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# News in an Age of Competition: The Case of Sensationalism in Dutch Television News, 1995–2001

Paul Hendriks Vettehen, Koos Nuijten,  
and Johannes Beentjes

*Trends in sensationalism in Dutch television news were investigated through a content analysis of 3 Dutch TV news programs in 1995 and 2001, a period when the competition between Dutch TV news programs increased. Indicators of sensationalism were derived from 4 categories: tabloid packaging, basic needs content, concreteness, and proximity. Results showed a trend toward the use of more sensational production techniques in Dutch TV news. However, these increases were not found on all indicators nor in all newscasts. No trend toward more sensational story subjects could be observed.*

The quality of the mass media performance has been subject of discussion for many decades, not only among media practitioners and their critics but also among media students (McQuail, 1992). One of the main topics in these discussions concerns the impact of market-driven journalism on the quality of the news coverage. Most researchers and critics expect market-driven journalism to have negative effects. They expect it will produce news with a generally low informational level and a homogeneous content, directed primarily at those sections of the population that are most interesting to the advertisers (e.g., Bagdikian, 1985; McManus, 1994; Underwood, 1988). According to others, however, the effects of market-driven journalism are not purely negative. Their main argument is that the pressure of the market urges journalists to take the information needs of the public very seriously (McManus, 1994, pp. 2–3).

Research on market-driven journalism is complicated by many theoretical and analytical problems. Notably, defining the *market* and its major players is often a difficult

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task, which involves decisions that are sometimes arbitrary (Albarran, 1996). The conceptualization and measurement of *quality* is another problematic task, which can be accomplished according to many conceivable but also arbitrary criteria (McQuail, 1992; Schatz & Schulz, 1992). Lastly, developments in technology and journalistic values are concurrent influences on journalistic products, which complicate the analysis of market influences. For instance, a study by Tuggle and Huffman (1999) documented the interplay between technology, journalistic values, and market demands in decisions concerning live reporting. At a more theoretical level, McManus (1994) described how journalistic values may converge with market demands in the coverage of some events but also may conflict with market demands in the coverage of other events.

Researchers have not been discouraged by these problems. They have studied market-driven journalism under various headings. The most prominent examples of these are the concept of diversity (e.g., Coulson & Lacy, 1996; Lacy, 1990) and a concept that might be best described as “sensationalism” (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). The present study focuses on the latter concept. First, this study aims at expanding a recent conceptualization of sensationalism that is largely based on the limited capacity model of mediated messages (cf. Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003; Grabe et al., 2001). Second, it will establish the extent of sensationalism in television news in a setting that recently witnessed an increase in competition between news organizations, that is, the Netherlands between 1995 and 2001.

## The Concept of Sensationalism

Traditionally, sensationalism in the news has been conceived mostly in terms of story content, such as stories about crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents, and fires (Adams, 1978; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). Accordingly, the contribution of sensationalist news to a democratic society has been criticized (e.g., Bernstein, 1992).

Recently, Grabe et al. (2001) suggested a more comprehensive view on the concept. They observed that “a number of scholarly definitions of sensationalism focus on the effects on the human sensory system” (p. 637), notably its potential to be attention grabbing and emotionally arousing. Starting from this observation, they developed a measurement of sensationalism on the basis of research findings that supported the potential of news features to provoke the human senses. The measurement included not only specific content features but also formal features of the news: the “bells and whistles of form,” as the title of their article indicated. Some years later, Grabe et al. (2003) embedded this conceptualization of sensationalism in a theoretical perspective: the limited capacity model of mediated messages (cf. Lang, 2000). In the present study, this conceptualization of sensationalism serves as a point of departure.

In the limited capacity model, two categories of stimuli are discerned that elicit orienting responses in viewers. One category includes stimuli that are relevant to the

goals and needs of the individual (Lang, 2000, p. 49). Although goals and needs may vary from person to person and from situation to situation, certain categories of message content are expected to automatically elicit orienting responses in every human, and consequently may be considered as sensational. From an evolutionary perspective, content that appeals to our basic needs and instincts has been expected to universally attract the attention (Davis & McLeod, 2003; cf. Shoemaker, 1996). The finding that negative video images tend to increase attention (Lang, Newhagen, & Reeves, 1996) provides some support for this view. In the present study, the label *basic needs content* is used.

The other category of stimuli that according to the limited capacity model automatically elicit orienting responses in viewers includes stimuli that represent novelty or change in the message content (Lang, 2000, p. 49). Although to some extent the definition of novelty and change could vary from person to person, many aspects of the form and content of television news may be considered as generally indicative of novelty or change, namely cuts, edits, movements of the camera (e.g., zooms, eyewitness camera), sound effects, the onset of background music, and so on. By virtue of their attention-grabbing capacity, such features may be described as *tabloid packaging* (cf. Grabe et al., 2003).

Although basic needs content and tabloid packaging constitute two broad categories of news features that universally attract attention, we suggest two additional categories of news features that may universally attract attention and that consequently may be considered as sensational. These categories are derived from studies on the concept of *vividness*. According to Nisbett and Ross (1980):

Information may be described as vivid, that is, as likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination to the extent that it is (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way. (p. 45)

Nisbett and Ross argued that vivid information stimulates imagination, attracts and holds attention, and is better retained in memory than nonvivid (pallid) information. Drawing on theories concerning cognitive heuristics and schemas, they expect vivid information to have a disproportional weight in people's judgments because it is more easily available in memory (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, pp. 55–59).

Over the past decades, experimental studies have resulted in a more differentiated view on vividness effects. In a nutshell, vivid information appeared to have the expected positive effects on information processing (e.g., on message recall) only when it was presented under conditions of low involvement, and only if the vivid elements in a message were congruent with the theme of the message itself (Frey & Eagly, 1993; McGill & Anand, 1989; Smith & Shaffer, 2000; Taylor & Thompson, 1982). In addition, studies on vividness have been criticized for defining the concept partly in terms of effects (notably "emotionally interesting," "imagery provoking"), which inhibits

knowledge about relationships between intrinsic message features of vividness and its effects (O'Keefe, 2003). In the present study, vivid information is accordingly defined as *concrete* or *proximate* in a spatial, temporal, or sensory way.

Vividness theory has been applied to features of television news. Notably, it has been argued that exemplary case histories in a news story (e.g., "the guy next door" complaining about cuts in his unemployment benefit) are more concrete than the general information (e.g., about cuts in unemployment benefits) that precedes the exemplars (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Studies on exemplification in television news (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Gan, Hill, Pschernig, & Zillmann, 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997) and other news media (e.g., Brosius & Bathelt, 1994) support the idea that exemplars draw the attention towards them. As a result, exemplars may be considered as sensational elements of news stories.

In a similar way, it may be argued that domestic news is more proximate than foreign news (cf. Hjarvard, 2000). In addition, it may be argued that the pictorial information in news stories is generally more concrete than the verbal information presented by the anchor (cf. Brosius, 1993, p. 107) and that a sense of proximity in television news can be achieved by a variety of camera techniques that simulate observation in real life, such as a subjective camera perspective, zooming, and an eyewitness camera (cf. Messaris, 1997, pp. 3–5). However, at present these are theoretical arguments, as we have found no studies directly relating to such claims.

In sum, we suggest that sensationalism in media messages may be described by four categories of content and formal features that are expected to attract attention: (a) basic needs content, (b) tabloid packaging, (c) concreteness, and (d) proximity. It may be noted, however, that the categories are in a theoretical sense not necessarily mutually exclusive because they were derived from two distinct research lines that both include message features in their respective arguments.

## Hypotheses

Until 1989 the public service NOS (Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation) was the only provider of television news, airing the *NOS Journaal* on a daily basis. When the first commercial broadcaster, RTL (currently RTL Group), made its entrance in 1989, it immediately started airing the *RTL Nieuws*, a program that like the public *NOS Journaal* covered both domestic news and international news. The position of NOS as television news monopolist had been ended.

By the end of 1995 developments quickly became more turbulent. Notably, the number of television channels directed at the Dutch market increased rapidly. Even apart from some new special interest channels, the number of regular television channels increased from four to nine. Because of this development, the traditional news programs had to compete more heavily for an audience. Partly, the competition was between news programs, but news programs also had to compete with an increasing

number of current affairs programs, infotainment programs, and news programs that were entirely dedicated to domestic issues.

In 1999 the commercial broadcaster SBS (currently SBS Broadcasting) introduced *Het Nieuws*, a program that similar to the *NOS Journaal* and the *RTL Nieuws* covered both domestic and international issues. Moreover, it was slotted just before the other two programs and thus posed a direct threat to the ratings of these programs. With the emergence of this news program, the rivalry in the television news market once more increased. So, in short, the fairly modest competition that had existed from 1989 on had changed drastically after 1995, resulting in a highly competitive market by the end of 1999.

According to a basic microeconomic notion, an increase in competition will put pressure on producers to make their products more attractive to potential buyers. Applying this idea to the television news market, we expect that increasing competition will press television news broadcasters to continuously raise the attractiveness of their news programs. Some researchers argue that sensationalizing the news is a means to increase attractiveness (e.g., Grabe et al., 2001; Hvitfelt, 1994; Scott & Gobetz, 1992). Theoretically, their argument seems reasonably sound, given the presumed capability of sensationalized news to attract and hold the attention of the audience. Besides, some indications of a tendency towards sensationalized news in periods of increasing competition have been established, both in the United States (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994) and in some European countries, notably Sweden (Hvitfelt, 1994) and Germany (Pfetsch, 1996). Because of the increase of competition in the Dutch television news market between 1995 and 2001, we expect the following change in news programs.

H<sub>1</sub>: News items in 2001 were more sensational than news items in 1995.

The general expectation that is formulated in H<sub>1</sub> may be specified in two respects. First, a hypothesis may be formulated pertaining to the existing news programs by NOS and RTL. From the end of 1995 on, both programs were faced with an increasing competition that may have urged the producers to sensationalize their newscasts in order to attract viewers. For this reason, we expect that:

H<sub>2</sub>: Items from both NOS newscasts and RTL newscasts were more sensational in 2001 than they were in 1995.

Second, because in 1999 the novice SBS news program *Het Nieuws* had to acquire a market share within a highly competitive, maybe even saturated market, it may have given the newscasts a distinctively more sensational character than the rivals NOS and RTL had done. For this reason we expect that:

H<sub>3</sub>: In 2001, items from SBS newscasts were more sensational than items from both NOS newscasts and RTL newscasts.



## Method

### Design

The items of Dutch newscasts were analyzed in two time periods. For the year 1995, shortly before the turbulent changes in the market, news items aired by NOS and RTL were analyzed. For 2001, when the developments in the Dutch television landscape seemed to have settled for a while, news items aired by NOS, RTL, and SBS were analyzed.

### Sampling Method

For both 1995 and 2001, newscasts were selected that were aired in early spring. In these periods, the news was not affected by large holidays, big sports events, or elections. For the year 2001, March 9th was selected, followed by March 11th, 13th, and so on, until a sample of 14 days was arrived at, with each day of the week being selected twice. This procedure guarantees an equal number of weekdays in the sample and an equal dispersion of selected days within the research period. For each selected day, all items from the main evening newscasts aired by NOS, RTL, and SBS were analyzed, which amounted to a total of 423 items.

For the year 1995, a similar procedure was followed. However, because of a limited availability of RTL newscasts (the RTL archive appeared to be incomplete due to a random loss of tapes), sampling could not be carried out as systematically as for the year 2001. Nevertheless, a 13-day sample over the period of March 1st to March 28th was arrived at, with each day of the week except Thursday being selected twice. For each selected day, all news items from the main newscasts by NOS and RTL were analyzed, which amounted to a total of 275 items. The total sample thus consisted of 698 news items, which are the units of analysis in this study.

### Measurement

In the theoretical section of this article, four categories of sensationalism were identified: (a) basic needs content, (b) tabloid packaging, (c) concreteness, and (d) proximity. Fifteen indicators were derived from these categories.

A total of nine graduate students were involved in the coding process. Twenty-four percent of all items were double-coded. With the exception of the indicator duration of shots, coder agreements were calculated for each indicator, both in terms of percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa. The percentages of agreement range from 83% to 98%, which may be considered at least "acceptable in most situations" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 143). On the beyond-chance statistic of Cohen's kappa, values between .50 and .88 were obtained for 12 indicators, which may be considered at

least "fair to good agreement beyond chance" by some researchers, although according to others, some reservations should be made (cf. Neuendorf, 2002, p. 143). Unsatisfactory kappas were obtained for the indicators eyewitness camera (.34) and dramatic editing (.27). For three reasons, these indicators were still included in the analysis. First, the extremely skewed distributions of these indicators, in combination with the relatively small reliability sample ( $n = 166$ ) might explain the unsatisfactory kappa scores. Second, the percentage agreements obtained for both eyewitness camera (90%) and dramatic editing (87%) were satisfactory. Third, no systematic disagreement was observed for both indicators, implying that findings on these indicators may at worst be somewhat attenuated.

The indicators are described next. Apart from the ratio variable duration of shots, all indicators of the categories are dichotomies.

*Basic Needs Content.* In this study, four features of news items were distinguished that may appeal to basic human needs. Analogous to most historical measurements of sensationalism, *dramatic subject* refers to the subject of the news story. The coding instrument consisted of 31 subject categories. Coders noted which categories were present in an item. In a way similar to Davis and McLeod (2003) as well as Grabe et al. (2001), the following categories were identified as dramatic subjects: sex, violence, criminality, death, drugs, disasters, riots, fires, famines, and terrorism. The score of dramatic subject refers to the presence of at least one dramatic category identified in the item (92% agreement;  $\kappa = .82$ ).

*Dramatic pictures* may be considered a summary label for "compelling negative images" (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992, p. 25), "negative video" (Lang et al., 1996, p. 460), or "emotional pictures" (Brosius, 1993, p. 105). The coding instrument consisted of pictures of riots, pursuits, fires, disasters, dead people, starved people, and havoc. The score of dramatic pictures refers to the presence of one such picture in the item (84% agreement;  $\kappa = .68$ ).

Although *dramatic sounds* has not previously been identified as a possible indicator of sensationalism, it is included in this study in a way analogous to dramatic pictures. Theoretically, dramatic sounds thus may appeal to basic needs and for this reason attract the attention. Dramatic sounds were defined as sounds of exploding ammunition, gunshots, as well as sounds of people who were crying, screaming, yelling, or applauding. Dramatic sounds were coded as either present or absent in the item (93% agreement;  $\kappa = .75$ ).

*Verbalized emotions* also has not been identified as a possible indicator of sensationalism. However, analogous to dramatic pictures and sounds, one may argue that explicit references to basic emotions by anchors, interviewees, or bystanders appeal to basic human needs. Based on theoretical notions in developmental psychology (Gerrod Parrott, 2001; Shaffer, 2000), four basic emotions were selected: happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. In the codebook, each basic emotion was described by means of an array of equivalents. The presence of verbalized emotions was scored if any of these equivalents was identified in the item (84% agreement;  $\kappa = .50$ ).

*Tabloid Packaging.* The following indicators of tabloid packaging were based on the content analysis of sensationalism by Grabe et al. (2001). For each item, the mean *duration of shots* was established by simply dividing the duration of the item in seconds by the number of shots.

The presence of an *eyewitness camera* was coded if shaky movements of the camera were identified in the news item (90% agreement;  $\kappa = .34$ ).

The presence of a *zoom-in* movement was coded if one or more zoom-in movements were present in the item (89% agreement;  $\kappa = .67$ ). Likewise, the presence of a *zoom-out* movement was coded if one or more zoom-out movements were present (83% agreement;  $\kappa = .60$ ).

Tabloid packaging has also been indicated by *dramatic editing*, that is, decorative editing techniques that are supposed to be salient because they are relatively unusual in news items, namely dissolve, fade-out, fade-in, slow motion, repeated images, and repeated sounds. The presence of dramatic editing was coded if one or more of these techniques was present in the item (87% agreement;  $\kappa = .27$ ).

*Music/sound effects* refers to music and sounds that are added to a news story. It was coded as either present or absent in an item (98% agreement;  $\kappa = .85$ ).

*Concreteness.* In the theoretical section of this article, it was argued that exemplary information in a news story is more concrete than the general information in the story (cf. Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gan et al., 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). In this study, two types of exemplary information were distinguished: personalization and laypersons speaking.

Reports about the personal situation of individuals may increase the concreteness of a television news item. *Personalization* was coded as present if a story featured one or more individuals in their everyday environment or telling about their personal situation (90% agreement;  $\kappa = .53$ ).

Following Hvitfelt (1994), a distinction was made between comments in the news story by politicians and experts on the one hand, and by laypersons on the other hand. In general, comments by laypersons may be considered more concrete than the comments made by politicians and experts that are often rather abstract. For this reason, the presence of comments by laypersons in a news item may be indicative of an increase in concreteness. In contrast, the presence of comments by politicians and experts may even be indicative of a decrease in concreteness and, consequently, may be considered as negative indicators of concreteness. *Laypersons speaking* was coded as present if during the item at least one comment was made by a person not well known nor introduced as having specific knowledge or experience (93% agreement;  $\kappa = .86$ ). *Politicians speaking* was coded as present if during the item at least one politician was shown as a "talking head" in the news item (96% agreement;  $\kappa = .88$ ). *Experts speaking* was coded as present if during the item at least one talking head was introduced as having specialized knowledge or experience on the issue at hand (90% agreement;  $\kappa = .66$ ).

*Proximity.* A shot in *close-up* may be an obvious example of proximity. It has recently been used as an indicator of vividness (Klijn, 2003). Close-up was coded as present if a human face covered at least one quarter of the screen (84% agreement;  $\kappa = .51$ ).

Finally, one may argue that the already mentioned eyewitness camera, zoom-in, and zoom-out indicate proximity of a message in a sensory way because these techniques are helpful in simulating real life observations (cf. Messaris, 1997, pp. 3–5).

## Results

H<sub>1</sub> stated that Dutch television news items in 2001 were more sensational than in 1995. As shown in Table 1, 8 out of the 15 indicators showed a significant increase in sensationalism: dramatic sounds, verbalized emotions, eyewitness camera, zoom-in, zoom-out, personalization, laypersons speaking, and close-up. In contrast, the percentage of news items with dramatic pictures decreased. No change was observed for

**Table 1**  
Indicators of Sensationalism in Dutch TV Newscasts in 1995 and 2001

	Total Sample <sup>a</sup>			NOS			RTL		
	1995 %	2001 %	$\chi^2$	1995 %	2001 %	$\chi^2$	1995 %	2001 %	$\chi^2$
Dramatic subject	53	50	0.85	56	45	-2.95*	51	50	0.04
Dramatic pictures	50	42	-4.42*	52	36	-7.07**	48	42	1.14
Dramatic sounds	24	29	2.72*	24	30	0.99	23	25	0.16
Verbalized emotions	15	20	3.77*	11	26	9.65**	18	14	0.89
Eyewitness camera	3	9	9.42**	2	6	2.70	4	7	1.46
Zoom-in	17	29	13.00**	18	27	3.06*	17	28	5.66**
Zoom-out	22	30	4.63*	23	23	0.02	22	29	2.33
Dramatic editing	4	6	1.81	5	4	0.23	2	3	0.23
Music/sound effects	4	5	0.25	5	3	0.68	4	5	0.30
Personalization	4	15	18.63**	4	9	2.80*	5	12	4.11*
Laypersons speaking	25	31	3.27*	20	26	1.32	30	24	1.30
Politicians speaking	30	26	1.55	28	30	0.20	32	24	2.35
Experts speaking	7	11	2.53	5	9	-1.77	9	10	0.09
Close-up	7	25	36.61**	7	21	11.73**	7	22	12.72**
	1995 <i>M</i>	2001 <i>M</i>	<i>t</i>	1995 <i>M</i>	2001 <i>M</i>	<i>t</i>	1995 <i>M</i>	2001 <i>M</i>	<i>t</i>
Duration of shots	8.34	7.95	0.74	8.01	10.73	-2.42**	8.66	6.59	2.81**
No. of items	275	423		136	128		139	164	

Note: NOS = Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation; RTL = RTL Group; SBS = SBS Broadcasting.

<sup>a</sup>The total sample in 1995 consisted of two newscasts: NOS and RTL. In 2001 it consisted of three newscasts: NOS, RTL, and SBS.

\* $p < .05$ , one-sided. \*\* $p < .01$ , one-sided.

the remaining 6 indicators: duration of shots, dramatic subject, dramatic editing, music/sound effects, politicians speaking, and experts speaking.

According to H<sub>2</sub>, both the NOS and the RTL news items would have become more sensational between 1995 and 2001. In accord with these hypotheses, we find increases on three indicators for both the NOS and the RTL items (zoom-in, personalization, and close-up). However, one increase is exclusive for the NOS items (verbalized emotions), and one is exclusive for only the RTL items (shorter duration of shots). Moreover, for the NOS items we also find three changes opposing the hypothesis: longer duration of shots, fewer dramatic subjects, and fewer dramatic pictures. The remaining indicators showed no significant changes. These results reveal that the changes in sensationalism that we find in the total sample of news items are not identical for different newscasts.

H<sub>3</sub> stated that in 2001 the news items by SBS, the most recent commercial broadcaster of television news, would be more sensational than those by, respectively, NOS and RTL. News items by SBS appeared to be more sensational than those by both NOS and RTL on 5 out of the 15 indicators: eyewitness camera, dramatic editing, personalization, laypersons speaking, and close-up (see Table 2). In addition, the SBS items turned out to be more sensational than only the NOS items on 3 more indica-

**Table 2**  
**Indicators of Sensationalism in Dutch Newscasts in 2001**

	Newscast			Comparison	
	NOS %	RTL %	SBS %	NOS-SBS $\chi^2$	RTL-SBS $\chi^2$
Dramatic subject	45	50	54	2.05	0.51
Dramatic pictures	36	42	48	3.92*	1.07
Dramatic sounds	30	25	34	0.65	3.08*
Verbalized emotions	26	14	23	0.29	3.89*
Eyewitness camera	6	7	14	4.02*	4.06*
Zoom-in	27	28	33	1.22	0.79
Zoom-out	23	29	36	4.80*	1.46
Dramatic editing	4	3	11	5.17*	8.13**
Music/sound effects	3	5	8	2.57	0.97
Personalization	9	12	24	11.72**	8.40**
Laypersons speaking	26	24	46	11.28**	14.90**
Politicians speaking	30	24	23	1.90	0.03
Experts speaking	9	10	13	0.85	0.49
Close-up	21	22	32	3.99*	3.83*
	NOS M	RTL M	SBS M	NOS-SBS <i>t</i>	RTL-SBS <i>t</i>
Duration of shots	10.73	6.59	6.94	-3.46**	0.92
No. of items	128	164	131		

Note: NOS = Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation; RTL = RTL Group; SBS = SBS Broadcasting.  
\* $p < .05$ , one-sided. \*\* $p < .01$ , one-sided.

tors: duration of shots, dramatic pictures, and zoom-out. Finally, in comparison to the RTL items, the SBS items appeared to be more sensational on 2 other indicators: dramatic sounds and verbalized emotions.

## Discussion

The main conclusion of this study is that Dutch television news programs show increases in sensationalist features between 1995 and 2001. However, this conclusion has to be qualified in two respects. First, the increases are not found at all indicators. This especially applies to the indicator dramatic subject. With respect to the subject of the news stories, Dutch television news programs have not become more sensational. In contrast, the indicators personalization and close-up differ in all comparisons, suggesting that personalization and close-up have become the main weapons in the battle of the newscasts. Second, there are substantial differences between newscasts with respect to changes in sensationalism. Both NOS and RTL television news items have contributed to the overall increase but not as much as the SBS news items, which are the most sensational in 2001. The finding that changes in sensationalism are not found on all indicators nor in all newscasts demonstrates that an increase in sensationalism is not as comprehensive and ubiquitous as some observers seem to fear.

As described in the introduction of this article, competition may not be the only driving force behind the changes in sensationalism. At least two other factors seem to be important: (a) technological innovation, and (b) journalistic routines and values. Technological developments such as the progressive digitalization and the introduction of video-camcorders may have facilitated the tabloid packaging of news items, particularly the use of eyewitness cameras. However, technological innovations alone seem insufficient to explain the increases in the use of personalization and laypersons who comment on events. Traditional journalistic routines may have hindered the inclusion of even more dramatic subjects and dramatic pictures, both of which by 1995 were already present in about half of the news items. Likewise, traditional journalistic values may explain the absence of the expected decreases on some indicators, namely asking politicians and experts to comment on events.

The finding that changes in sensationalism are not identical for all newscasts may be explained by the distinct financial structure of the organizations. NOS, being a public service broadcaster, is only partially dependent on advertisers' revenues, whereas RTL and SBS are commercial stations. As a result, NOS might have been less impelled to join "the battle of the newscasts" and consequently, according to our second hypothesis, to sensationalize the news. This could explain the rather mixed findings for the NOS news items: Although we observed a significant trend towards more sensationalism on four indicators, we also observed a trend towards less sensationalism on three other indicators.

As already stated, the studies by Grabe et al. (2001, 2003) extended the historical concept of sensationalism to include both story content and formal features. The main

theoretical contribution of the present study is that the concept of sensationalism is further extended to include not only aspects that are derived from the limited capacity model but also aspects that are derived from vividness theory. The results on most indicators of concreteness and proximity (particularly personalization and close-up) provide support for the construct validity of this extension.

The extended conceptualization of sensationalism underscores the social significance of research on sensationalism because it enables specific predictions concerning both positive and negative effects of sensationalism on news consumers. On the positive side, both the limited capacity model and the theoretical notions concerning vividness predict that sensationalism in television news will both attract more viewers to the news and increase attentiveness during the viewing process. With regard to these predictions, the negative connotation that has often been attached to sensational story subjects may be unjustified, and the use of sensational production techniques may be part of good storytelling.

On the negative side, however, the limited capacity model implies that an unrestricted use of sensationalist devices (e.g., the sensational packaging of an already sensational news topic) might induce cognitive overload that will harm retention of the news messages (Grabe et al., 2003; Lang, Bolls, Potter, & Kawahara, 1999; Lang, Potter, & Grabe, 2003). Besides, the theoretical notions concerning vividness imply that vivid aspects of the news differentially draw attention to only parts of the informational content, which could lead to distorted comprehension and judgments (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Gan et al., 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Similar predictions have been tested regarding other media messages, notably persuasive messages (Frey & Eagly, 1993; Morgan, Palmgreen, Stephenson, Hoyle, & Lorch, 2003; Smith & Shaffer, 2000). Future research on each of these predictions, using a variety of message features, may contribute to a conclusive conceptualization and measurement of sensationalism.

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