

BALANCED ENTERTAINMENT: MOTIVATIONS BEHIND WATCHING CABLE NEWS

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Abstract

Cable news networks have a peculiar dynamic with their audiences compared to other television news mediums, as their privatized, highly competitive nature means they are especially dependent on attracting audiences and catering to viewer whims to maintain ratings. The nature of this dynamic has made it fertile ground for studies that examine it through a Uses and Gratifications Theory lens.

Prior scholarly perspectives have focused largely on the partisan, ideological ways that cable news networks have catered to audiences, such as by decrying bias in competing networks or making vocal, performative gestures of their professed ideology. The Fox News Network is the most visible representation of this pattern of behavior, having over the decades cultivated a loyal, predominantly conservative audience, and a sizable amount of research on cable news networks has focused on Fox News and its audiences.

This study sought to examine both Fox News and other cable news networks using Uses and Gratifications Theory, surveying cable news network audiences to get a sense of what uses and gratifications they tended to value and what areas they felt both their network of choice and other networks could improve in, so as to get a sense of what non-partisan factors may be serving as potential uses and gratifications for American cable news network viewers.

The results of this study were mixed, and overall seemed to suggest that the independent variable that was aspects of one's personal identity and background such as age and political self-identity had a stronger influence on the dependent variable that was what uses and gratifications one prioritized instead of cable news network affiliation, which is true to the spirit of uses and gratifications theory.

Chapter 1: Introduction

News organizations and consumers of news have a stilted dynamic in the United States compared to many other regions due to the dominance of private news organizations. Unlike the United Kingdom, where the most renowned and highest-penetrating news organization, the BBC, is a public one owned by the government (Matsa 2018), in the United States, most citizens primarily rely on privately owned news sources, including cable news networks watched by a significant number of Americans (Walker & Foreman-Katz 2021).

This is of interest because of the highly co-dependent relationship in place between news organizations and news consumers (Roese 2018), wherein news organizations are just as if not more reliant on consumers for their continued existence as consumers are reliant on the news organizations for information and analysis, implying that on some level private news companies need to tailor their content so as to gain a larger, more loyal share of the audience.

Given the nature of this dynamic, where it is the private news organization that is reliant on exciting and attracting viewers while viewers are free to select between an ever-increasing number of potential sources, it seems clear that Uses and Gratifications Theory is the best-fitting media theory to apply for analysis. The theory focuses on the motivating factors that form the relationship between media and consumer from the consumer's perspective (Haridakis & Humphries 2019), making the theory a suitable framework for examining the question of what factors may motivate audiences to select Fox News shows over other cable news options, as gleaned via survey.

These questions about the dynamic between audience and news organization are of particular contemporary significance when examining the Fox News Network and its associated

shows. The network has attained a large share of the cable news network market over the past several decades, reaching a peak of nearly 3.1 million prime time viewers on average as of 2020, compared to CNN's over 1.8 million and MSNBC's nearly 1.6 million (Walker & Foreman-Katz 2021). This was accomplished through advertising itself as an alternative to a news landscape that is, according to these appeals, biased in favor of left-wing viewpoints, as can be seen in how as recently as 2017 it had "fair and balanced" as its network slogan (Grynbaum 2017). This strategy succeeded in spades, allowing Fox News to become a powerful news network whose diverging news narrative exists in parallel with other news sources (Morris 2007), with Fox News Network shows content gaining traction among the viewing public despite frequent factual inaccuracies on important issues such as COVID-19 safety (Bursztyn et al 2020).

This has had a number of effects on American society. One study found that among Fox News audience members there had been a distinct rightward shift from 2000 to 2012 (Martin & Yurukoglu 2017), with both audience and network growing more conservative in tandem. Other studies of the Fox News Network and its audience back this up, finding evidence of a feedback loop in place wherein audience motivations, rather than remaining static after making their initial selection of an information source, continue to evolve and change alongside their source of choice (Morris 2005), uncovered via examination of Pew Research Center media consumption surveys from the period of 1998 to 2004.

The rise of the Fox News Network has correlated with a distinct fracturing of news audiences along partisan lines and citizens growing more focused on a few distinct issues rather than having a general understanding of current political issues, as found in analysis of polling data and past literature (Stroud 2011). This has been reinforced by surveys suggesting that, in response to Fox News's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, viewers of the network

tend to be less cautious about it and take greater risks to their health than viewers of other networks (Bursztyn et al 2020). While further research indicates that correlation may not necessarily equal causation and that partisan news networks may be more so a symptom than a cause of societal polarization (Wojcieszak et al 2021), the fact remains that a thorough analysis of the dynamic in play between audiences and cable news networks like Fox News is necessary to attain deeper insight into what motivating factors may be affecting both society-altering group decisions and media choices.

The purpose of my research was to examine the individual and group motivations and decision-making processes utilized in selecting one news source over others via the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, and to determine what factors beyond a perception of fairness or unfairness and group loyalty may be involved, if any. This study collected data from cable news network viewers, but particular emphasis was placed on the Fox News Network and its audience. This was because of both the network's noticeable increase in audience share over time as outlined above and due to its highly publicized deliberate invoking of the concepts outlined below in order to secure as many loyal viewers as possible, making it a pertinent, clear example to base my initial research on.

In considering this research problem, two key concepts will come into play over the course of my literature review and method: the Hostile Media Effect (Vallone et al 1985), and Performative Ideological Gestures (Jones 2012). The Hostile Media Effect refers to a phenomenon wherein people who self-identify as being a part of a given group, such as a political party, tend to perceive bias against their group in most media around them, even when it does not necessarily exist. While one may initially be inclined to assume that the Hostile Media Effect does not apply here, as it is a theory that focuses on whether a person is likely to dislike

media and perceive it as hostile rather than whether a person is likely to be positively disposed towards media, analysis of polling and viewing data from members of different ideological demographics supports the assertion that perceptions of hostility and bias in other news media have led to Fox News gaining viewers in certain demographics, such as self-identified Republicans (Morris 2007). However, while the Hostile Media Effect can persuasively explain why other sources of news are not selected because of their perceived bias, additional factors may explain why some viewers select Fox News Network shows.

The concept of Performative Ideological Gestures (Jones 2012) may provide additional insight here. The Fox News Network stands out compared to other news organizations in large part because it styles itself as being equal parts entertainment and news (Morris 2005), positioning itself as a dynamic challenger to more conventional journalism when it was founded in 1996. This was done as part of a larger business shift in media as channels and shows placed an emphasis on trying to attract a devoted, fervent audience, a goal Fox News accomplished by constructing a vast us versus them narrative that cast other, more conventional news organizations as antagonistic forces compared to themselves (Jones 2012). Jones argues that Fox News turned political ideology into a performance and that viewers who select a Fox News show are performatively demonstrating their ideological commitment to one faction of American politics over the other. This explanation suggests that, in addition to the issue of partisanship and perceived hostility from other media sources, audiences also selected Fox News over other networks as a means of demonstrating loyalty to their given ideological and social groups.

To gain a stronger understanding of other factors that may be in play, it will be necessary to review the rise of the Fox News Network, as well as the different possible approaches to understanding audience motivations and the factors that may be in play, to see if there are other

potential factors beyond ideology and partisanship. From there, through conducting a survey of cable news network audiences and attaining a sample of Fox News Network viewers to question on their reasons for selecting the network over other options, it will be possible to glean a more complete insight into the nature of this complicated network-audience dynamic and the ways audiences become motivated to seek out the Fox News Network over other sources can be determined.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Before progressing further, it is important to define the nature of Uses and Gratifications Theory to provide context for the application of the following literature. This definition will be followed in this chapter by further elaboration on the potential uses and gratifications that have been examined in relation to Fox News and other able news networks, and further explanation for this study's particular focus on Fox News.

Uses and Gratifications

The theory sets out to examine media issues from the perspective of the audience member rather than from the perspective of the media creator (Katz et al 1973). Instead of treating audiences like blank slates on which media offloads agendas and beliefs, the theory states that audiences should be perceived and examined as independent entities with their own agency, goals, and beliefs that underly audience selection of certain media over others.

The theoretical ideas that underpinned Uses and Gratifications were first seriously researched in the 1940s and 1950s (Haridakis & Humphries 2019). These earliest studies, though diverse in the media they covered, looking at what would be known as Uses and Gratifications via media ranging from comics (Wolfe & Fiske 1949) to newspapers (Berelson 1949), began to show that media's effects on society were far less uniform and immediate than prior research on propaganda and mass media predicted, prompted a larger interest in examining the audience side of the audience-media dynamic that coalesced into a climactic articulation of the theory in the 1970s (Katz et al 1973). Since then, the theory has been further refined, with studies in the 2000s working to better formulate ways of using the theory (occasionally by integrating aspects of other theories like cultivation and media systems dependency) to examine broader societal trends and effects as well as individual ones. Uses and Gratifications has seen a particular rise in

scholarly relevance with the advent of mobile phones, the Internet, and social media in the 2000s and 2010s (Sundar & Limperos 2013). This is because of the increased relevance of consumer choice and motivation, due to how much news is spread by individuals posting and spreading items digitally.

Uses and Gratifications Theory relies on five central conceptual assumptions (Rubin 2009). These assumptions are 1) that selection and use of media organizations is goal-directed and motivated, 2) that media audiences are actively engaging and initiate these selection processes instead of being passive, 3) that social and psychological factors guide these selections, 4) that media organizations compete with each other to be selected, and 5) that people are usually, but not always, more influential in this dynamic than media organizations are. Much of Uses and Gratifications Theory research has been focused on clarifying and testing these core assumptions, and defining the multiple variables associated with them (Haridakis & Humphries 2019).

The Hostile Media Effect as a Potential Gratification

The Hostile Media Effect offers a possible motivation for a segment of the public to select Fox News over other news sources. Surveys taken by the Pew Research Center regarding Fox News viewers indicate that Fox appeals primarily to Americans who identify as conservative, and who strongly believe that every other network is biased in favor of the opposition (Morris 2007), complete with highly distinct attitudes and voting patterns that are separate from the rest of the television audience, something that can be explained by the Hostile Media Effect.

Research from past literature and survey data indicates that as people move further to the left or right on the political ideology spectrum, they are more likely to select certain news

sources over others, both due to perceiving the other sources as biased and as a way of taking a form of ideological action (Stroud 2011), with cable news networks in particular thriving off strongly ideological audiences (Coe et al 2008). The Coe study, in particular, which combined, national survey data and experimentation by exposing respondents to news clips from different networks, found evidence that audience perceptions of bias influenced individuals' selection of certain news sources over others.

When Feldman tested how audiences responded to both opinion and non-opinion news clips from different news sources commonly accused of being “ideologically biased” in 2011, she found that audience members tend to have difficulty perceiving biases they are pre-inclined to agree with and are more likely to notice biases or alleged biases in cases where the news sources were ones they are already pre-inclined by their perceived ideological slant to disagree with. As an explanation, Feldman pointed to the Hostile Media Effect and confirmation bias. Her work demonstrates the importance of considering the different cognitive phenomenon that often underpin audience selection processes. These results have been substantiated by additional studies that indicate via survey data that one's perception of which networks qualify as providing quality journalism and which are overly biased is strongly associated with one's political leanings (International Communications Association 2012). In addition, it has been found through experimentation through forced media exposure that people on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum will have precisely inverse views of networks perceived as being on either their side or the opposition (Arcenaux et al 2012) relative to each other. These studies, taken as a whole, suggest that the Hostile Media Effect may affect audiences' media choices, something that Fox News and other cable news networks keep in mind alongside other potential motivating factors when appealing to viewers.

Fox News's Awareness of Audience Selection Motivations

Analysis of Fox News's marketing and media tactics by past scholars indicate that the cable news network, to encourage audience members with certain ideological inclinations to select it relies heavily on an ideological performance (Jones 2012), making its arch-conservative platform front and center and celebrating it as an antidote to all other news platforms, which it demonizes as "biased". This provides an implicit justification for Fox News's own arch-conservatism, by suggesting that it is simply depicting stories that more "mainstream" media is too biased to fairly show (Morris 2005), and thus encourages members of the viewing public already disinclined to trust other news sources to watch them instead.

At this point, the relationship between Fox News as a commercial media organization and the viewing audience as an economic institution also become apparent. The audience exists as an institution in commercial journalistic spaces because, through consumption of commercial media, it provides the profit needed for news organizations to survive (Figueroa 2017). Thus, commercial news organizations are motivated to produce and adjust content in such a way that it is more likely to attract a greater audience.

Accordingly, research has shown a shift in both Fox News and Fox News's audience's ideology over time. Specifically, as time passed from its founding to the modern day, Fox News audience members grew increasingly politically polarized as can be gleaned from analyzing survey and polling data and were more specifically looking for news content that had entertainment value and agreed with their personal views, a trend that can also be seen to a lesser extent with opposition ideologies and other cable news networks (Gramlich 2020). This put them in direct contrast with viewers of other cable news networks who were looking for news with more perceived informational value (Morris 2005). The heads of the Fox News network

recognized this trend, and both encouraged and took full advantage of it by adjusting content, even as doing so alienated the network from the political institutions like political parties that more conventional news organizations relied on for information sources (Peck 2019). Overall, it becomes clear that over time Fox News and other cable networks became aware of how both Performative Ideological Gestures and the Hostile Media Effect factored in as potential audience motivating factors, and sought to deliberately tailor their content in order to better invoke them in viewers.

Consequences of This Phenomenon

To begin with, it is worth noting that polarization as a phenomenon, and polarized news from cable news network, can have a tangible impact, particularly when it has a potential decline on the factual inaccuracy of news reporting. The very presence of inaccurate partisan news as a noticeable phenomenon causes a decrease in trust in more legitimate news sources (Ward 2017), largely because it makes it far more difficult for members of the public to discern what news is and is not trustworthy (Kirby et al 2018) and causes people to have to take additional steps to fact-check. Thus, even outside of Fox News's immediate audience the consequences of such a wide audience selecting it as a trustworthy source can still be felt.

One such consequence, and the one that is perhaps most immediately obvious, is the effect Fox News has had on its viewing public's political leanings, both via direct opinion-shaping and indirectly providing a platform for viewers to select and express their beliefs through. By analyzing political shifts among viewers between 2000 and 2012, one study found that among Fox News audience members, there had been a distinct rightward shift over time (Martin & Yurukoglu 2017), as, they contend, both viewers and the network gradually radicalized each other in an attempt to express their hostility at a supposedly biased media world

and to appeal to their audience, respectively. This is backed up by the feedback effect that was alluded to by Morris in 2005, indicating that audience motivations and perceptions are not static and can shift along with a network even after making their initial selection.

Research also indicates that in areas where Fox News is broadcast, a corresponding shift in opinion among local political elites has occurred in anticipation due to their desire to appeal to that segment of the populace (Clinton & Enamorado 2014), showing that audience selection of a given network can serve as a performative gesture of ideology for viewers and have corresponding influence on politics in that area.

It is also worth noting, however, that there is an ongoing debate over how much of the increasing political polarization among cable news network audiences can be attributed to the networks in and of themselves, even if there are consequences affecting how the networks conduct themselves. More recent research data collected via multiple online surveys suggests that there is little direct correlation between level of exposure to strongly partisan news sources and polarization (Wojcieszak et al 2021). This would imply that, to the extent that cable news network audiences have become more polarized over time, it is less likely to be the direct result of any action undertaken by the networks themselves and more likely to be due to other factors, with the networks merely further polarizing their content in order to better appeal to potential viewers, as the Uses and Gratifications readings of the rise of Fox News discussed above would imply.

Overall, the literature examined for this review through the framework of a combination of Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Hostile Media Effect, and Performative Ideological Gestures paints a fascinating portrait of what common factors exist among the institution of the viewing audience that may motivate the selection of a cable news network like Fox News as a

source, suggesting that a combination of perceptions of outsider hostility within other media sources, a desire for either entertaining or more informative content, and a way of both demonstrating one's ideology and fitting in with one's social circle can all act as factors. Individually, each of these theories offered a partial explanation for how cable news networks such as Fox News became so popular among the American public, but when combined together laid the groundwork for a much stronger understanding of the power dynamic in place between cable news networks and their viewers. Uses and Gratifications Theory offers the overall framework, with an emphasis on the viewer's place in the dynamic and a focus on motivating factors, the Hostile Media Effect offers a potential gratification in how viewers will, wanting to avoid bias, deliberately seek out networks they feel are not biased against them and shun those that are, and Performative Ideological Gestures imply a potential use in the form of deploying one's cable news network affiliation as a form of easy ideological practice, using their viewership of MSNBC or Fox News as a shorthand to others for their broader ideological affiliations, or choosing a certain network to demonstrate ideological loyalty to their social circle.

However, there remain some gaps in understanding the audience as an institution beyond political self-identification. The bulk of the sources I found, with a few exceptions, also predated several society-altering events in 2020 and beyond such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, and the January 2021 Capitol Riots, which may render them potentially out of date in their understanding of cable news networks' audiences. For that reason, I contend it is necessary to attain additional data, both to update our knowledge of the audience and to look for what factors beyond ideological loyalty and perceived bias may be in play, if any.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research has attempted to build on the growth of alternate perspectives on the rise of Fox News and other cable news networks by probing into potential non-partisan reasons for viewers to select Fox News as their network of choice. Previous studies have focused primarily on the partisan and polarization angle, which is understandable given how Fox News markets itself (Jones 2012). This study sought to branch out and build on the still-growing research area of examining the strength of non-partisan uses and gratifications, such as entertainment value, perception of family and friends, and amount of information content. Accordingly, this study sought answers to the following specific research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: Why do Fox News viewers choose Fox News as a source of information over other news sources, beyond reasons of partisanship?

RQ2: What do Fox News audience members perceive themselves as getting out of the experience of selecting and viewing Fox News, compared to how viewers of other cable news networks perceive their relationship with their networks of choice?

RQ3: To what extent is socialization and perception of outsider hostility a motivating factor in cable news viewers' selection of which cable news network to primarily view?

H1: Fox News viewers will be more likely than other cable news network viewers to name entertainment as important.

H2: Fox News viewers will be less likely than other cable news network viewers to name accuracy or information content amounts as areas that need improvement, either for their network of choice or for other networks.

Chapter 3: Method

The method utilized was a cross-sectional survey in the form of a survey conducted online utilizing Amazon's Mechanical Turk software. A cross-sectional survey was an ideal choice for these research questions because its design is best suited for determining the prevalence of certain attitudes or phenomenon within sections of the population (Kumar 2011). Mechanical Turk allows researchers to easily offer a financial award for completing a survey (which will help to incentivize responses), it has a large userbase (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis 2010), and the surveys have tools that make it easy to specify how many responses one desires and what sorts of participants one seeks. In addition, research indicates that Mechanical Turk's structure allows studies to avoid many of the problems present in other Internet questionnaires such as difficulty in attracting respondents and the ease in making clear which respondents one is seeking, and that studies conducted using it produce comparable results to those conducted in a laboratory, or via other online methods (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis 2010) if reasonable precautions are followed to screen for respondents not paying attention. Finally, Mechanical Turk also has a Sandbox function that allows for testing surveys before conducting them "live" with regular respondents, which provided room to make sure there were no unforeseen issues with the questions and sample size.

Study Design

The design of this study was an online survey conducted via Amazon Mechanical Turk, specifically asking for respondents who primarily utilize cable news networks as their source of information and who are residents of the United States. The questionnaire included a trick question in the form of a basic math problem to test respondents and filter out any not actually reading the questions (Kennedy et al 2020). In addition, it asked for both demographic

information (age range, ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation), their cable news network of choice, and the extent to which they accorded personal importance to various uses and gratifications via a Likert 1 to 5 scale.

Sampling

Due to the nature of the study and its theoretical origins, this method utilized judgmental sampling (Kumar 2011), or, in other words, looking for a certain number of people with a certain prerequisite of knowledge. More specifically, this survey called for a certain number of people who utilized cable news networks as a primary information source. Since this study was working from the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, and by extension needed to ask questions of people who it is assumed already possess certain preferences and implicit biases, it was counterproductive to use other forms of sampling that are designed to look at a general population and minimize the chances of those biases and preferences coloring the results. The population for this study consisted of all cable news network viewers. According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, the average prime time viewership for CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC in 2020 was about 1.8 million, almost 3.1 million, and almost 1.6 million respectively, for a total average number of cable news network viewers of just under 6.5 million. To achieve a representative sample of that population with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, Qualtrics' sample size calculator called for a sample size of 385 (Qualtrics 2021), so that was the minimum sample size that this study aimed to recruit, with the goal of having at least approximately 48% of the final respondents be Fox News Network viewers, to both aid in answering my research questions and to match the data of how many Fox News viewers there are in the population proportionate to other network viewers. The final cost of this study, including

both the \$0.25 financial incentive to each respondent and Amazon Mechanical Turk's user fees was \$325.65, which was paid for via a grant from the Thomas Duffy Fund.

This study set out to survey and analyze the results of viewers of all major American cable news networks instead of just Fox News Network viewers. This was done despite the past literature, hypotheses, and research questions primarily focusing on Fox News for in order to put the responses of Fox News Network viewers in greater context by offering multiple comparison points in the form of the responses of other cable news network viewers. Broadening the scope of the data collection also allowed for finding results of interest for future studies that can branch out from Fox News Network viewers, as much of the past literature around cable news networks and their audiences understandably centers around Fox News due to it mastering the art of catching on to what uses and gratifications audience members are likely to prioritize, and attempting to market itself in such a way as to appeal to those uses and gratifications, making it a well-established starting point for Uses and Gratifications Theory research in this context.

IRB approval was granted for this study prior to publishing the survey on Mechanical Turk.

Uses and Gratification Variables

Firstly, the survey had a screener question asking which news medium the respondent primarily consumes (Newspapers, Political Radio, Broadcast News, Social Media, Cable News, or Other). Answering "cable news" allowed the respondent to proceed to the medium-specific questions while any other response ended the survey immediately. These variables were taken from a 2008 study by Natalie Stroud, with the substitution of social media in place of political websites in order to keep the focus on what this study felt to be news mediums that the average respondent was more likely to use as a primary general source of information, as political

websites are more of a specialty news medium. Finally, respondents who selected cable news as their primary news medium of choice were prompted to select which cable news network they prefer among Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, or Other (Walker & Forman-Katz 2021, & Gramlich 2020).

Next, the survey obtained measurements of how respondents prioritized and perceived the different uses and gratifications that can potentially come into play when selecting a given cable news network over others. These were produced via a series of questions wherein respondents were asked to rate the level of importance they accorded both certain uses (entertainment value, accuracy, amount of information content, reinforcing personal beliefs) and gratifications (maintaining a social circle, reacting to perceived hostility in other media, demonstrating personal or ideological commitment to others) as potential personal motivating factors in selecting their cable news network of choice on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, with 1 marking that it is considered of no importance at all and 5 marking that it is considered of absolute importance. I developed the question wording, but the uses and gratifications they were testing were based on uses and gratifications examined by past literature that examined different methods by which news networks in general and Fox News in particular try to find and cultivate audiences (Dellavigna & Kaplan 2007, Morris 2007, Peck 2019, & Jones 2012).

Demographic Variable Instrumentation

Following the attainment of Uses and Gratifications measurements, the survey concluded by collecting demographic information, including gender (Male, Female, Nonbinary, or Other/Would Prefer Not to Say) (Igielnak 2020), age range (measured ordinally through ranges of 18-29, 30-49, 50-64, or 65+) (Auxier 2021), political identification (classified on a spectrum from Democrat/Lean-Democrat to Republican/Lean-Republican, with Independent in the

middle) (Auxier 2021, Gramlich 2020), and ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or Other/Would Prefer Not to Say) (Auxier 2021, Daniller 2021). Each of these questions and potential response variables were taken from multiple surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center over the course of 2020 and 2021 that provided useful data in each instance.

These variables could for the most part be measured by utilizing an ordinal scale, wherein the subgroups for each variable were ranked and arranged in a certain order, with the exception of certain aspects of the demographic information like political affiliation, which by its nature will require a nominal scale wherein the subgroups are grouped together but cannot be ranked. (Kumar 2011).

Data Processing/Analysis

For the most part, the survey data could be clearly slotted into categories for the purpose of measurement following an editing process to check for missing content and to filter out responses that missed the trick question and thus were suspect in their accuracy. More specifically, the results were examined to look for any clear correlations between certain demographic information (such as age range) and the uses and gratifications respondents gave the most importance. If, to use a hypothetical example, it was found that older viewers were more likely to prioritize information-dense content over entertainment-dense content, that would be a significant result that would be broken down and examined in further detail. In addition, in order to examine both the hypotheses and research questions, this study conducted a series of one-way ANOVA tests using SPSS to examine the relationship between the independent variable of news network affiliation and the dependent variables of prioritization of different uses and

gratifications, so as to gain a better understanding of what influence if any that might have compared to demographic factors.

Additional Details

The survey was pre-tested via Qualtrics' preview feature, with no immediate errors in question wording or formatting uncovered at that time, and published from March 14 to March 22 2022. The data was analyzed via one-way ANOVA f-tests. These were done because this survey collected a series of variables with multiple categories, with network affiliation and demographic details such as age range serving as the independent variables and rating of various uses and gratifications on a 1-5 Likert scale as the dependent variables. Given the multi-category nature of the independent and dependent variables, and the fact those variables could differ in how many categories there were, one-way ANOVA f-tests were the method that allowed for the most ease of interpretation.

Chapter 4: Results

Before delving into the details of the results, it is important to establish the final population size and demographic proportions of both the overall population and each network’s viewers. This study had a final valid respondent total of 510, putting the results well above the minimum that was required to get results within a reasonable margin of confidence. The average respondent was in the age range of 30-49, male, and self-identified as Leaning-Democrat. Enclosed below are the statistical breakdowns of network affiliation by gender, age range, ethnicity, and political affiliation, as well as the overall sample population’s breakdown by network affiliation.

Table 1:
Table of valid responses for independent variable of news network of choice by dependent variable of gender identity.

| Network/Gender | Male | Female | Non-binary/third gender | Prefer not to say |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| CNN | 54.2% (168) | 46.4% (90) | 0.0% (0) | 100.0% (1) |
| Fox News | 34.5% (107) | 37.6% (73) | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) |
| MSNBC | 6.8% (21) | 9.3% (18) | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 4.5% (14) | 6.7% (13) | 100.0% (2) | 0.0% (0) |

Table 2:

Table of valid responses for independent variable of news network of choice by dependent variable of ethnicity.

| Network/Ethnicity | White | Black or African American | Native American | Asian | Other | Would prefer not to say |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------|-------------------------|
| CNN | 50.6% (163) | 50.0% (24) | 62.5% (5) | 50.8% (60) | 55.6% (5) | 100.0% (2) |
| Fox News | 39.1% (126) | 37.5% (18) | 25.0% (2) | 26.3% (31) | 33.3% (3) | 0.0% (0) |
| MSNBC | 5.9% (19) | 10.4% (5) | 12.5% (1) | 11.9% (14) | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 4.3% (14) | 2.1% (1) | 0.0% (0) | 11.0% (13) | 11.1% (1) | 0.0% (0) |

Table 3:

Table of valid responses for independent variable of news network of choice by dependent variable of age range.

| Network/Age | 18-29 | 30-49 | 50-64 | 65+ |
|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| CNN | 51.8% (71) | 52.5% (147) | 53.4% (31) | 31.3% (10) |
| Fox News | 35.8% (49) | 35.4% (99) | 32.8% (19) | 40.6% (13) |
| MSNBC | 9.5% (13) | 5.7% (16) | 6.9% (4) | 18.8% (6) |

| | | | | |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Other (Please Specify) | 2.9% (4) | 6.4% (18) | 6.9% (4) | 9.4% (3) |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|

Table 4:
Table of valid responses for independent variable of news network of choice by dependent variable of political self-identification.

| Network/Politics | Democrat | Lean-Democrat | Independent | Lean-Republican | Republican |
|------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------|------------|
| CNN | 49.1% (112) | 62.7% (32) | 56.8% (71) | 35.5% (11) | 45.8% (33) |
| Fox News | 36.8% (84) | 21.6% (11) | 27.2% (34) | 58.1% (18) | 45.8% (33) |
| MSNBC | 10.1% (23) | 2.0% (1) | 8.8% (11) | 3.2% (1) | 4.2% (3) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 3.9% (9) | 13.7% (7) | 7.2% (9) | 3.2% (1) | 4.2% (3) |

Table 5:
Table of valid responses for question of primary cable news network choice.

| Network | Percent |
|------------------------|-------------|
| CNN | 51.7% (260) |
| Fox News | 35.7% (182) |
| MSNBC | 7.6% (39) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 5.7% (29) |

Miscellaneous fill-in responses included “local news,” as well as a host of international news networks, Bloomberg, and C-span. This sample population’s overall breakdown between the different networks was different from the overall population of American cable news network viewers as established by the 2021 Pew Research study used as reference, with a higher proportion of CNN viewers and a lower proportion of Fox News Network viewers. There was also a notable oddity in the number of respondents who claimed to both primarily watch Fox News and self-identify as Democrats, a notable anomaly due to how it differed from past examinations of that network’s viewers and that network’s primary target audience (Gramlich 2020, Jones 2012).

Testing Hypotheses and Research Questions

H1 hypothesized that Fox News viewers would be more likely than other cable news network viewers to name entertainment as important. This hypothesis was not supported. This was tested by performing a one-way ANOVA test on the relationship between the independent variable of network affiliation and the dependent variable of prioritization of entertainment value as a use.

Table 6:
Table of the relationship between the independent variable of Network affiliation and the dependent variable of prioritization of entertainment value.

| Network | Mean |
|----------|------|
| CNN | 3.44 |
| Fox News | 3.41 |
| MSNBC | 2.69 |

| | |
|------------------------------|------|
| Other (Please Specify) | 2.97 |
|------------------------------|------|

The results of this one-way ANOVA test, $F(3, 506) = 5.905, p < 0.001$, demonstrated the effect of network affiliation was significant for prioritization of entertainment value, but not for the networks where a difference was predicted. Specifically, this relationship was similarly strong with both Fox News Network viewers and CNN viewers, suggesting that either H1 was too narrow in scope in solely attributing such a relationship to Fox News Network viewers or errors in population distribution threw off the results. For this reason, this study rejects the first hypothesis that Fox News Network viewers will be more likely than viewers of other networks to prioritize entertainment value.

H2 hypothesized that Fox News viewers would be less likely than other cable news network viewers to name accuracy or information content amounts as areas that needed improvement, either for their network of choice or for other networks. H2 was not supported. This was tested by performing an analysis on the relationship between network affiliation and prioritization of entertainment value as a use, to examine what percentage of viewers of each network selected certain uses and gratifications as areas that needed improvement. It should be noted again that the questions used to test this hypothesis allowed respondents to select all answers they felt applied, instead of just choosing one option above all others.

Table 7:

Table of relationship between the independent variable of preferred cable news network and the dependent variable of perceived areas that need improvement in one's preferred network.

| Network/Own Network Improvement | Entertainment Value | Accuracy | Amount of information content | Bias | Other (Please Specify) | I do not feel my network of choice needs improvement |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------------------|--|
| CNN | 24.1% (123) | 29.8% (152) | 23.9% (122) | 16.3% (83) | 50.0% (3) | 50.0% (29) |
| Fox News | 20.6% (105) | 21.4% (109) | 21.8% (111) | 10.6% (64) | 16.7% (1) | 25.9% (15) |
| MSNBC | 3.5% (18) | 3.9% (20) | 4.1% (21) | 3.5% (18) | 0.0% (0) | 10.3% (6) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 1.4% (7) | 2.4% (12) | 2.7% (14) | 1.0% (5) | 33.3% (2) | 13.8% (8) |

As demonstrated in table 7, Fox News Network viewers noticeably lagged behind CNN viewers in naming accuracy as an area that needed improvement in their preferred network, giving near-equal priority to both amount of information content and entertainment value. This is in contrast with CNN viewers, who did have a majority list entertainment value and amount of information content as areas that needed improvement when asked to select areas they felt their network of choice could use improvement in, but had an even larger majority list accuracy, compared to Fox News viewers who listed the three near-equally.

Table 8:

Table of relationship between the independent variable of preferred cable news network and the dependent variable of perceived areas that need improvement in other networks.

| Network/Other Network Improvement | Entertainment Value | Accuracy | Amount of information content | Bias | Other (please specify) | I do not feel my network of choice needs improvement |
|---|------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|--|
| CNN | 20.8% (106) | 31.0% (158) | 24.7% (126) | 24.1% (123) | 0.6% (3) | 2.4% (12) |
| Fox News | 16.3% (83) | 23.9% (122) | 18.2% (93) | 15.7% (80) | 0.6% (3) | 0.6% (3) |
| MSNBC | 3.1% (16) | 5.9% (30) | 3.7% (22) | 8.0% (19) | 0.6% (3) | 0.0% (0) |
| Other (Please Specify) | 1.2% (6) | 3.9% (20) | 3.1% (10) | 6.7% (16) | 0.0% (0) | 0.6% (3) |

The results in table 8 demonstrated similar results to those in table 7, but with a few key changes that show potentially significant differences in how viewers of certain cable news networks view other networks. In the case of both Fox News viewers and CNN viewers, there was a notable uptick in respondents who listed bias as an area of improvement for other networks compared to their own network. In the case of both CNN and Fox News viewers, there was also a decrease in naming entertainment value as an area that needed improvement in other networks, compared to naming it as an area that needed improvement in their own network. Finally, Fox News viewers showed a slight decrease in naming amount of information content as an area of improvement in other networks compared to their own network, though not to a particularly significant extent. Overall, this study accepts the hypothesis that Fox News viewers will be less likely than other cable news network viewers to name accuracy or information content amount as areas that need improvement in either their own or other networks, though with the caveat that the difference in terms of how much less prioritized accuracy and information content compared to other network viewers is smaller than was originally hypothesized from past literature.

RQ1 asked why Fox News viewers selected Fox News as a source of information over other news sources, beyond reasons of partisanship. In order to test and find answers for this, multiple one-way ANOVA tests were conducted examining the relationship between both Fox News Network and other cable news network viewers and different non-partisans uses and gratifications, including entertainment value (as shown in table 2) and the perception of family and friends.

Table 9:

Table of relationship between the independent variable of preferred cable news network and the dependent variable of rating of perception of friends and family as motivating factor.

| Network | Mean |
|------------------------|------|
| CNN | 3.06 |
| Fox News | 3.23 |
| MSNBC | 2.62 |
| Other (Please Specify) | 2.31 |

As discussed when examining H1, there is indeed a statistically significant relationship between Fox News affiliation and prioritizing entertainment value, but it is not exclusive to Fox News viewers, casting doubt on it as a significant motivating factor for choosing it over other cable news networks. However, the results of the one-way ANOVA test displayed in table 9, $F(3, 505) = 4.942, p = 0.002$, indicate that there is in fact a potential statistically significant relationship between Fox News network viewership and the perception of what others in one's social circle thought of one's news choice. If future studies bear this relationship out, this would imply an additional non-partisan motivating factor behind network selection in addition to entertainment value.

RQ2, which asked what Fox News audience members perceived themselves as getting out of the experience of selecting and viewing Fox News, compared to how viewers of other cable news networks perceive their relationship with their networks of choice, remains similarly unclear following this study. As shown in table 6 and table 9, both CNN and Fox News network viewers displayed similar results in what uses and gratifications they prioritized, and the population sizes for MSNBC viewers and miscellaneous network viewers were too small to glean significant results out of on their own, though the presence of some potentially interesting

results that could be verified at a later point with a better-distributed population led to this study utilizing one-way ANOVA tests to examine the data as a whole regardless, such as MSNBC viewers having a far larger majority that rated Entertainment as a prioritized use at 1, or the lowest possible value to rate it in terms of importance, than viewers of any other network at 12 out of 39, or 30.8%.

RQ3, which asked the extent to which socialization and perception of outsider hostility was a motivating factor in cable news viewers’ selection of network, showed similarly unclear results. While socialization factors such as perception of family and friends of one’s news network choice showed strong signs of having a statistically significant relationship with network choice, a one-way ANOVA test analyzing the relationship between the independent variable of preferred cable news network and the dependent variable of prioritization of avoiding bias as a motivating factor showed no significant relationship between the two.

Table 10:
Table of relationship between the independent variable of preferred cable news network and the dependent variable of rating of avoiding bias and hostility from other networks and groups as motivating factor.

| Network | Mean |
|------------------------|------|
| CNN | 3.61 |
| Fox News | 3.64 |
| MSNBC | 3.59 |
| Other (Please Specify) | 3.38 |

The results of this one-way ANOVA test, $F(3, 505) = .446, p = 0.720$, suggest that there is not a statistically significant strong relationship between network choice and avoiding bias, likely because as shown in table 6 a sizable majority of viewers of all networks rated avoiding bias highly instead of it being closely affiliated with any particular network's viewers.

Other Findings

While it was not an initial major focus of this thesis project, due to the research questions and hypotheses focusing on how viewers of different networks placed different uses and gratifications, when reviewing the data a curious trend appeared. In several instances, while conducting one-way ANOVA tests examining the relationship between demographic aspects such as age range and political self-identification and prioritization of certain uses and gratifications like information amount, there was a stronger statistically significant relationship. In particular, the results of the one-way ANOVA test comparing the independent variable of age range and the dependent variable of rating of information amount showed a strong positive relationship between the two, with $F(3, 503) = 3.328, p = 0.019$, while the one-way ANOVA test comparing the relationship between the independent variable of political self-identification and the dependent variable of perception of one's friends and family of news media choices showed a positive relationship between strength of political self-identification and rating of perception of one's friends and family, with $F(4, 502) = 9.014, p < 0.001$.

Table 11:
Table of the relationship between the independent variable of age range and the dependent variable of rating of amount of information shared as a motivating factor.

| Network | Mean |
|---------|------|
| 18-29 | 3.96 |

| | |
|-------|------|
| 30-49 | 3.97 |
| 50-64 | 4.29 |
| 65+ | 4.28 |

Table 12:
Table of the relationship between the independent variable of political self-identification and the dependent variable of perception of one’s friends and family that supports one’s beliefs as a motivating factor.

| Network | Mean |
|-----------------|------|
| Democrat | 3.26 |
| Lean-Democrat | 3.18 |
| Independent | 2.20 |
| Lean-Republican | 2.26 |
| Republican | 3.07 |

In both tests, the resulting p-value showed a relationship of greater statistical significance than was present when examining the relationship between network loyalty and prioritization of the same two uses and gratifications. Respondents who identified strongly as either a Democrat, Independent, or Republican showed a noticeably stronger tendency towards rating perception of one’s friends and family higher than respondents who identified as leaning either Democrat or

Republican, and as respondents grew older they began to value amount of information more highly on average, as can be seen in table 11, with respondents in both the 50-64 and 65+ range having a mean response of 4 or higher on the likert scale.

Chapter 5: Discussion

To briefly summarize the results, this study found both hypotheses H1 and H2 to be unsupported due to being too narrow in scope. Each of those hypotheses attempted to attribute certain patterns of prioritizing uses and gratifications to viewers of the Fox News Network, only for the analysis of data to indicate that these prioritizations are more characteristic of cable news network viewers in general rather than characteristic of viewers of any particular network. Research questions RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 were in a similarly murky area, wherein it was questionable at best whether there existed a uniquely significant association between Fox News Network viewers and certain motivations and perceived gains from watching, or whether the trends found were associated with cable news network viewers as a whole. The results of this study were as a whole inconclusive, at least in regard to the hypotheses and research questions it originally set out to answer.

While there were certain results of statistical note, including CNN viewers having a similarly high prioritization of entertainment value as Fox News viewers, viewers of both CNN and Fox News being more likely to name entertainment value as an area that needed improvement in their own network compared to other networks, and a potential implication that Fox News viewers have a stronger relationship with valuing the perception family and friends will have on their news choice than viewers of other networks, these results were either not directly related to the present research questions and hypotheses, or contradicted them, leaving the overall results a mixed bag.

These results intersected in a divisive way with past literature. Some past studies have found strong significant relationships between perceptions of certain uses and gratifications like entertainment or avoiding bias and affiliation with a particular network (Morris 2007,

DellaVigna & Kaplan 2007). If these results were taken into account, it would have been expected that this study would have shown much stronger associations between Fox News specifically and valuing entertainment value and avoiding bias. However, the actual results showed significant but not especially strong associations between Fox News viewers and these uses and gratifications, with CNN viewers showing similar associations, which would suggest that this study had flaws in population distribution that led it to reach inconsistent conclusions such as the lack of strong association between avoiding bias and any specific network. This study's findings on Fox News viewers having a stronger relationship with valuing the perception family and friends will have of their news choice than viewers of other networks also has potential implications from the lens of Performative Ideological Gestures, as it could be interpreted as them making news choices for the sake of what people close to them will think. On the other hand, at least one more modern study has also found that past scholars may have overstated the influence certain factors such as the hostile media effect and perceived bias may have on the audience (Wojcieszak et al 2021). If this is taken into account, that could imply that this study's results are on the right track in terms of partisan uses and gratifications being less significant than previously assumed compared to non-partisan uses and gratifications, and several uses and gratifications being more generally held as values by cable news network audiences as a whole instead of viewers of any one particular network, even if there remains more work to be done in verifying the results and gleaning more information in order to ascertain the accuracy of this study's specific results.

While unrelated to the hypotheses and research questions originally formulated, what showed the most promise when conducting this study was the much stronger than originally expected association between age range and valuing of information amount, as well as the

association between political identification and valuing of perception of friends and family. To recap, in general as respondents grew older, they grew more likely on average to highly value information amount, while more explicit political identification (outright Republican, Democrat, or Independent instead of lean-Democrat or lean-Republican) had a stronger, statistically significant association with more highly valuing the perception of friends and family. These associations suggest that this study as it was originally formulated may have been overly focused on breaking down the differences between each cable news network and how viewers perceived them, which provided limited data compared to the question of what details and aspects of a person's life may cause them to value certain aspects of the news-consuming experience over others, such as people possibly prioritizing amount of information more as they grew older. Before going into the larger implications of these results, however, it is important to discuss potential caveats to this study.

Given the results, it is highly possible that the initial arranging of theory components as outlined in the literature review may have been incorrect. In the case of Performative Ideological Gestures in particular, it appeared that the desire to performatively demonstrate one's ideology via media choice only carried to those in one's immediate social circle, as respondents showed no statistically significant prioritization of how strangers and outsiders may perceive their media choice, suggesting that while it is likely present as originally theorized its degree of influence is smaller and more focused.

Limitations

Multiple potential challenges and limitations existed primarily due to this study's nature as an online survey. Fox News' audience trends over 60 years old on average according to demographic data (Businesswire 2021), while the average age of Mechanical Turk's subject pool

trended younger, though still older than other online resources for conducting questionnaires (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis 2010), which meant that there was potentially going to be a problem collecting sufficient numbers of primary Fox News viewers to answer our research questions in full even if more general information about cable news network audiences.

Collecting demographic information from respondents allowed for comparing the sample to the average demographics of the population, so that resulting qualifications to the results could be accounted for and addressed.

The ratios between different cable news networks were less than ideal, as the Fox News Network viewer respondent percentage was lower and the CNN viewer respondent percentage higher than would be truly representative as indicated by the 2021 Pew Research Center study used to determine sample population size. There was also a dearth of respondents who viewed networks other than CNN or Fox News, with both MSNBC and miscellaneous network viewers accounting for a very small amount of the sample population relative to their actual population size, though they were included when calculating data regardless to gain the most complete picture possible, as well as to look for potential anomalies to verify in future studies with more accurate sample population distributions. Several miscellaneous network viewers also seemingly misunderstood the fill-in question, writing in non-cable news networks for their response, leaving the validity of that admittedly small category of respondents questionable. This was the reason for primarily focusing on the responses of CNN and Fox News viewers in Chapters 3 and 4, as the respondents associated with other networks were too few in number for the results to be statistically reliable despite potential results of note such as MSNBC viewers far more overwhelmingly rating entertainment value at a 1, the lowest possible value, compared to viewers of other networks.

It should also be noted that there was a very statistically troubling anomaly in the political breakdown of respondents. More specifically, the fact that Fox News Network viewers on this survey trended majority Democrat or Lean-Democrat. Such a result is near-unprecedented, and it must be admitted leads to results involving those respondents being heavily qualified. There are multiple possible explanations for why this could be, ranging from respondents lying about either primarily watching Fox News or their political affiliation to mislead the survey, to them being genuine viewers of Fox News but for reasons aside from agreeing with its content, to an anomaly borne out of Mechanical Turk's own political demographic ratios, though I have not been able to uncover a specific cause. Due to the highly anomalous nature of these results compared to virtually all past studies and literature, however, it is likely safest to assume that there was something untoward taking place with the respondents.

It is also worth noting that, due to the above-mentioned average age trends of Mechanical Turk's userbase, respondents largely trended younger, with 18-29 and 30-49 respondents accounting for a sizable majority of responses compared to the actual population of national cable news network viewers, which may have impacted results. Some of the above-mentioned demographic difficulties may have been caused by the restrictions on which Mechanical Turk users had access to the survey link being either overly lenient (due to simply asking for American cable news network viewers), or by being available for too short a time and having a low requested sample population, both of which may have inhibited fully vetting responses before the survey's publication was already finished.

Outside of the questionability of the final sample population, several of the survey questions themselves could have been written and designed more elegantly in hindsight. The Likert scale questions were all needlessly verbose, for example, and may have caused anomalous

results by being too long and repetitive to read for the average respondent. This study also erred by restricting the “improvement areas for your own network/other networks” area of the survey to two “check all that apply” questions, rather than applying the same Likert scale formula that was used for the uses and gratifications section. This not only may have tainted the data by again making the question and list of possible responses too long, but also restricted how much statistical analysis could be done to compare the results of these past two questions to the study’s intended independent variables, a problem that would have been avoided if the same Likert scale formatting had been used (which would have allowed for continued one-way ANOVA f-tests).

Despite these shortcomings, however, this survey is a diamond in the rough, and provided data that, with further verification and refinement through future studies that can capture a larger, more representative population of the American cable news-viewing public, could offer stronger insight into what makes cable news audiences tick.

Implications and Avenues of Future Study

If taken as true, the results of this study have multiple potential implication for journalism as a field. It would reinforce a trend that has been growing since the establishment of Uses and Gratifications Theory that aspects of an individual’s background and personality play a larger role in cable news media consumption and absorption than have been previously assumed. They may also reinforce the idea that socialization-based uses and gratifications are of equal relevance to partisan uses and gratifications such as avoiding bias, and should be accorded equal importance even in the face of partisan uses and gratifications becoming a more tempting explanation to jump to in the wake of increasing political polarization. Given the increasing relevance of uses and gratifications in an era where shifts in journalism have greatly increased the audience’s options across multiple mediums, news organizations, and levels of corporate

power, it is important to gauge what uses and gratifications are relevant to specific news mediums and groups of news organizations, such as the major cable news networks. Ascertaining which uses and gratifications are best applied to which mediums and organizations will be a top priority for such a study.

While further studies would be required to be certain, it appeared when examining the data compared to the results of past literature that cable news network affiliation has become less important, with the specific act of primarily using cable news as one's primary source of news information being a larger indicator of what uses and gratifications one values than the specific cable news network viewed. This could be seen in how demographic aspects like age and political identification carried more statistically significant associations with certain uses and gratifications such as amount of information and perception of friends and family than the cable news network they were affiliated with. While there are some uses and gratifications that do show a more significant association with network choice, such as entertainment value, the significance is relatively weak enough that it may still be more tied to the respondents' preference for cable news in general than to any specific network affiliation.

This, however, raises new questions: what prioritized uses and gratifications may inform selecting cable news networks over other news mediums? To what extent do demographic aspects such as age or political self-identification impact news medium choice? How do multi-medium news organizations factor into these studies, particularly as several news organizations begin branching into social media and video-sharing websites like YouTube? Do different mediums serve to satisfy different uses and gratifications? This is all, of course, assuming that the results of this study do in fact indicate that medium matters more than network, which as

established may not be the case following future verification, though many of these research questions could bear useful information nonetheless.

In considering these questions, there are several potential future research routes that could be taken that may provide insight. One would be to conduct a similar survey but excise the cable news network question and instead place cable news alongside other news mediums such as newspapers, social media, and news radio, to see whether news medium has a stronger positive or negative relationship with rating of different uses and gratifications compared to the relationship between specific media selections within a medium and rating of uses and gratifications. Another potential follow-up would be a replication of this study that goes into more detail on asking for demographic information as well as specifically asking what draws respondents to their network of choice, so as to get a better sense of audience motivations and how demographic details or valued uses and gratifications may inform news network choice. It may also be potentially insightful to supplement these studies with an examination into the marketing aspect via qualitative research, conducting content analysis of how each major American cable news network advertises itself in different regions and mediums, and how audiences responded to them. If these advertising methods match up with audience uses and gratifications established in prior studies, that could demonstrate a potential wrinkle in the power dynamics between private news networks and audiences, and how the former are required to play to the preferences of the latter in order to stay afloat.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Fundamentally, while the results of this survey may be potentially flawed in certain areas, the general trends they indicate and the suggestion that personal details have more impact on prioritizing different uses and gratifications than network loyalty based on the stronger p-values displayed when examining the former would bear out the broad idea that it is ultimately people who form their own motivations, rather than having them imprinted on them by news media.

This is a statement that is of particular relevance when discussing a highly privatized news medium like cable news, as its high popularity and lack of oversight from regulatory bodies has left both journalists and scholars concerned about the potentially malignant influences cable news networks can have on society, either from promoting political polarization (Arcenaux et al 2012), spreading misinformation without oversight (Bursztyn et al 2020), or altering the voting and behavioral patterns of the general public and political elites alike (Clinton & Enamorado 2014, DellaVigna & Kaplan 2007). While there has been some recent pushback against this idea as time goes on and suggestions that the effect news media has on polarization is overstated (Wojcieszak et al 2021), it is still largely considered conventional wisdom even among the general public. For this reason, it is important to continue researching the dynamic between cable news networks and audiences, so as to ascertain with as much certainty as can be managed whether it is these private networks who are pulling the strings of the public, or if audiences have more agency than they are traditionally given credit for.

It is for this reason that Uses and Gratifications theory is so important as a theoretical model for examining this issue, as its emphasis on audience motivations and agency makes it a very attractive, viable option for examining a dynamic as complex as the relationship between cable news networks and their audiences, as due to the heavily privatized nature of cable news

and its high emphasis on ratings even compared to other news mediums means it is uniquely dependent on catering to audience desires to remain afloat.

Appendix A:

Survey Questions:

1. You are being invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to identify audience motivations behind selecting a cable news network of choice. You are being asked to provide your preferences in cable news network content, offer areas where you feel your primary cable news network of choice and other cable news networks could use improvement, and provide some basic demographic information. Your participation should last up to 10 minutes. For your time and effort, we will be offering compensation in the amount of \$0.25. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access. If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at aaron.senk@mail.missouri.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.
Do you offer your consent to have your responses to this survey be collected and analyzed for the purpose of the described research project?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. (If “Yes” was answered, otherwise survey closes) What is your primary news media resource?
 - a. Newspapers
 - b. Political Radio
 - c. Cable News
 - d. Social Media
 - e. Other
3. (If “Cable News” was answered, otherwise survey closes) Which network do you most commonly watch for news?
 - a. CNN
 - b. Fox News
 - c. MSNBC
 - d. Other (please specify)
4. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on entertainment value when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

5. What is 60 divided by 12?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 5
 - e. 4
6. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on accuracy of content when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
7. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on amount of information conveyed when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
8. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on what friends or family will think about your viewing choice when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
9. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on avoiding bias against you and your beliefs when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
10. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place on finding information that supports your beliefs when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

11. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important, how much importance do you place demonstrating your beliefs through your news choice to others when considering which cable news network to watch?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
12. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other/Would Prefer Not to Say
13. What is your ethnicity?
 - a. White
 - b. Black
 - c. Hispanic
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native American
 - f. Other/Would Prefer Not to Say
14. What is your age?
 - a. 18-29
 - b. 30-49
 - c. 50-64
 - d. 65+
15. How would you identify your personal politics?
 - a. Democrat
 - b. Lean-Democrat
 - c. Independent
 - d. Lean-Republican
 - e. Republican
16. In which of the following areas do you feel your primary cable news network could use improvement? Mark all that are applicable.
 - a. Entertainment value
 - b. Accuracy
 - c. Amount of information content
 - d. Bias
 - e. Other (please specify)
 - f. I do not feel my network of choice needs improvement
17. In which of the following areas do you feel the cable news networks other than the one you primarily watch could use improvement? Mark all that are applicable.
 - a. Entertainment value
 - b. Accuracy
 - c. Amount of information content
 - d. Bias
 - e. Other (please specify)
 - f. I do not feel that other cable news networks could use improvement

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