, the causes of sensationalism in television news are discussed. Finally, the focus is on the consequences of sensationalism for news viewers, considering the informative function of news. This review provides us with the opportunity to identify the questions that remain to be solved in order to build a theory of sensationalism. This chapter can therefore also be seen as a starting point for further research on sensationalism in television news.

### 17.1 Introduction

On the eve of his departure, Tony Blair made a stinging attack on sensationalist media in a speech about his ten years as prime-minister of Great Britain. Blair argued that the changing context in which communication takes place in the 21st century has led to a more intense form of competition: “The result is a media that increasingly and to a dangerous degree is driven by ‘impact’. Impact is what matters. It is all that can distinguish, can arise above the clamour, can get noticed. Impact gives competitive edge. Of course the accuracy of a story counts. But it is secondary to impact” (Blair, 2007).

The speech of Blair is just one of the many examples in which news reporting has been criticized over the past decades. Already in 1992, US journalist Carl Bernstein noticed: “For more than fifteen years we have been moving away from real journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid info-tainment in which lines between Oprah and Phil [...], between the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, are too often indistinguishable” (1992, p. 24). In a nutshell, these critics argue that the ever increasing competition on the news market has given rise to a phenomenon that might best be labelled as ‘sensationalism’. Market-driven journalism is believed to have pressurized newsmakers to fight for the attention of the audience. Sensational features are believed to be capable of attracting the

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audience's attention. Consequently, sensationalism in news is expected to increase (e.g., Adams, 1978; McManus, 1994).

Blair worried about the increase in sensationalism, because he expected sensationalism to have an impact on public life. Many journalists, politicians, and news critics share Tony Blair's concerns (cf. Bernstein, 1992; Fortuyn, 2000; Gore, 2007). Citizens need information to be able to monitor the democratic system in their country. Blair presumed that the use of sensational news features would push important and objective information away, which would cause problems when informing the public. In other words, sensationalism disturbs the informative function of news. Blair concluded that the damaged relationship between public life and the media had to be repaired, because it reduced the capacity of citizens in taking the right decisions in the right spirit for the future (Blair, 2007).

Public discussions about sensationalism in news media have served as inspiration for academic research on this topic. In the past decades, sensationalism gained substantial attention in communication research. In this context, researchers mostly focused on sensationalism in television news. This makes sense, considering the function of television news in viewer's every day life. Although internet is becoming an increasingly important source of news, television news may still be acknowledged as a main source of the day's important events to the public (Groothues, 2004).

This chapter provides a review of studies on sensationalism in television news. It aims at the identification of questions about sensationalism that remain to be answered in order to build a theory of sensationalism. The overview is centred on three questions: what is sensationalism, what are the causes of sensationalism in television news, and what are the consequences of sensationalism for news viewers, considering the informative function of news?

## 17.2 The concept of sensationalism

### 17.2.1 Historical background

The concept of sensationalism has a long history (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Grabe, Zhou & Barnett, 2001). In their review of the concept, Grabe et al. (2001) noted that sensationalism has already been traced in the course of the late 1500s. From this moment onwards, public attacks on sensationalism have become a periodic ritual. The authors mentioned discussions about the penny press in the 1830s and yellow journalism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century; hence well before the rise of television journalism.

In 1833, the first successful penny paper, the *New York Sun*, appeared in the United States. This poor man's newspaper tended to be highly sensational. The focus of the articles was on local events and on news about violence. Moreover, most of the content was flippant and trivial (Emery, 1962). A few years later, a new penny newspaper emerged, the *Herald*. It was comparable to the *Sun* in using sensational material, but some new features were added. Probably the most obvious was the introduction of an aggressive style of journalism, which was adopted by a large number of penny papers in the following years. Although vulgarity, cheapness, and spuriousness remained in penny press papers, a few years after their launch, editors began to offer more significant informa-

tion in penny papers, causing a temporarily reduced criticism on sensationalism (Emery, 1962).

A second wave of discussions about sensationalism in newspapers emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with the development of yellow journalism. Smythe (2003) outlined the rise of yellow journalism, created by the competition between newspapers. The increasing availability of newspapers through lower prices made it necessary to attract the attention of large numbers of readers. Particularly low-income readers, for instance labourers and immigrants, became interesting new customers. Yellow journalists tried to make their newspapers more attractive by, for instance, emphasizing on crime and vice, by the use of large typefaces, and by an increasing amount of illustrations. Moreover, events were routinely overdramatized. Smythe argued that because of these characteristics, the yellow press would never be a long-lasting, successful attribute to journalism. However, as Kaplan (2008) noted: “yellow journalism was a precursor to sensationalism elsewhere in the media.”

Davis and McLeod (2003) did not focus on a particular period in their research on sensational newspaper stories. Instead, they studied the phenomenon over time. Davis and McLeod selected newspaper stories from eight different countries between 1700 and 2001, and divided this time period into six sub-periods. Twelve categories of sensational news, for example, murder / physical assault, robbery / vandalism, rape / sexual assault, were defined to analyse the appearance of sensationalist topics over the years. Then, the number of stories in each category was counted for each of the six different periods. The results showed that the same general topics emerged in news stories over time. This suggests that sensationalist topics do not appear on the basis of time or local cultural values (Davis & McLeod, 2003). However, this result does not imply that sensationalism has maintained the same level throughout the years. Fluctuations in use of sensational features can be distinguished, as discussions about the penny press and yellow journalism have shown.

### 17.2.2 Sensationalism and evolutionary theory

Periods of public discussion about sensationalism have in common that sensationalism has been viewed with disdain time after time. Nevertheless, sensationalism never disappeared completely from news media. One might wonder why sensational news stories interest people over time and place. An explanation can be found in human evolutionary theory. Shoemaker (1996) argued that people, as a result of evolutionary developed human habit, have become ‘hardwired’ to monitor the world around them. They routinely survey their environment for deviant or unusual things, because these pose potential threats. Moreover, people's emotions may be aroused by negative or deviant information, which may improve performance in case this information proves indicative of a dangerous situation (cf. Lang, 1985).

Although our modern western societies are probably far more secure than our ancestor's worlds, people still try to detect threats by following the news, in particular aspects of the news that are generally defined as ‘sensational’. For instance, people pay a lot of attention to stories about crimes, natural disasters, or deviant political ideas. In addition, David and McLeod (2003) argued that, next to survival, reproduction is an important factor to explain people's preferences for news that is generally defined as ‘sensational’. From an evolutionary perspective, reproductive success is important to

humans. For that reason, not only negative or deviant news but also news with a sexual content attracts attention.

To summarize, from evolutionary theory it may be argued that the human brain has become adapted to the task of scanning for information related to survival and reproduction. For this reason, evolutionary theory has been invoked to explain why sensationalism in news stories has such a long history (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Shoemaker, 1996).

### 17.2.3 Sensationalism in television news: Development of the concept

The phenomenon that is labelled 'sensationalism' in this chapter has also been studied under other headings. For instance, Grabe, Zhou, Lang, and Bolls (2000) wrote about tabloid news. Graber (1994) talked about the presentation of news stories as infotainment, and Scott and Gobetz (1992) made a distinction between hard news and soft news, the latter of which they defined as news that is not really news. Nevertheless, the most commonly employed label in the context of television news is that of sensationalism (cf. Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten & Beentjes, 2005; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). For that reason, this label will be used here.

Besides different labels for the same phenomenon, different definitions appeared in previous research. Uribe and Gunter (2007, p. 209), for example, described sensationalism as "a characteristic of the news packaging process that places emphasis upon those elements that could provoke an effect on the human sensory system." Hendriks Vettehen (2008) defined sensationalism as 'a theoretical concept that encompasses those features of journalistic products that are capable of attracting the attention of the audience'. However, the most inclusive description of sensationalism is that of Grabe et al. (2001). These authors reviewed a number of definitions of sensationalism. Based on these definitions it can be concluded that sensationalism refers to those content features and formal features of messages that have the capability to provoke attention or arousal responses in viewers.

For a long time, sensationalism has been conceived in terms of story content. Stories with topics and pictures containing crimes, violence, sex, riots, fires, and disasters were typified as sensational (e.g., Adams, 1978; Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Newhagen & Reeves, 1992; Ryu, 1982). Such stories contain information with survival value, and are thus closely connected to notions about human evolution. Against that background, an attention-grabbing capability of sensational story content can be expected (cf. Davis & McLeod, 2003; Shoemaker, 1996).

Over the past decades, the concept of sensationalism has evolved in a broader sense. Slattery and Hakanen (1994) extended the measure of sensational story topics by introducing the idea of 'embedded sensationalism'. They argued that television news stories with a non-sensational topic, for instance governmental news or community affairs, were often presented in a sensational context. An example of embedded sensationalism is a story about governmental elections in which time is dedicated to the corrupt past of one of the candidates. Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus (2001) found an increase in embedded sensationalism between 1968 and 1996. In addition, the prominence of sensational topics also increased in this period.

Grabe and colleagues broadened the sensationalism concept by arguing that not only content, but also audiovisual production features may attract the attention of the audience (Grabe, Lang & Zhao, 2003; Grabe et al., 2001). They, and other researchers,

based their thoughts on cognitive psychological theories. The main model in this context is the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing, which is used to investigate the way in which mediated messages like television news are processed (Lang, 2000). This model has two major assumptions. First, viewers are information processors that perceive stimuli, turn them into mental representations, do mental work on those representations, and reproduce them. Second, viewers' ability to process information is limited, because viewers have only a limited pool of mental resources (Lang, 2000, p. 47).

Although the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing acknowledges that viewers to some extent control the allocation of resources to the various cognitive tasks in information processing, it especially stresses the automatic allocation to the cognitive system. This automatic process is controlled by the characteristics of the message through the elicitation of orienting responses in viewers. Two major types of stimuli elicit orienting responses in viewers. First, stimuli that contain information relevant to the goals and needs of the individual elicit orienting responses. Examples include news stories about violence, sex, and death. These have been defined earlier as examples of sensational story content. Second, stimuli that represent change or unexpected occurrences in the environment elicit orienting responses (Lang, 2000, p. 49). In a television news story examples are a high number of (abrupt) changes in the picture material, the presence of music, the addition of a loud sound, the use of an eyewitness camera, and decorative editing techniques, such as wipes and dissolves (Grabe et al., 2001; 2003; Hendriks Vettehen & Nuijten, 2006; Lang, 2000). These two categories of news features eliciting orienting responses have led Grabe et al. (2001; 2003) to distinguish not only sensational story content, but also sensational production features in television news.

Inspired by two studies on news coverage conducted in Europe (Hjarvard, 2000; Hvitfelt, 1994), Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) introduced another aspect of sensational news features: the vividness of the information in the news story. Vivid information can be defined as information that is emotionally interesting, concrete and imagery-provoking, and proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 45). Nisbett and Ross argue that this kind of information is able to attract and hold the attention of viewers. In addition, it will have disproportional weight in people's inferences. Hendriks Vettehen and colleagues suggested that vivid television news features may be expected to universally attract the attention, and that these features may therefore be considered as sensational. In particular, they pointed to brief comments by laypersons to exemplify the public opinion, or reports based on an individual case history as examples

*Table 17.1* Overview of sensational news features

Sensational content features	Sensational production features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensational story topic</li> <li>• Embedded sensationalism</li> <li>• Sensational pictures</li> <li>• Individual case histories</li> <li>• Interviews with laypersons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of camera shots</li> <li>• Decorative editing techniques</li> <li>• Music onsets</li> <li>• Sound effects</li> <li>• Story length</li> <li>• Eyewitness camera</li> <li>• Close-ups of human faces</li> </ul>

of vivid and consequently sensational news features. They also pointed to the use of close-ups of human faces as a visual device to increase the proximity, and hence vividness of a news story.

In sum, over the past decades, the concept of sensationalist television news has gradually broadened. The most comprehensive concept of sensationalism includes a large number of sensationalist features that may be categorized under two broad categories: sensational content features and sensational production features. Table 17.1 provides an overview of the features most often applied in studies on sensationalist television news.

#### 17.2.4 The validity of the concept

In the preceding section, a broad concept of sensationalism was introduced, suggesting that sensationalism in television news can be measured by focusing on content and production news features, such as topic, pictures, camera shots, music, and layperson comments. It is important to know how valid this measurement is, to be sure that appropriate inferences and interpretations are made (cf. Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). In this section, both the construct validity and the social validity of the concept are discussed.

##### 17.2.4.1 Construct validity

In the social sciences, construct validity is the most appropriate and applicable type of validity (Zeller & Carmines, 1980). Construct validation takes place when researchers believe that their instrument reflects a particular theoretical construct. Researchers then investigate if their construct fits into an already existing theoretical network of related concepts (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

Cognitive theories in psychology have provided a basis for a theoretical network concerning sensationalism. In particular, the already mentioned Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing predicts that sensationalism is able to provoke fluctuations in attention or arousal during television viewing (cf. Grabe et al., 2001; Lang, 2000). Some empirical studies support the expectation that characteristics of a television message elicit attentional responses in viewers. In these studies, short-lived increases in attention ('orienting responses') were indicated by a sudden deceleration of the heart rhythm, lasting for a few seconds. For instance, Lang, Newhagen, and Reeves (1996) found that the presence of sensational pictures, which they labelled negative video, elicited greater short-term attention than the use of non-sensational pictures. Grabe et al. (2003) examined the effect of tabloid and standard packaging styles on calm and sensational news stories. These sensational news stories contained a sensational story topic and pictures. To create tabloid versions, five sensational production features, for example, music, sound effects and decorative editing techniques, were added. First, Grabe et al. (2003) found that viewers paid more attention to tabloid stories compared to standard stories, which implies that the use of the five sensational production features increases attention. Second, stories containing a sensational story topic and sensational pictures increase viewer's attention.

Besides attention, Grabe et al (2003) also studied arousal. The elicitation of arousal in viewers has been studied using a physiological measure, namely skin conductance, as an indicator of the activation of the sympathetic nervous system in viewers. Grabe et al. (2003) found that the tabloid stories were more arousing than the standard stories. Fur-

thermore, sensational news stories increased physiological arousal. Lang et al. (2005) also used physiological measures to study the relationship between the number of camera changes (pacing) in a message and arousal. They found that increasing the number of camera changes increases arousal for long stories. Next to physiological measures, self-reported feelings of arousal have been used in studies on the relationship between sensationalism and arousal. Lang, Bolls, Potter & Kawahara (1999) used both skin conductance and self-reported arousal to measure the effects of the number of camera changes and sensational content on arousal. First, they found that respondents reported increased arousal in response to increased number of camera changes. Second, skin conductance increased as camera changes increased. Third, viewers felt more aroused during sensational content messages. Finally, sensational content appears to have no effect on skin conductance, except when the number of camera changes is low. Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters (2008) found positive relationships between self-reported emotional arousal and four sensationalist features, namely the presence of a sensational story topic, the number of camera shots, the presence of interviews with laypersons, and the presence of an eyewitness camera.

A number of studies have shown that sensational news features behave as theoretically expected. Substantial support was found for the elicitation of attention and arousal responses for camera shots and sensational story topics. There is some support for sensational features such as sensational pictures, laypersons speaking, and eyewitness camera. However, there is general lack in support for features such as decorative editing effects, music, and sound effects, because they have never been analysed individually, but only simultaneously with other sensational news features. In general, to a certain extent, previous research provides support for the expectation that the sensationalism measurement fits into the theoretical network as it stands, which thus contributes to the construct validity of the sensationalism concept.

#### 17.2.4.2 Social validity

The question whether sensationalism studies measure what they intend to measure, is not fully answered by judging the construct validity. As noted in the introduction, academic research on sensationalism is closely related to public discussions. Assuming that scientific research on sensationalism is meant to make a contribution to public discussions about this topic, one may wonder how the scientific concept of sensationalism relates to the concept as used beyond an academic audience (cf. Riffe et al., 2005). In other words, what about the social validity of the sensationalism concept?

In past research, little attention has been given to the social validity of sensationalism. For instance, Grabe et al. (2001) argue that the word sensationalism has become an easy name-calling device for those who want to criticise the mass media. To test if mass media are rightly or wrongly accused of sensational reporting, Grabe et al. (2001) contrasted a publicly recognized sensational news programme with a respectable television news programme. The use of sensational content and a number of sensational production features in both programmes were compared. As public debate predicted, the publicly recognized sensational programme contained more sensationalist news features. The authors conclude that both sensational content and sensational production features are helpful in distinguishing sensational from respectable news. In addition, Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) studied trends in sensationalism in three Dutch news programmes. They found that, in general, news stories from the SBS news programme *Hart van*

*Nederland* were more sensational than stories from the *NOS Journaal* and *RTL Nieuws*. Acknowledging that *Hart van Nederland* is commonly mentioned by the public as the most sensational Dutch news programme, these results indicate that sensational news features are more strongly present in this publicly recognized sensational programme.

### 17.2.5 Commentary

Concerning the validity of the sensationalism concept, general support for construct validity was found. However, for some features there is a lack in support. To enlarge knowledge of the construct validity, further research on some sensational news features is recommended.

The results of the studies by Grabe et al. (2001) and Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) provide indications for the social validity of the sensationalism concept, because these studies have shown that what is judged as sensational by the public is also defined as sensational in academic circles. However, these studies provided only indirect indications for the social validity of the concept. It did not become clear which sensationalist features in the news programmes caused the public judgements of sensationalism. To examine the social validity of the sensationalism concept, more direct support is needed. Therefore, further research should, for instance, focus on the comparison between the lay definition of sensationalism and the academic definition.

## 17.3 The origins of sensationalism

### 17.3.1 Market-driven Journalism and Sensationalism

The second question in this overview relates to the causes of sensationalism in television news. McManus' market theory of news production (1994) provides insight into some of these causes. According to McManus (1994), newsmakers are confronted with conflicting norms in their daily work. On the one hand, their task is to serve the public by informing them about significant events in accordance with traditional norms of proper journalism. However, on the other hand, newsmakers only maintain their advertising revenues in case their newscasts are watched by a considerable proportion of the population. Thus, market-driven journalism increases the need for news programmes that attract viewers' attention. Moreover, news programmes have been confronted with a media environment that has grown much more competitive over the past decades. As a result of increasing competition, news departments are bound to struggle for an audience ever more strongly. McManus argues that the need to attract attention has the potential to conflict with the task of serving the public. Some events that are newsworthy under journalistic norms would remain so for economic reasons. However, in most instances, market norms are incompatible with journalistic norms. For instance, selection of news on the basis of its attention-grabbing capacity could result in the selection of more interesting, but less informational stories.

McManus' theory gives an explanation for the presence of sensational features in news, because such features have the capability to attract the attention of the audience. In present-day markets, this capacity is very important for newsmakers in order to survive. The increasing competition on news markets in various Western countries pro-

gressively urges news producers to capture the attention of the audience, which may lead to the expectation that sensationalism in the news continues to increase.

### 17.3.2 Studies on Trends in Sensationalism

A number of studies have focused on developments in the use of sensational features in television news stories. These studies have been conducted within the different media systems of the US and Europe. By outlining a number of these studies, some light may be shed on the assumptions of McManus' market theory.

#### 17.3.2.1 Sensationalism in US news programmes

The US media system is large and complex (Ostroff, 2001). There are hundreds of television stations, and commercial broadcasting is a significant component of the economy. Localism is one of the main characteristics of the American media system, especially for news programmes. Most (local) broadcasters in the United States are supported by advertising. In Ostroff's words (2001, p. 417): "broadcasting in the US is advertiser-driven." For that reason, large audience shares are very important. Moreover, the recent change to digital services enlarged the competition on the news market (Ostroff, 2001). The US market situation could therefore be expected to provoke an increasing presence of sensationalism in news programmes.

A number of studies support the expectation of an increasing use of sensational features in American newscasts. Slattery and Hakanen (1994), for instance, replicated a study of Adams (1978) by focusing on the story topic and story scope of newscasts. They found that the local television news of Pennsylvania contained more sensational and human interest stories in 1992 compared to 1976. In contrast, they found that the time spent on hard news—like government, politics and education—decreased. Furthermore, they witnessed a larger increase in proportion of sensationalism and human interest coverage between 1976 and 1992 when stories containing embedded sensationalism were also included.

Slattery, Doremus and Marcus (2001) studied sensationalism in ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. They focussed on the period between 1968 and 1996. Results showed that stories containing human interest and sensationalism had increased, but that they were still relatively minor components of network news, compared to local television news. Moreover, an increase in embedded sensationalism was found. For instance, news coverage of non-sensational stories such as community and government affairs in 1996 contained elements of crime, violence, disasters, and other sensational content to a far greater degree than in 1968 and 1980.

#### 17.3.2.2 Sensationalism in European news programmes

Historically, most European broadcasting systems were different from the US media system in that they were publicly owned and financed. Commercial broadcasting was virtually absent. However, throughout the past decades, European public service broadcasters witnessed a deregulation of broadcasting systems (d'Haenens & Saeys, 2001). In the same period, commercial broadcasters entered the television market, which enlarged competition and made it more important for newsmakers to attract the attention of the audience. Hence, an increase in sensationalism in television news can also be expected in European countries.

Hvitfelt (1994) analyzed evening television newscasts in Sweden in the period 1991-1993. Results showed, first, that the number of stories containing a sensational topic increased. Second, the tempo in news stories increased, for instance by inserting a higher number of cuts in the story. Finally, laypeople were more often present as source in commercial newscasts, compared to public service newscasts. Based on these results, Hvitfelt concluded that the commercial channel took the initiative to increase sensationalism, and that the public service broadcaster reacted by following this tendency.

Hjarvard (2000) studied sensationalism in Denmark in the 1990s. The introduction of a commercial channel next to the public service broadcasting channel, and with that a second newscast, has led to competition on the Danish television market. The new commercial programme *Nyhederne* attracted more viewers than the public service programme *TV-Avisen* only a few years after its start. According to Hjarvard, the key to this success was the programme's emphasis on proximity. As discussed in the section on the concept of sensationalism in television news, proximity may be considered an aspect of vividness, and hence of sensationalism. Hjarvard found that, throughout the 1990s, soft news and entertainment gained higher priority. Foreign news, which is less proximate, appeared less frequently among the top items of both newscasts. Hjarvard also found that the length of the news items and the intervals between cuts decreased on both channels. These findings indicate an increase in the use of sensational features in Danish newscasts after the entrance of a commercial broadcaster.

In the Netherlands, the media landscape has seen a development similar to developments in Sweden and Denmark. Studies on sensationalism that were conducted for the period 1980-2004 revealed that the increased supply of television news by commercial broadcasters appeared to have resulted in an increasing use of different aspects of sensationalism. For example, an increase in the presentation of sensational story topics, laypersons speaking, and a decrease in shot length were observed in both public and commercial television newscasts (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Nuijten, 2007).

In addition to the tendency towards more sensationalism in European newscasts, another notable result appeared in the European studies on sensationalism. In general, it was found that the use of sensational news features increased more in commercial news stories compared to public service news stories (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Hjarvard, 2000; Hvitfelt, 1994). Based on McManus' theory of news production, it can be assumed that commercial news programmes are more market-driven than public service newscasts. Public service broadcasting is (partly) financed by the government, while commercial broadcasting depends entirely on sponsoring and advertising revenues (d'Haenens & Saeys, 2001). Consequently, maximisation of audience attention is financially more important to commercial broadcasters, which could explain the higher amount of sensationalism in their news programmes.

### 17.3.3 Commentary

The market theory of news production (McManus, 1994) is able to explain trends towards more sensationalism in television news in both the US and Europe. As the theory predicted, more competition in the television news market increased the need to attract the attention of the audience, which resulted in an increase in use of sensational news features. Furthermore, McManus' theory could explain that the more market-driven

European commercial broadcasters used more sensational features in their news compared to public service broadcasters.

Although the studies provided correlative evidence for the role of competition as a main cause of sensationalism, these studies did not eliminate the role of contextual variables that might also influence sensationalism, or that might moderate effects of competition. Several of these contextual variables can be distinguished. For instance, Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that variables such as political influence on the media and journalistic orientation are noteworthy. In addition, Hvitfelt (1994) mentioned technological advances as influential factor. To gain insight into the factors that explain sensationalism in television news, cross-national research may be helpful. Choosing a large number of countries, which display differences on the relevant contextual factors, will make it possible to disentangle the influence of these factors.

In an attempt to study explanatory factors that influence the level of sensationalism, Kleemans, Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, and Hendriks Vettehen (2008) built an explanatory model of sensationalist news production. The model pointed to level of competition, journalistic culture, media policy, type of broadcaster, and target group as possible explanatory factors for sensationalism in news. Subsequently, they put the model to the test by comparing Dutch, Flemish, Walloon, and French newscasts. A few conclusions can be derived from this study. In the first place, the study revealed that competition had a positive effect on the presence of sensationalism in the news. Next, news stories from commercial news programmes were more sensational than public service broadcasts. Third, journalistic culture appeared to be an important explanatory factor for sensationalism in television news. However, journalistic culture appeared to have radically different effects on different aspects of sensationalism, leading the authors to conclude that the precise role of this factor was yet unclear. Finally, no indications were found for the role of differential media policies. To summarize, the study of Kleemans et al. (2008) showed support for the model. However, it was preliminary support, because it remained partly unclear in which way the factors influence the level of sensationalism in television news. Moreover, the study consisted of a small number of countries, which made it difficult to disentangle possible influences. Further cross-national research on sensationalism in a larger number of countries is thus necessary.

## 17.4 Sensationalism and the informative function of news

### 17.4.1 Studies on Audience Appeal of Sensational News

The question that remains to be answered in this overview concerns the consequences of sensationalism for the informative function of news. News can only fulfil its informative function if the audience watches it. In this chapter, it is already described that sensational news features elicit short-lived attentional responses in viewers, which happens beyond the viewer's control (cf. Lang, 2000). However, these automatic responses can only partly explain the extent to which viewers will watch the news. For a certain part, watching television is controlled by the viewers themselves. As audience centred approaches in mass communication studies have taught us, the audience needs to be conceived as active. Their media use is based on need for gratification and therefore goal directed (cf. Renckstorf & Wester, 2004). This implies that viewers decide whether or not they will watch programmes, such as the news, on the basis of the gratifications the

programme will give them. For that reason, the appeal of sensationalist news is noteworthy to study.

Lang et al. (2005) studied how production pacing and story length of television news stories affect viewers' channel changing behaviour and evaluations of newscasts in a free choice news viewing environment. Participants were placed in front of a television set with a remote control in one of their hands. They were told that there were different newscasts on each of the four channels and that they were free to change between channels as much as they liked. In the study, it was found that physiological arousal and cognitive effort declined prior to a channel change, followed by an increase of these variables after the channel change. In other words, viewers changed channels as a result of decreasing interest and arousal. Short stories and fast pacing increased cognitive effort and arousal in viewers, especially among younger viewers, implying that these sensational news features can be used to combat channel changing. However, using fast pacing in short stories overloaded the cognitive processing, which resulted in deteriorated recognition. Related to viewers' evaluations of the news stories, Lang et al. (2005) found that fast pacing improved evaluations for both younger and older viewers. However, for older viewers this improvement was only found in long stories. For younger viewers fast pacing in both longer and shorter stories resulted in better evaluations.

Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) studied the appeal of sensational news stories in a different way. They assumed 'liking' to be an important predictor of exposure. For that reason, they chose to ask participants to evaluate a large number of news stories. These stories were different in degree of sensationalism. After watching each story, the participants were asked how much they liked the story. Hendriks Vettehen and colleagues expected that the use of sensational features in news stories elicited emotional arousal in viewers. Furthermore, emotional arousal was expected to have a positive effect on the degree to which the stories are liked, however, only up to a certain level of arousal. Beyond that level, the relationship was predicted to become negative. In other words, too little and too much emotional arousal elicited by sensational news features may be expected to result in less liking of the story. The results of the study supported the expectations. Emotional arousal mediated effects of sensationalist news features on liking. Moreover, the relationship between emotional arousal and liking took the shape of an inverted U.

The studies that were described above have shown that arousal is an important factor in explaining the appeal of sensational television news (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008; Lang et al., 2005). However, also somewhat diverging results were found. The study of Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) suggests that both low and high levels of arousal negatively influence the level of liking, which probably may induce viewers to change channels. In contrast, Lang et al. (2005) only found channel changing behaviour at a decreasing level of arousal. These diverging results may lead to the conclusion that the precise role of emotional arousal in explaining audience appeal of sensationalism is yet unclear.

#### 17.4.2 Studies on the Cognitive Processing of Sensational News

Next to studies on appeal, a number of studies focused on the processing of sensational television messages (cf. Brosius, 1993; Grabe et al., 2003; Lang et al., 1999). Once the

attention of viewers is caught and maintained, the question is how well information is processed and consequently, how well the audience is informed by the news.

Mundorf, Drew, Zillmann, and Weaver (1990) studied the effects of emotionally arousing news on recall of subsequently presented news. They established that the acquisition of information from news items was poorer for items that were shown following a sensational content story. In other words, sensational content news reduced news recall. Lang et al. (1999) investigated how the use of camera shots and sensational content relates to viewer's information processing. They found that both fast pacing and sensational content increase recognition and cued recall for the content of the message. However, the combination of fast pace and sensational content resulted in less recognition and cued recall. In addition, Grabe et al. (2003) examined the differences in information processing between news stories containing several sensational production features (e.g., music, sound effects, and slow motion) and stories without sensational production features for both sensational and non-sensational content news stories. They found that the presence of sensational production features in a story without a sensational content attracted the attention, and that it had a positive influence on recognition, cued recall and free recall. However, when sensational production features were applied to news stories that contain a sensational content, memory decreased.

Another line of research on the processing of television news suggests that sensational aspects may distract the viewer's attention. Brosius (1993) found that the use of emotional pictures, which is related to what is labelled sensational pictures, resulted in attention to the emotional parts of a news item, and that these visuals led to recall errors in the information given in television news text. Viewers paid differential attention to certain aspects of an item. As a consequence, most of the information in the item got lost. Viewers reconstructed the information, based on the general impression of the item or the details on which is focused. This results in recall errors (Brosius, 1993).

Zillmann and Brosius (2000) summarized studies on the use of exemplification. Exemplification refers to the use of cases to make an abstract issue more concrete. This means that issues become more personal and therefore more vivid. Exemplification can, for instance, be indicated by the presence of interviews with laypersons (cf. Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). In their study, Zillmann and Brosius found that exemplification resulted in more attention to the examples and less to the general information in the news item. This implies that exemplification distracted the attention of viewers and made them sensitive for only certain parts of a news story. As a consequence, exemplification distorted the issue perception of the viewer.

In sum, in studies on the cognitive processing of news, three main consequences of sensationalism were observed. First, to a certain level, sensationalism could enhance memory. Second, the use of combinations of sensational content and production features may result in recognition and recall problems. And third, studies suggested that sensationalism may distract the viewer's attention. Explanations for these results can be found in the earlier mentioned Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (Lang, 2000). This model states that television viewing involves the continuous allocation of a limited pool of resources to the cognitive processing of the message. This process includes the simultaneously performed tasks of encoding, storage, and retrieval. Both the viewer and characteristics of the message affect the allocation of resources to the cognitive processing. In general, the viewer controls some aspects of the allocation of resources by making decisions about, for instance, whether to watch and how care-

fully to watch. Characteristics of the message, in particular sensational features, automatically evoke the allocation of resources.

The Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing suggests that as the use of a sensational news feature increases, the number of orienting responses elicited by the message increases. The amount of information available to encode should increase, and as a result, the viewer should automatically allocate more resources to encode this message (Lang et al., 1999). Because of the increase in allocation of resources, recognition and recall of the message increases. However, viewers have a limited availability of processing resources, which implies that it is not possible to encode and to store all the information in a message. If a message contains too much sensational news features, the available resources are insufficient. Cognitive overload of the information processing system occurs, which results in poorer cognitive performance (cf. Lang, 2000; Lang et al., 1999). In case of insufficient resources, it could be that some aspects of the message will be performed well, while others will not. Lang, Sias, Chantrill, and Burek (1995) found that viewers allocate more resources to strong narratives compared to weaker narratives, and that they remembered the strong ones better. This could explain the finding that some aspects of sensationalism, like layperson speaking, distract the attention of viewers and make the viewer sensitive for only these parts the story.

### 17.4.3 Commentary

In popular discussions it is commonly assumed that sensationalist news coverage is at odds with the task of news media to inform citizens properly about socially significant events. How do findings from scientific studies relate to this assumption? To answer this question, two lines of studies were reviewed: the appeal of sensational television news and the cognitive processing of this news.

Studies on the cognitive processing of sensational television news showed that sensationalism could improve the cognitive processing of information in a story, because sensationalist features continually elicit attentional responses in viewers. However, the use of sensational news features may also have negative effects on processing. On the one hand, a combination of sensational content and production features may result in cognitive overload of the information processing system. On the other hand, sensationalist features have the capability to distract the viewer's attention in a way that viewers only focus on specific parts of the news story. Both may result in decreased memory. Thus, if journalists want to optimize the information processing by viewers, moderate levels of sensationalism are recommended. In particular, adding sensational production features or vivid features to a non-sensational story could prove beneficial in terms of message recall and recognition, whereas adding sensational production features or vivid features to an already sensational story could prove detrimental.

Studies on the appeal of sensational news indicate that the arousal elicited by news stories affects the audience appeal of these stories. However, it remains partly unclear how arousal exactly relates to appeal. The study of Lang et al. (2005) showed that viewers change channels as a result of low levels of arousal, while the study of Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) indicates that both low and high levels of arousal are not preferred by viewers. These diverging findings may well be explained by a number of methodological differences between the studies. However, one of these differences may provide a more theoretical explanation. Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) studied older viewers,

while Lang et al. (2005) focused on both older and younger viewers. The viewer's age is expected to be an important factor in this context. In particular Zuckerman (1994) has shown that viewers of different ages differ in their need for sensation. In general, younger viewers will have a greater need for sensation than older ones, suggesting that younger viewers prefer a higher level of arousal, and therefore will prefer more sensational news stories. Older viewers are often so-called low sensation seekers, who prefer a lower level of arousal in news messages. In future research, attention may be paid to need for sensation as moderator in the relation between the presence of sensational news features and exposure to news stories.

Examining the studies on appeal and processing, it remains unclear how sensationalism might contribute to the maximisation of audience appeal on the one hand, and cognitive processing on the other hand. To maximise audience appeal, high (cf. Lang et al., 2005) or moderate (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008) levels of sensationalism appear to be preferred, while the studies on information processing that were discussed earlier in this section support the application of moderate levels of sensationalism. Moreover, comparing these studies is problematic, because the studies differ in designs, samples, and measures of sensationalism. It may thus be recommended to study audience appeal and information processing in one design. Such an approach may provide answers to the question whether sensationalism is a convenient tool to accomplish journalists' double task of attracting and informing the audience.

## 17.5 Conclusion

Sensationalism in television news is frequently discussed in public debate. In addition, an increasing number of academic studies have paid attention to sensationalism. The concept of sensationalism was broadened in the past decades to a concept that includes a large number of sensationalist content features and sensationalist production features. In previous research, indications for the construct validity of this concept were found. Also, indications for the social validity of the concept were found. However, further research into both the construct validity and the social validity of the sensationalism concept are warranted.

Studies on trends in sensationalism showed that the use of sensationalist features increased over the past decades. The increasing competition on news markets in Western countries is assumed to be an important explanation for this trend. However, the role of contextual variables that may also affect sensationalism remains unclear. Comparative research in a number of countries could enlarge knowledge about explanatory factors for sensationalism in television news.

The consequences of sensationalism for the informative function of news are not fully disentangled in past research. Insight into the effects of sensationalism on information processing has improved, but the effects of sensationalism on audience appeal needs further study. Moreover, future research should focus on the relationship between effects of sensationalist features on the information processing and audience appeal. This information is in particular interesting for journalists who want to attract and maintain the attention of the audience, and inform the public properly at the same time.

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