

IV

Contextualizing Media Diversity and Localism: Audience Behavior and New Technologies

PAGE PROOFS

Diversity of Exposure

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Policymakers have wrestled with the concept of media diversity for decades. Typically, their attention has focused on either the diversity of sources or the diversity of content available to the public. While these are important considerations, they ignore a crucial question. What do audience members do with the media options they have? Do they consume a varied diet of program types and ideas, or binge on the equivalent of junk food? Is there diversity of exposure? The data and methodological tools needed to answer these questions in a nonconjectural way already exist. Those answers could provide a useful “reality check” as we consider the meaning of diversity in the new media environment.

TYPES OF DIVERSITY

Napoli (1999) has suggested a useful framework for thinking about media diversity. He argues that the concept can be understood as having three component parts: (a) source diversity, (b) content diversity, and (c) exposure diversity. There is an extensive literature on the first two types of diversity (e.g., Einstein, 2004), but, as Napoli notes, the latter has been largely neglected. This chapter comments briefly on the first two, and then expands on the idea of diversity of exposure.

Source diversity can include ownership diversity or workforce diversity. In the current media environment, it’s hard to argue that there is not at least a numerical diversity of sources. Over 80% of U.S. television households subscribe to some sort of “alternative delivery system” providing programming above

and beyond local broadcast outlets. Indeed, Nielsen Media Research has reported that the average U.S. home receives over 100 channels of programming (Nielsen Media Research, 2004). Obviously the Internet and DVDs offer the public even more choices. Of course, a single corporation can control multiple outlets and multiple owners can replicate content, so having many sources is largely meaningless if there is no corresponding diversity of content across those channels of communication.

Content diversity can include differences in program types, a demographic diversity of the characters represented in media, and, perhaps most important for First Amendment purposes, a diversity of ideas or viewpoints. Many policymakers would content themselves with an empirical demonstration that the public had access to diverse content offerings. Frankly, in a world with hundreds of TV channels and millions of Web sites from which to choose, even the more elusive content diversity would be hard to avoid. What is most interesting, and critical to understanding the diversity question, is how people do or do not make use of that universe of content.

This brings us to the concept of “diversity of exposure,” the forgotten stepchild of the policy debate. Napoli (1999) categorized diversity of exposure into two types: horizontal and vertical. The former refers to the distribution of audiences across content options or channels. This is akin to the concept of audience fragmentation that so occupies the attention of media industries. The latter refers to the diversity of content consumed by individuals. This is related to a feature of mass behavior called “audience polarization” (Webster & Phalen, 1997). Evidence of polarization is much harder to come by, although it can be extracted from the data routinely collected by audience measurement companies like Nielsen and Arbitron. Getting a handle on both types of exposure diversity is essential to completing the picture on media diversity.

OUR HOPES AND FEARS

Before jumping into a study of what media people actually consume, it’s worth reflecting on what patterns of exposure may be welcome or worrisome. There are four scenarios that should be considered. Each has strong normative overtones.

One Generalist

One possibility, at least in theory, is that everyone attends to one general interest source of content. This is consistent with the notion of a common “public sphere” (Habermas, 1991), and is a model that seems to underlie much First

Amendment theory. Here, citizens participate in a public forum where diverse ideas can be circulated and weighed. In the end, consensus, or perhaps even the truth, may emerge. This is rather like the old world of Israel's publicly owned broadcast monopoly, wistfully described by Katz (1998):

Television controlled by the Broadcasting Authority was the only show in town. Within two years of its inauguration, almost all households owned television sets, and almost everybody watched almost everything on the one monopolistic channel. From the beginning, strong emphasis was placed on news and public affairs. (p. 105)

In such a media environment, no horizontal diversity of exposure is possible because only one channel is available. Vertical diversity—the diet of content that each individual consumes—is essentially a function of what is served up by the monopolist.

Even if such a common sphere existed at some point in history—and there is reason to doubt it did (Schudson, 1992)—it is certainly long gone from the modern media marketplace. Still, it serves as a useful model against which other possibilities can be judged.

Generalists With Many Specialists

A second scenario is that general interest media are augmented by many more specialized sources of content. The latter would cater to smaller communities of interest—or what Sunstein (2001) called “enclaves.” This is the model that Katz (1998) identified as the democratic ideal:

If one were designing a participatory democracy, one would make provision for a central space in which all citizens could gather together and for dispersed spaces in which they could meet in smaller, more homogeneous groups. Ideally, the agenda would be agreed upon in the central space (forum, agora, town meeting), mulled over in the dispersed spaces (café, salon, club, trade union hall, party headquarters), and returned for debate and decision to the central space. In the era of mass society and mass communication, these spaces would be served even cloned, by generalized media dedicated to the polity as a whole, and specialized media dedicated to the citizens' need to know what like- or right-minded others are thinking. (p. 99)

This is an appealing model similar to Sunstein's (2001) blend of enclaves and “general interest intermediaries,” and Fraser's (1992) description of “subaltern counterpublics” within the larger public sphere. Here, horizontal diver-

sity is achieved because the audience is spread across both types of content. Under this model we would expect to see people watching special interest programming but spending considerable time with general interest fare.

Specialists Without Polarization

Another possibility worth considering is that the new media environment will be populated exclusively by special interest media. This would mean the end of general interest outlets, or, less kindly put, programming aimed at “the lowest common denominator.” Under this scenario, the media, in effect, offer a vast buffet of exotic foods including many local delicacies, and we discover that people are inclined to sample a little of each. Here the audience is not polarized into exclusive communities of interest, but exhibits more catholic tastes. Of course, much of what we know about human behavior, and our penchant for selective exposure, suggests we will do otherwise. Still, there is some evidence that social elites are becoming more “omnivorous” in their consumption of cultural products (Holt, 1998; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

In such a world, there is considerable horizontal diversity, as the mass audience is distributed across a multitude of offerings, and there is vertical diversity, because everyone consumes a varied diet.

Specialists With Polarization

The very idea of specialized media, however, suggests a degree of polarization. Such materials are designed to appeal to some while being ignored by others. It’s quite possible, then, that each specialized outlet will create an enclave of loyalists who attend to “like-minded” speech, whereas the rest of the public remains either uninterested or uninvited. Although this kind of world might pass muster with those who advocate consumer sovereignty and a “market economics” view of policymaking, it is a troubling prospect for those who advocate a social values approach (Entman & Wildman, 1992; Sunstein, 2001).

It’s in this spirit that Sunstein (2001) warns of new media that filter content and the consequent rise in “group polarization”:

An understanding of group polarization casts light on the potential effects not only of the Internet but also of radio and television, at least if stations are numerous and many take a well-defined point of view. Recall that mere exposure to the positions of others creates group polarization. It follows that this effect will be at work for nondeliberating groups, in the form of collections of individuals whose communications choices go in the same direction, and who do not expose themselves to alternative positions. (p. 73)

In much the same vein, Turow (1997) sees technology and advertiser-driven programming dividing America into the equivalent of “gated communities,” and Gitlin (1998) suggests that the public sphere is being broken into “sphericules.”

Superficially, this world looks rather like the scenario of specialists without polarization. That is, in either case, the mass audience is distributed across a variety of specialized content options, each winning a tiny share of the market. However, beneath this veneer, there is no vertical diversity because each person consumes an unvaried, and presumably unhealthy, diet.

MEASURING DIVERSITY OF EXPOSURE

How best to measure exposure diversity? It is useful to consider three potential units of analysis: (a) viewer-centric measures, (b) content-centric measures, and (c) channel-centric measures. The focus here is on the medium of television, although the same conceptual framework might be applied to other media. I’ll also address behavioral measures that could be constructed from the databases created in the day-to-day business of audience measurement. In the case of U.S. television, this would be the data collected by Nielsen in either its national (NTI) or local (NSI) samples. Exploiting existing data has two important advantages: first, the cost of collecting the data has already been incurred so a secondary analysis should, in theory,² be relatively inexpensive; and second, Nielsen methods and numbers are well understood in media industries, and so have a degree of credibility that is difficult to match in customized studies.

Viewer-Centric Measures

The most obvious way to measure vertical diversity is to track the consumption patterns of individuals over time. We know, for example, that of the 100+ channels available in a typical home, an average household actually views fewer than 15 in a typical week (Nielsen Media Research, 2004). People maintain surprisingly small “repertoires” even in the face of great numerical abundance (e.g., Ferguson & Perse, 1993; Heeter, 1988; Neuendorf, Atkin, & Jeffres, 2001). Aside from these averages, we know relatively little about factors associated with the size of people’s repertoires. Similarly, we know little about the substantive content of repertoires. For example, are there viewers who never see local news or public affairs? Who are they? How much time do different kinds of people spend with these and other program types?

Content-Centric Measures

One could also consider audience shares for programs of a type (e.g., Napoli, 1997). This addresses the concept of horizontal diversity. For instance, what percentage of all the time spent viewing is devoted to the local news, or programs owned by a particular entity? Or, to take a more global perspective, what percentage of all time spent watching is devoted to imported versus domestically produced programming (Curran, 1998)? Vertical diversity might be examined by looking at “audience duplication” across pairs of programs to identify patterns of program-type loyalty. This would enable us to say that the audience for “60 Minutes” also watches “20/20,” or that network news viewers also tend to watch local news.

Channel-Centric Measures

Channels are an interesting unit of analysis because newer networks tend to specialize in a type of content (Turow, 1997; Webster, 1986, 2005). Returning to our buffet analogy, they are food stations offering one specialty item, or at least catering to one kind of diner. Furthermore, channels are generally owned by a single entity so measures of attendance can indicate a corporation’s actual share of audience across channels. Such behavioral measures might be a more useful metric than simply noting the percentage of households capable of receiving a signal. It’s also possible to assess channel-centric polarization. What percentage of the audience watches a channel? What percentage avoids it? Among those who watch, how much time do they spend viewing? Even a network with a tiny overall share of the audience might have loyal viewers. For example, do the viewers of FOX News or MTV or Black Entertainment Television (BET) watch those networks to the exclusion of other more mainstream fare? Do they constitute the worrisome case of “specialists with polarization”? Inventive uses of existing data can provide answers.

If we are serious about understanding diversity in an age of media abundance, we need to be serious about diversity of exposure. We might begin with an assessment of the current state of affairs. Knowing what use the audience actually makes of the media environment could help us craft sensible policy prescriptions.

A CASE STUDY IN DIVERSITY OF EXPOSURE TO TELEVISION

What follows is a brief case study illustrating how commercial audience measurement can give us insights into diversity of exposure. It is based on an analy-

sis of data collected in the first week of February 2003 by Nielsen Media Research using its national peplemeter sample. These are the kinds of data on which virtually all national TV media buys, and many programming decisions, are based. Peplemeters are electronic devices that monitor the behavior of all TV sets in sample households and are designed so that individual members of the household can signal their presence to the meter. Nielsen places meters in homes using a probability sampling procedure. At the time, Nielsen had a national sample of just over 5,000 households, including almost 13,000 individuals. Over any measurement period, the actual number of homes providing useful information is somewhat less than the total installed base. For a more complete description of Nielsen's methods, see Webster, Phalen, and Lichty (2006).

The centerpiece of the analysis is a rather large table (see Table 13.1) that describes each of 62 national networks on five dimensions. These are the most widely viewed networks in the country and serve as the study's units of analysis. Hence, this is an example of a channel-centric study. The first column of data is the universe of households in which each network can be received, expressed as a percentage of total TV households (TVHH). The next two columns of data report the size of each network's audience. They offer ways to assess horizontal diversity. The first is the network's overall share of audience. That is, of all the viewing done by adults during the week, what percentage of the total number of "man-hours" is attributable to a particular network. The second is the network's cumulative audience (i.e., the "cume" or reach) expressed as the percentage of all persons 18+ who have viewed for at least 1 min during the week. The remaining two columns of data are measures of audience polarization. They offer a picture of vertical diversity. These metrics are less familiar than "ratings" and "shares" and so deserve a few words of explanation.

Nielsen Media Research sells a service to clients called "NPower." It allows those clients to access the Nielsen database so they can produce customized analyses. One reason polarization is not well documented in the academic literature is because it's a form of cumulative audience behavior (see Webster et al., 2006) that is not routinely described by Nielsen in published reports. NPower, however, is capable of tracking individuals over time, and producing a number of such measures. I am using two closely related measures.

The first is "time-spent-viewing" (TSV). This is a simple metric, directly analogous to the measures of time-spent-listening common in radio research. It is the average number of minutes per week spent viewing the network in question, among those who tuned in for at least a minute (i.e., those in the cume). So, in the case of a broadcast network with a large cume, it's based on a

large number of people. In the case of a cable network with a smaller cume, it's based on a smaller sample size. It is the total amount of time that people who used the network actually spent watching that network, whether in multiple viewing sessions or just one.

The second measure is "share-within-cume." This is an unconventional measure. Simple TSV can be hard to interpret without reference to the total amount of time a channel's users spend watching television. This measure adjusts for that by representing TSV as the percentage of total TV-viewing time. In other words, among those who watched the network (the cume), what share of their time did they spend watching? As with TSV, it is based on samples that vary with the size of the cume.

Horizontal Diversity of Exposure

The first question deals with how the mass audience is distributed across channels. Are general interest intermediaries (e.g., the broadcast networks) holding their own? Table 13.1 presents the results of the analysis. Networks are listed down the left-hand side. To make the table easier to evaluate, I organized these as either broadcast or cable networks and, within each grouping, sorted them by the average time-spent-viewing.

TVHH Universe describes the percentage of all television households, an estimated 106.7 million at the time of this survey, capable of receiving the network signal in question. This is a powerful structural constraint that circumscribes a network's ability to serve as a common public forum. As would be expected, the older broadcast networks had near universal penetration of the market, with coverage that ranged from 99% to 95% of all TVHH. The newer broadcast networks (i.e., FOX, UPN, WB, and PAX) had somewhat reduced coverage ranging from 93% to 85%. The most successful advertiser-supported cable networks generally covered 80% to 70% of the market, whereas newer or more regional services had considerably less coverage. Premium cable services (e.g., HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax) that charge an additional fee to subscribers had smaller coverage still. Because there are 339 national cable networks (National Cable & Telecommunications Association [NCTA], 2004), there were over 270 services not included in Table 13.1. These would, undoubtedly, be at the lower end of the coverage spectrum. As such, they could scarcely serve as a national public forum.

Share of total audience viewing expresses how large a "piece of the pie" each network gets. If all sources of programming were listed, the numbers would add up to 100%. In the case of Table 13.1, the column total is 65. In other words, 35% of all the television viewing done in this week in February

TABLE 13.1

Diversity of Exposure Across Television Networks

Network	Structure	Horizontal Diversity		Vertical Diversity	
	TVHH Universe	Share of Total Audience Viewing	Weekly Cume	Average Time Spent Viewing Per Week	Share Within Cume
<i>Broadcast Networks</i>					
CBS	95%	6.3	65%	189	7.9
NBC	95%	5.9	67%	173	7.4
ABC	97%	5.1	66%	152	6.4
PBS	99%	2.0	45%	89	3.7
FOX	93%	1.9	47%	78	3.3
WB	90%	0.8	25%	59	2.4
PAX	85%	0.4	15%	55	2.0
UPN	86%	0.4	18%	46	1.7
<i>Cable Networks</i>					
HBO	33%	2.0	20%	196	8.0
FOX News Channel	77%	2.7	27%	193	7.5
Lifetime Movie	34%	0.6	7%	167	5.5
Cinemax	20%	0.7	9%	159	6.3
SHOWTIME	21%	0.6	9%	146	5.5
Turner Network Television (TNT)	81%	2.3	34%	134	5.0
Lifetime	81%	1.9	28%	130	4.8
Game Show Network	47%	0.4	6%	128	4.4
TV Land	73%	1.1	16%	127	4.2
CNN	81%	2.1	35%	118	4.7
Nickelodeon	81%	1.5	25%	117	4.6
TBS Superstation	82%	2.3	39%	116	4.5
SOAP Network	27%	0.1	2%	115	4.0
Hallmark Channel	47%	0.5	9%	110	3.7
Court TV	71%	0.8	16%	103	3.6
Home & Garden TV	75%	1.0	20%	97	3.8
USA Network	81%	1.6	34%	95	3.6
Cartoon Network	77%	0.7	15%	95	3.7
SCI-FI Channel	75%	0.8	17%	87	3.0
The Movie Channel	19%	0.2	5%	86	3.0
ESPN	81%	1.1	25%	85	3.4
History Channel	77%	1.0	23%	85	3.4
A&E	81%	1.1	26%	85	3.1
MSNBC	73%	0.9	23%	76	2.9
Food Network	73%	0.7	17%	75	2.9
Black Entertainment TV (BET)	70%	0.5	14%	75	2.7
Toon Disney	35%	0.1	3%	72	2.6
The Learning Channel	79%	1.1	30%	71	2.8
American Movie Classics	79%	0.9	25%	71	2.5
Disney Channel	76%	0.6	18%	70	2.7

(continued)

TABLE 13.1 (continued)

Network	Structure	Horizontal Diversity		Vertical Diversity	
	TVVH Universe	Share of Total		Average Time	Share
		Audience Viewing	Weekly Cume	Spent Viewing Per Week	Within Cume
<i>Cable Networks (con't.)</i>					
FX	75%	0.9	26%	66	2.6
WGN Superstation	53%	0.6	17%	64	2.3
Animal Planet	76%	0.7	21%	63	2.3
Discovery	81%	0.9	29%	59	2.3
MTV	80%	0.7	26%	55	2.3
Comedy Central	77%	0.6	22%	53	2.2
CNN Headline News	78%	0.7	25%	51	2.0
Spike TV (TNN)	81%	0.7	26%	51	1.9
CNBC	79%	0.4	14%	51	2.0
Weather Channel	80%	0.6	24%	50	1.9
Speed Channel	52%	0.1	6%	48	1.8
Discovery Health	39%	0.1	5%	45	1.7
Country Music Television (CMT)	62%	0.3	12%	43	1.6
ESPN2	79%	0.4	21%	41	1.6
ABC Family	80%	0.5	23%	40	1.6
Woman's Entertainment (WE)	47%	0.2	8%	38	1.3
Bravo	65%	0.3	14%	36	1.3
Entertainment TV (E!)	75%	0.5	25%	36	1.5
Travel Channel	66%	0.3	16%	36	1.3
VH1	78%	0.4	23%	34	1.4
TV Guide Channel	53%	0.3	19%	32	1.2
National Geographic	39%	0.1	5%	31	1.1
Outdoor Life	47%	0.1	5%	28	1.0
FUSE	28%	0.0	2%	16	0.6
TOTAL		65.0			

Note. From Webster (2005), *Beneath the Veneer of Fragmentation: Television Audience Polarization in a Multichannel World*, *Journal of Communication*, Blackwell Publishing. Used by permission.

was attributable to sources not on the table. This would include individual stations broadcasting syndicated or locally produced programming (e.g., the local news) as well as those 270 missing national networks. I should also note that this method of calculating share of total audience assumes each network is feeding programming 24 hr a day. For all broadcast networks and some cable-only services, that was not the case. Hence, their shares of total viewing may seem rather low. By way of contrast, if shares were calculated only during those times when each broadcast network was actually on the air, their numbers would be significantly higher (e.g., ABC was 9.1, CBS was 10.8, FOX was

8.4, NBC was 11.3, UPN was 2.4, and WB was 3.1). These are closer to the audience shares most often reported in the popular and trade press.

Of course, most of the networks in Table 13.1 are owned by a parent company that has other networks in its portfolio. As corporate entities, then, they occupy a larger space in the lives of viewers than individual network shares would suggest. For example, Viacom, Disney, and Time Warner each enjoyed a double-digit share of the audience (13.3, 13.0, and 12.5, respectively). To achieve those combined shares, however, a corporation is likely to offer diverse services. The News Corp portfolio, for instance, includes FOX News, which appeals to a relatively old, politically conservative audience; the FOX television network, which appeals to a relatively young, urban audience; and the Speed Channel, which appeals to NASCAR dads. All this bespeaks the rather murky relationship between ownership and content diversity (Napoli, 1999).

That said, audience shares capture rather well the phenomenon of audience fragmentation, and offer a nice snapshot of the state of horizontal diversity. The big-three networks have roughly twice the audience of their nearest competitors. But in absolute terms, they now occupy just a sliver of the time people spend watching TV. Beyond them, viewing is widely distributed.

Unfortunately, shares don't tell us much about the intensity of channel use. Small numbers could mean that everyone watches just a little, which would be consistent with the "specialists without polarization" hypothesis. Or it could mean that a handful of viewers spend long periods of time with the channel, whereas others ignore it altogether. That would be consistent with the "specialists with polarization" hypothesis.

Weekly cumes provide a different and somewhat more revealing measure of audience size. They describe the percentage of the adult population that watched each network at least once. Obviously, the flip-side of the cume is the percentage of the population that never watched the network. So here we get our first glimpse of the number of viewers who anchor one end of what may be a polarized distribution. As with audience shares, the big-three networks (i.e., ABC, CBS, and NBC) had the largest audiences. Each one was viewed by approximately two thirds of the audience during the week. Of course, that means that one third of the adult population didn't watch ABC or CBS during a time of particularly heavy television viewing. Beyond the major broadcast networks, audience cumes dropped off rather quickly. Even among networks that had a substantial potential universe, cumes were quite low. For example, UPN was receivable in 86% of all TVHHs, yet it had a weekly reach of just 18% of adults. This suggests that most viewers hadn't included UPN in their channel repertoires, a fate that was characteristic of many smaller networks.

Both total audience shares and weekly cumes, which are themselves highly correlated ($r = .883, p < .01$), show considerable horizontal diversity of exposure across television networks. The cume data also provide a partial answer to the question of vertical diversity. Once we get beyond the major broadcast networks, a great many people who could use the remaining networks never do. They sit at the pole of nonuse. What these measures fail to reveal is how much time the users of a network actually spend in attendance. We need different metrics to see the rest of the distribution.

Vertical Diversity of Exposure

The two remaining columns add to the picture on vertical diversity. Average TSV gives us a sense of the intensity of channel use among a network's viewers. Each of the big-three networks continued to do well, being viewed for 2½ to 3 hr a week. But the networks wracking up the largest TSV were HBO and the FOX News Channel. Each was watched for over 3 hr a week. Premium cable channels and networks specializing in movies were also watched for relatively long periods of time. Beyond that, an odd collection of networks with otherwise small audience shares were high on the list.

Share-within-cume expresses TSV as a percentage. So, for example, although HBO was viewed by just 20% of the adult population (i.e., the cume), those people spent 8% of their time watching HBO. The overall pattern of results for share-within-cume was quite similar to TSV ($r = .988, p < .01$). HBO, FOX News, and the big-three networks again posted the highest values. Interestingly, these measures of the intensity of channel use were unrelated to the channel's universe. So the most available channels were not necessarily the ones that drew the heaviest use.

We've seen that the direst predictions for the new media environment envision very little vertical diversity of exposure. In this world, the mass audience is broken into enclaves that consume a steady diet of like-minded speech and very little else. The marketplace of ideas, our common public sphere, becomes many sphericules (e.g., Gandy, 2001; Gitlin, 1998; Sunstein, 2001). Turow (1997) has offered the most extensively developed of these portraits of the television audience. He sees advertisers and new media technologies breaking America into the equivalent of gated communities:

Once the emerging system is solidified, it will not be easy to change. Media technologies and formats that have been shaped by the values of social division will reinforce those values even when leaders in their rhetoric are trying to bring people together. Like heavy gates separating one community from another, the very structure of the American media world will drive people apart for a long time to come. (p. 200)

Measures of polarization offer a way to assess how much time people spend behind those gates. Consider three networks that cater to specific segments of the audience: BET, MTV, and FOX News. BET provides "... entertainment, music, news and public affairs programming for the African-American audience" (NCTA, 2004, p. 53). MTV targets 12- to 34-year-olds with music videos and many regularly scheduled series ranging from news to animation. FOX News claims to offer "fair and balanced coverage of the day's events," but is widely regarded as appealing to a politically conservative viewership. Each reached a modestly sized audience, with weekly cumes of 14%, 26%, and 27%, respectively. Those who tuned into BET or MTV spent less than 3% of their time with those channels. Even the audience for FOX News, with its high TSV, spent 92.5% of its time watching something else on television. If these viewers live in cloistered communities, they clearly spend a good deal of time out on the town.

A Closer Look at FOX News Viewers

Of course, it might be instructive to know what other media the viewers of any particular channel consume. Here, too, the Nielsen data can provide an answer (as least as far as their television viewing goes). Table 13.2 offers a comparison on how the viewers of FOX News allocate the rest of their viewing in comparison to nonviewers.

TABLE 13.2

FOX News Viewer's Allocation of Time Across Selected Sources

Source	Reach Among Fox News Viewers	Audience Shares	
		Viewers	Nonviewers
NBC Affiliates	85%	9.42	12.53
CBS Affiliates	84%	8.79	12.08
ABC Affiliates	84%	8.11	10.81
FOX News Channel	100%	7.47	—
FOX Affiliates	78%	4.77	7.31
CNN	68%	2.88	1.62
WB Affiliates	54%	2.07	3.58
HBO	25%	1.80	2.10
MSNBC	55%	1.63	0.47
History Channel	46%	1.62	0.76
A&E	47%	1.45	1.03
Home & Garden TV	39%	1.43	0.75
PBS Affiliates	57%	1.41	2.34
UPN Affiliates	44%	1.18	2.34
CNBC	35%	0.65	0.23

As we've seen, FOX News viewers spent 7.5% of their time watching that network. However, roughly 85% of them watched at least one of the big-three affiliates, and, on average, they spent more time watching those sources.³ Most FOX News viewers also watched PBS, although it occupied less than 2% of their time. It would be interesting to know just what programs they watched on these affiliates. Was it, for instance, something that might challenge or reinforce a particular world view? This could be answered with "program-centric" analyses. For the time being, however, it appears that this audience is not just a polarized enclave, but a group that spends considerable time with general interest programming. The same can be said of all of the 62 networks (Webster, 2005).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This quick look at diversity of exposure to television offers a number of insights. There is great horizontal diversity. The mass audience is widely distributed across several dozen national networks. In fact, this is a more egalitarian distribution than what we find in Web use, where the audience tends to concentrate on the most popular offerings (e.g., Adamic & Huberman, 1999; Hindman & Cukier, 2003; Webster & Lin, 2002).

Of course, this means that the big-three networks—which would probably qualify as general interest intermediaries—no longer dominate the nation's attention. Over the years, they have clearly lost ground to the competition (Webster, 2005). For social theorists like Katz (1998) and Sunstein (2001), this is a troubling development. Nonetheless, they occupy a special place in the media landscape. Most Americans still watch them at length. The same cannot be said of any other networks.

Whether the big-three networks will continue to hold that privileged position is an interesting question. In many ways, they look like anomalies. Will they remain as "outliers" or eventually regress toward the mean? Although there is no way to know for certain, social scientists often study younger cohorts to anticipate change (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Rahn & Randolph, 2001). Assessing the behavior of young adults (e.g., 18- to 24-year-olds) might offer a glimpse into the future of broadcast television, and with it the future of our last great cultural forums.

The preliminary indications on vertical diversity of exposure are, I think, rather hopeful. The mass audience certainly has not devolved into myriad enclaves, each attending to one or two sources of content. Some networks, like FOX News, do enjoy relatively high levels of loyalty among their viewers, but even these people seem to consume a varied diet of programming—at least as

far as channel-centric analyses allow us to see. As a rule, viewers appear to use a mix of general interest and specialized media. These findings are consistent with studies of Internet usage. According to Neuman, “research thus far on Web behavior reveals diverse personal interests but a surprising balance among specialized and ‘mainstream’ sites among new and experienced users” (2001, p. 311). Even in the smaller arena of overtly political speech, Internet users seem to seek out at least some diversity of expression (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004). Perhaps, instead of binging on one type of content, American media users are, indeed, more omnivorous (Holt, 1998; Horrigan et al., 2004; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

At least two cautions are in order. First, the technology for delivering television and most other media is undergoing constant change. Digital video recorders and video on demand are currently on the verge of widespread adoption. These will undoubtedly make it easier for viewers who are so inclined, to see what they want to see. Second, no matter what patterns of exposure emerge, we should be careful not to equate TSV with effect. It may be that even a little exposure to politically or culturally extreme materials leads to the kind of social divisiveness or group polarization many fear (e.g., Gitlin, 1998; Sunstein, 2001; Turow, 1997).

Even so, studying diversity of exposure would represent an important, nonconjectural, and eminently feasible step forward in our understanding of media diversity. It would move us beyond our preoccupation with the character of the media environment, toward an appreciation of how diversity is, or is not, realized in the lives of people who inhabit that environment.

NOTES

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²Nielsen provides access to its database through a facility called “NPower.” Two limiting factors need to be considered. First, Nielsen sells this service to clients and pricing may not reflect the actual cost of incremental analyses. Second, analyses are typically limited by the software Nielsen provides. Not everything that can be imagined in theory can be constructed with Nielsen programs.

³In the comparison of FOX News viewers and nonviewers, network viewing totals are to all programming feed by affiliates, not just the network feed as is the case in Table 13.1

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