

## Factors Affecting Viewers' Perceptions of Sensationalism in Television News: A Survey Study in Taiwan

TAI-LI WANG AND AKIBA A. COHEN

*Using national survey data, this study examines factors that affect Taiwanese television viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. Findings indicate that TV formal features, channel selection, motivations for watching TV news, and viewers' demographics are significant factors that influence viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. Compared to other news topics, "gossip" was identified as the most sensational news topic. Concerning TV news formal features, the more audio, visual, and editing production features in the programs, the more sensational the news was perceived to be. In addition, cable news viewers perceive news content as more sensational than viewers of terrestrial television. Finally, information-oriented, older, and more highly educated viewers tend to perceive television news as more sensational. This paper further discusses the more universal implications of these findings.*

**KEYWORDS:** sensationalism; tabloid news; television news; audience research.

---

TAI-LI WANG (王泰俐) is an associate professor in the Graduate Institute of Journalism, National Taiwan University. Her research focuses on sensationalism and tabloidization in news, television news and media effects, and web communication. Professor Wang can be reached at <tailiw@ntu.edu.tw>.

AKIBA A. COHEN is a professor in the Department of Communication, Tel Aviv University, Israel. His main research interests are global television news, news and cognition, and mobile telephony. Professor Cohen can be reached at <akiba@post.tau.ac.il>.

©Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan (ROC).

\* \* \*



For the last few decades, the topic of sensationalism in news reporting has aroused fierce public debate.<sup>1</sup> Summarizing from the previous literature, the sensationalization of news can be defined as the displacement of socially significant stories by "tabloid" news topics and the use of flamboyant production styles that overpower substantive information. The media perform a democratizing function in contemporary societies, because they inform the public about communal affairs and provide the basic information people need to make electoral decisions. This is particularly applicable to TV news which over the last fifty years has become the primary news source for the general public. If sensational news content occupies too much time in news programs, there will be less time for the substantial information a citizen needs to be truly informed. As a consequence, sensationalism is believed to harm the media's democratic functions in societies in which the media are essentially market-driven.

According to a recent content analysis of prime-time news in Taiwan, 54 percent of the segments contained sensational elements. As for the presentation of the news, 66 percent of the segments featured the obtrusive and dramatic voice of a presenter. Additionally, 80 percent of the segments contained emotional subtitles, one-third of which were presented in multi-color and animated forms.<sup>2</sup>

Media critics in Taiwan have pointed out that the pursuit of commercial interests is the major reason why broadcasters "throw garbage at

---

<sup>1</sup>E.g.: Maria Elizabeth Grabe et al., "Packaging Television News: The Effects of Tabloid on Information Processing and Evaluative Responses," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no. 4 (2000): 581-98; Maria Elizabeth Grabe, Shuhua Zhou, and Brook Barnett, "Explication Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form," *ibid.* 45, no. 4 (2001): 635-55; Mine Gencil Bek, "Tabloidization of News Media: An Analysis of Television News in Turkey," *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 3 (August 2004): 371-86; and Wang Tai-Li, "The Shifting Cultural Space of Television News: From Public Affairs toward Entertainment" (Paper presented at the annual conference of the Chinese Communication Association, National Taiwan University, Taipei, July 13-15, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Wang, "The Shifting Cultural Space of Television News," 15.

consumers."<sup>3</sup> According to Lin and Chuang, since 2002 newscasts have contained excessive coverage of sensational stories concerning the private lives of celebrities.<sup>4</sup> Some critics describe their own news watching experience as "detached," as they witness the "bizarre sensationalism" of news programs and wonder about the relevance of entertainers' private lives.<sup>5</sup>

A tendency toward sensationalism has emerged in several other countries as well. In the United States, journalistic sensationalism has provoked vehement debates ever since Carl Bernstein coined the term "idiot culture."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Hallin argues that the pressures toward commercialization are strongest in the case of television, although they affect the print media as well.<sup>7</sup> In Japan, commercial news broadcasters have adopted such production methods as animation or dramatic subtitles that were originally seen only in variety shows. While such entertainment-oriented presentation of news could have the effect of attracting the interest of viewers, it may decrease the credibility and objectivity of the reporting.<sup>8</sup> In some European countries, notably Sweden<sup>9</sup> and Germany,<sup>10</sup> increased competition in news markets drove broadcasters increasingly to sensationalize the news in order to win viewer allegiance. In the Netherlands,

---

<sup>3</sup>Chang Bao-yuan, "Poor Quality News Media Is Isolating the Country," *Taipei Times*, July 18, 2005, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Lin Yu-huei and Chuang Bo-zhong, *Dianshi xinwen guanjian baogao* (TV news key report) (Taipei: Broadcasting and Television Development Fund, 2003, 2004, and 2005).

<sup>5</sup>See note 3 above.

<sup>6</sup>Carl Bernstein, "The Idiot Culture: Reflections of Post-Watergate Journalism," *The New Republic*, June 8, 1992, 22.

<sup>7</sup>Daniel C. Hallin, "Commercialism and Professionalism in the American News Media," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, third edition (London: Hodder Arnold, 2000), 218-37.

<sup>8</sup>Matsuharu Kawabata, "Audience Reception and Visual Presentations of TV News Programs in Japan" (Paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Taipei, July 25-27, 2005).

<sup>9</sup>Håkan Hvitfelt, "The Commercialization of the Evening News: Changes in Narrative Technique of Swedish TV News," *Nordicom Review* 15, no. 1 (1994): 33-41.

<sup>10</sup>Barbara Pfetsch, "Convergence through Privatization? Changing Media Environments and Televised Politics in Germany," *European Journal of Communication* 11, no. 4 (December 1996): 427-51.

recent research indicates that the newscasts of a commercial broadcaster contained more sensational characteristics than those of public service broadcasters.<sup>11</sup>

Although sensationalism in the news media has been a topic of wide concern, the related academic research tends to focus on its manifest content. Little research has been done into viewers' own judgments or perceptions of sensationalism in news reporting. From the viewers' perspective, what does "sensationalism" mean? What are the factors affecting their perception of sensationalism in TV news? This study examines viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in television news. Specifically, we applied a modified measurement procedure developed in the earlier literature on a current national sample in Taiwan, which explores the factors affecting television viewers' perceptions of this phenomenon. By providing a more thorough understanding of the factors affecting public perceptions concerning sensationalism, this study will attempt to provide an insight into the issue of sensationalism from the audience's own perspective.

## **Perceptions, Measurement, and Factors Influencing Sensationalism**

### *Defining Sensationalism*

Postman has claimed that one of the primary factors in the development of sensational news is the increased competition for ratings between news organizations.<sup>12</sup> According to Esposito, this may result in news being increasingly structured along themes and in formats originally found in entertainment programs, thus leading to dramatic, fast-paced, superficial presentations and simplistic explanations that focus on personalities, personal relationships, physical appearances, and idiosyncrasies, all aimed at

---

<sup>11</sup>Paul Hendriks Vettehen, Koos Nuijten, and Johannes Beentjes, "News in an Age of Competition: The Case of Sensationalism in Dutch Television News, 1995-2001," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 49, no. 3 (2005): 282-95.

<sup>12</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985), 129-35.

attracting the largest possible audience.<sup>13</sup>

While heated discussion has mounted in a variety of countries regarding sensationalism in the news, no clear and exhaustive definition of sensationalism has yet been offered. Similarly, while Sparks and Tulloch have attempted to define "tabloid," primarily with reference to newspapers, they have argued that the tabloid is marked by two features: it concentrates on news topics such as scandal and entertainment, and it devotes less attention to politics, economics, and society. They point out, however, that such a definition ignores the visual dimension of presentation in tabloid newspapers, such as layout, headline sizes, and use of pictorial material. The definition of the tabloid newspaper reflects the definitions of sensationalism in television news in at least two ways: news story content and formal features of the news.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to the 1990s, sensationalism in news was primarily conceived in terms of story content. According to Adams, sensationalism and human-interest stories together referred to news coverage of "crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents, and fires, along with amusing, heartwarming, shocking, or curious vignettes about people in the area."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Adams did not distinguish between sensational and human-interest stories, regarding both as representing local American TV news that appeals to emotion over reason.

Knight defined sensationalism both in terms of story content and formal features. Accordingly, sensational story content consists of sex, scandal, crime, or corruption, while sensational story formal features include fast editing pace, eyewitness camera perspective, zoom-in camera lens movements, re-enactment of news events, the use of music, and the tone of the reporter voice-over narration. In sum, sensationalism refers

---

<sup>13</sup>Steven A. Esposito, "Presumed Innocent? A Comparative Analysis of Network News', Prime-Time News Magazines', and Tabloid TV's Pretrial Coverage of the O.J. Simpson Criminal Case," *Communication and the Law* 18, no. 4 (1996): 50-53.

<sup>14</sup>Colin Sparks and John Tulloch, *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 10.

<sup>15</sup>William C. Adams, "Local Public Affairs Content of TV News," *Journalism Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1978): 691.

to the presentation of news as "a deluge of images and words."<sup>16</sup>

Later, Slattery and Hakanen argued that sensationalism may not be a dichotomous concept. They replicated a content analysis of local TV news using Adam's definition of sensationalism. An analysis of ten Pennsylvania stations revealed that news organizations devoted significantly more time to sensational and human-interest stories. In addition, they discovered that even hard news stories could be depicted in a sensational way, which Slattery and Hakanen termed "embedding sensationalism."<sup>17</sup>

Along with rapidly developing market-driven journalism and digital communication technologies, another conceptual dimension was added to sensationalism: the increasingly flashy and lavish formal production features aimed at getting audiences more involved in the viewing process. Thus Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett call for a more comprehensive measure of sensationalism that includes both news content and formal features.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, sensational content deals with crime, accidents and disasters, celebrity news, scandal, and sex, and it has the potential to startle or entertain viewers. Formal production features involve video maneuvers (e.g., zoom movements) and decorative effects (e.g., postproduction audio and visual manipulations).

In various countries, market-driven journalism has been identified as the cause of sensationalized news.<sup>19</sup> Sparks and Tulloch have argued that there are several marketplaces in which media standards are driven down in order to increase media profits, including the United States, Britain, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries.<sup>20</sup> Davis and McLeod further contended that the generality of sensational news extends to places as well as

---

<sup>16</sup>Graham Knight, "Reality Effects: Tabloid Television News," *Queen's Quarterly* 96, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 96.

<sup>17</sup>Karen L. Slattery and Ernest A. Hakanen, "Sensationalism versus Public Affairs Content of Local TV News: Pennsylvania Revisited," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 38, no. 2 (1994): 205-16.

<sup>18</sup>Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett, "Explication Sensationalism in Television News," 638-39.

<sup>19</sup>Stuart Allan, "Good Journalism Is Popular Culture," in Stuart Allan, *News Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 185-92; and see notes 9 and 12 above.

<sup>20</sup>Sparks and Tulloch, *Tabloid Tales*, 1-40, 63-90, 129-46, 195-210.

time.<sup>21</sup> After consideration and analysis of these viewpoints, this study posits that the concept of sensationalism may possess certain universal features.

Vettenhen, Nuijten, and Beentjes have suggested that news content which "appeals to our basic needs and instincts" and tabloid packaging techniques that "automatically elicit viewers' orienting responses with novelty or change" may universally attract viewers' attention.<sup>22</sup> In addition, they added vividness and proximity of news as two additional characteristics of sensationalism. Vividness refers to vivid effects generated from "stimulating imagination, attracting and holding attentions, and retaining better in memory." Proximity refers to geographic proximity (domestic news vs. foreign news) and sensual proximity (pictorial information vs. verbal information).<sup>23</sup> While the first two features appear to be more universal, the latter two are more limited to culturally specific characteristics. Thus this study assumes that these conceptualizations and definitions of sensationalism in TV news, both as content and formal features, tend to grab viewers' attention and arouse their emotions.

### *Perception of Sensationalism*

Nearly half a century ago, researchers began to discuss the emotion-arousing aspects of sensationalism.<sup>24</sup> They suggested that sensationalism not only "provided thrills" but also fascinates in a "morbid way." Thus, sensationalism can be defined by its potential to be emotionally and psychologically arousing.

Grabe and others defined tabloid news as news that "emphasized style over substance," and is "punctuated by structural features, such as quick-paced editing, dramatic music, rapid-fire narration, and extravagant graphic effects," in contrast to standard news that focuses on substance

---

<sup>21</sup>Hank Davis and S. Lyndsay McLeod, "Why Humans Value Sensational News: An Evolutionary Perspective," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24, no. 3 (May 2003): 208-16.

<sup>22</sup>Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes, "News in an Age of Competition," 284.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 285.

<sup>24</sup>See Percy H. Tannenbaum and Marvin D. Lynch, "Sensationalism: The Concept and Its Measurement," *Journalism Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1960): 381-92.

over style.<sup>25</sup> They found that viewers tended to rate standard news as more informative and believable than tabloid news. In another study, Grabe, Lang, and Zhao found that tabloid production features enhanced memory for calm news stories but hindered memory for arousing or sensational news stories.<sup>26</sup> Once again, viewers tended to rate tabloid news as less objective and believable than stories without such dramatic features.

### *Measuring Viewers' Perceptions of Sensationalism*

In the mid-twentieth century, Tannenbaum and Lynch developed a sensationalism index for newspapers (*Sendex*) based on a set of semantic-differential scales.<sup>27</sup> They assumed that the more similar the connotative judgments of a given message and sensationalism, the greater the degree of shared connotative characteristics, hence the more sensational the message in the news. *Sendex* was based on twelve bipolar adjective pairs in three dimensions: evaluative (accurate/inaccurate, good/bad, responsible/irresponsible, wise/foolish, acceptable/unacceptable); excitement (colorful/colorless, interesting/uninteresting, exciting/unexciting, hot/cold); and activity (active/passive, agitated/calm, bold/timid).

Two later studies applied *Sendex* to identify components of Murdoch-style newspapers. Following Rupert Murdoch's acquisition of the *San Antonio News* in the 1970s, Pasadeos determined the extent to which changes made in this daily's front page compared with that of its competitor.<sup>28</sup> Results showed that the percentage of space given to sensational front-page headlines in Murdoch's newspaper, in terms of graphics and placement, and the proportion of sensational stories found on the front page increased significantly during the mid-1970s, indicating that Murdoch did indeed sensationalize the *San Antonio News* after acquiring it. Perry's

---

<sup>25</sup>Grabe et al., "Packaging Television News," 582.

<sup>26</sup>Maria Elizabeth Grabe, Anne Lang, and X. Zhao, "News Content and Form: Implication for Memory and Audience Evaluations." *Communication Research* 30, no. 4 (2003): 387-413.

<sup>27</sup>See note 24 above.

<sup>28</sup>Yorgo Pasadeos, "Application of Measures of Sensationalism to a Murdoch-Owned Daily in the San Antonio Market," *Newspaper Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 9-17.



study compared perceptions of sensationalism between American and Mexican newspaper readers.<sup>29</sup> The findings showed that in eight of the twelve original *Sendex* items there were significant differences between the two countries. This suggested that it might have been necessary to modify *Sendex* before it could be applied to any market other than that of the United States.

In order to modify the *Sendex* scale to make it applicable for television news, a study using several focus groups was conducted in Taiwan with a total of sixty adult TV news viewers, aged 18-60, who were asked to watch and then discuss eight TV news stories and rate them on *Sendex*.<sup>30</sup> On a scale from 1 to 10, participants were required to rate each item on the original *Sendex* scale for its adequacy in describing viewer perceptions of the stimulus news items. Three measures were used for rating the adequacy: concrete/abstract, precise/vague, suitable/unfit.

Results showed that viewers gave seven dimensions—good/bad, wise/foolish, acceptable/unacceptable, colorful/colorless, hot/cold, active/passive, and bold/timid—below average scores. On the other hand, several items were rated above the mean on six dimensions: accurate/inaccurate, responsible/irresponsible, important/unimportant, credible/incredible, professional/unprofessional, and likely/unlikely to arouse interest. In open-ended probing, 73 percent of the participants added two dimensions of sensational news features: invasion of privacy and gossiping about people. Accordingly, the current modified *Sendex* scale for television news consists of eight items: accurate/inaccurate, responsible/irresponsible, important/unimportant, credible/incredible, professional/unprofessional, likely/unlikely to arouse viewing interest, invading/not invading privacy, and gossiping/not gossiping about people.

The addition of gossiping as a dimension of sensationalism was also based on evolutionary psychology. Davis and McLeod examined sensational front-page newspaper stories from eight countries and found twelve

---

<sup>29</sup>David K. Perry, "Perceptions of Sensationalism among U.S. and Mexican News Audiences," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (January 2002): 82-87.

<sup>30</sup>Wang, "The Shifting Cultural Space of Television News."

major story categories.<sup>31</sup> These categories corresponded to major themes in evolutionary psychology that influence human success, including altruism, reputation, cheater detection, violence, etc. Most significantly, they concluded that the essence of gossiping was virtually identical to that of sensational news.

In summary, previous research did not directly tackle the relationship between news topics and formal features of TV news and viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. Therefore, the first research question (RQ1) probes whether or not there is a relationship between what the news is about (news topics) and viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. The second research question (RQ2) investigates the relationship between how the news is packaged (news forms) and viewers' perception of sensationalism.

#### *Terrestrial News vs. Cable News*

The TV news market in Taiwan has undergone a big transformation since the 1990s. With the lifting of martial law in 1988, as well as the legalization of cable television in 1993, Taiwan's TV news market has entered an era of fierce competition. At present there are six cable news channels providing 24-hour news in addition to five networks that air news during prime time. Relative to its population of 23 million, Taiwan's extraordinarily high density of TV news has inevitably resulted in a ratings war over the limited audience share.

Product differentiation and price leadership are two primary strategies that may be employed in a situation of competition.<sup>32</sup> Since price competition in Taiwan's multi-channel media environment is rare, the various channels need to differentiate their product from that of their competitors. Sensationalizing the news has become one of the most efficient means for newcomers to differentiate their products from those of existing broadcasters. Indeed, since the deregulation of cable TV, sensational stories

---

<sup>31</sup>See note 21 above.

<sup>32</sup>Michel E. Porter, *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors* (New York: The Free Press, 1980).

and images have gradually become the selling point for many TV news programs.<sup>33</sup>

In the United States, according to Ibelema and Powell, cable television news is generally viewed as a more credible news source than terrestrial news.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, local news in the U.S. markets tends to emphasize tabloid news, such as celebrity and gossip-driven soft news, a trend that has a powerful influence on news.<sup>35</sup>

Cable television news in Taiwan entered the country's media market in a similar fashion to local news in the American market. Sensationalizing the news was used as a business strategy by cable companies to enable them to compete with the existing terrestrial news. This is akin to the development of sensationalism in the Dutch media market in the mid-1990s, with a newly-aired commercial newscast growing more sensational than two other existing newscasts, particularly in terms of tabloid packaging techniques.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to competitive forces, Taiwan's terrestrial news is regulated by a stricter law, the Broadcasting Radio and Television Act, than are the cable stations which come under the Cable Radio and Television Act. This is because terrestrial news is aired more freely and considered to be more of a public information carrier than cable news. Accordingly, the third research question (RQ3) queries whether there is a relationship between viewers' selection of news channels and their perceptions of sensationalism in news.

#### *Different Motivations for News Viewing*

Studies based on the "uses and gratifications" paradigm have shown that people have different motivations and needs that lead them to expose

---

<sup>33</sup>Cheung Yiu, "CTV Redefines What It Considers 'News'," *Taipei Times*, September 29, 2004, 4.

<sup>34</sup>Mineabere Ibelema and Larry Powell, "Cable Television News Viewed as Most Credible," *Newspaper Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (January 2001): 41-52.

<sup>35</sup>Steve Michael Barkin, *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 61-78.

<sup>36</sup>Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes, "News in an Age of Competition," 283.

themselves to different media contents. Since the early 1970s, research in this tradition has produced studies of media use in order to gratify the audience's social and psychological needs.<sup>37</sup> This kind of research developed typologies for audience gratification with regard to television content, including surveillance (the motivation to acquire news and information about what is happening in the world), interpersonal utility (the motivation of achieving companionship or social utility through interpersonal discussion of events), and diversion (the motivation to achieve escape or emotional release from such events).<sup>38</sup> These three dimensions are also the focus of the present study.

It appears that TV news packaged in standard or tabloid formats provides different kinds of gratification for viewers, with the former providing more information-oriented gratification and the latter providing more entertainment-oriented gratification. Grabe, Lang, and Zhao have shown that the application of entertaining, attention-grabbing production techniques makes news content more entertaining and ultimately gives viewers more enjoyment.<sup>39</sup> However, in terms of evaluating the quality of the news, viewers tended to rate standard news as more informative and believable than tabloid news.

This study, therefore, suggests a fourth research question (RQ4), to explore whether the motivation for watching TV news is an additional factor affecting the audience's perceptions of sensationalism.

#### *Age and Education and the Perception of Sensationalism*

Very little empirical literature is available on the impact of demographic factors on viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in news. Regarding the relationship between audience age and the use of the news media,

---

<sup>37</sup>Alan M. Rubin, "Media Uses and Effects: A Uses-and-Gratifications Perspective," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 417-36.

<sup>38</sup>Richard C. Vincent and Mike D. Basil, "College Students' News Gratifications, Media Use, and Current Events Knowledge," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 41, no. 3 (1997): 380-93.

<sup>39</sup>Grabe, Lang, and Zhao, "News Content and Form," 408.

young adults were found to be more attracted to entertainment news content than hard news content.<sup>40</sup> Another study suggested that college students' overall media use and surveillance needs increased with age.<sup>41</sup> Compared to younger students, older students showed more surveillance need and sought less entertainment gratification from news. In other words, age was found to be negatively associated with surveillance needs, but positively associated with entertainment gratification. Younger viewers were further found to be more attracted to flamboyant television news production techniques compared with more senior viewers.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the fifth research question (RQ5) addresses whether older viewers perceive TV news as more sensational than younger viewers.

Moreover, research on media credibility<sup>43</sup> suggests an association between age and education and the assessment of news credibility. Generally, older and more educated individuals tend to be more critical of the media, while younger and less educated news consumers are more likely to accept news coverage and to evaluate the media as credible. It was also found that sophistication, life experience, and knowledge of the mechanisms used by the press combine to make viewers more skeptical of the nightly news.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, the sixth research question (RQ6) in the current study investigates whether or not viewers' educational levels affect their perceptions of sensationalism in TV news.

---

<sup>40</sup>Kevin G. Barnhurst and Ellen Wartella, "Newspapers and Citizenship: Young Adults' Subjective Experience of Newspapers," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 2 (June 1991): 195-209.

<sup>41</sup>See note 38 above.

<sup>42</sup>Steve McClellan and Ken Kerschbaumer, "Tickers and Bugs: Has TV Gotten Way Too Graphic?" *Broadcasting & Cable* 131, no. 50 (December 3, 2001): 16-20.

<sup>43</sup>Erik P. Bucy, "Media Credibility Reconsidered: Synergy Effects between On-Air and Online News," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 247-64.

<sup>44</sup>Michael J. Robinson and Andrew Kohut, "Believability and the Press," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1988): 174-89.

## *Gender and the Perception of Sensationalism*

Much of the research on overall interest in news topics suggests that differences exist between the sexes.<sup>45</sup> Mills suggests that although the general assumption about gender differences with regard to news preferences may be questionable, news preferences among women generally include the four "F's": family, food, fashion, and furnishing.<sup>46</sup> Also, Klein found that women, regardless of their age, were less interested in violent television news content.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, a study examining the relationships between sensation-seeking and gender role orientations found that men reported higher levels of overall sensation-seeking than women.<sup>48</sup> Sensation-seeking has been conceptualized as involving self-exposure to various novel and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks to engage in them.<sup>49</sup> Sensation-seeking scales contain five dimensions, including thrill and adventure seeking, disinhibition, experience seeking, and susceptibility to boredom. Moreover, Scourfield, Stevens, and Merikangas found that gender was an important predictor of lifetime sensation-seeking and that men were more likely to engage in sensation-seeking behavior than women.<sup>50</sup>

Although empirical studies have yet to establish relationships between sensation seeking and the TV news viewing experience, research suggests that high sensation seekers prefer media that include a high level

---

<sup>45</sup>Cory L. Armstrong, "Writing about Women: An Examination of How Content for Women Is Determined in Newspapers," *Mass Communication and Society* 9, no. 4 (January 2006): 447-60.

<sup>46</sup>Kay Mills, *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Pages* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1990), 1-20.

<sup>47</sup>Roger D. Klein, "Audience Reactions to Local TV News," *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 12 (August 2003): 1661-72.

<sup>48</sup>Demet E. Öngen, "The Relationships between Sensation Seeking and Gender Role Orientations among Turkish University Students," *Sex Roles* 57, no.1-2 (July 2007): 111-18.

<sup>49</sup>Marvin Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking: Beyond the Optimal Level of Arousal* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

<sup>50</sup>Jonathan Scourfield, D. E. Stevens, and K. R. Merikangas, "Substance Abuse, Comorbidity, and Sensation Seeking: Gender Differences," *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 37, no. 3 (1996): 384-92.

of arousing content.<sup>51</sup> This study argues that sensational presentation in TV news might be viewed as a kind of sensual watching experience. Thus if men generally tend to be more oriented toward sensation-seeking, they may be more likely to become insensitive to either sensational news topics or lavish news presentation techniques and be consequently more likely to perceive lower levels of sensationalism in TV news. Therefore, the seventh research question (RQ7) examines the relationship between viewers' gender and their perception of sensationalism.

In summary, the aforementioned seven research questions explore factors that may affect viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. The study will go further by asking an eighth research question (RQ8): What is the relative strength of each factor in predicting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism?

## **Method**

### *The Sample*

The research questions were tested using data from a randomly-selected nationwide telephone survey sample of Taiwanese adults. After eliminating business numbers, disconnected phones, and non-responses, 1,868 phone calls were made with a response rate of 66.1 percent, thus yielding 1,235 valid questionnaires.

Based on a filter question that eliminated respondents who reported watching fewer than two hours of news during the previous week, 894 respondents remained in the study. The sample consisted of 464 men (52 percent) and 430 women (48 percent). Of the sample, 41.4 percent had a college education, 33.9 percent had completed high school, and 24.5 percent had completed only junior high school or less. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 86 with a mean of forty-four years. Other than being

---

<sup>51</sup>Margaret Usha Dsilva, "Individual Differences and Choice of Information Source: Sensation Seeking in Drug Abuse Prevention," *Communication Reports* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 51-57.

somewhat skewed in terms of higher education, the sample was quite representative of the adult population.

The interviews were conducted by a Taipei-based professional survey research center in March and April 2006 following a pre-test of the questionnaire. The average interview lasted twelve minutes.

### *Measures of the Variables*

*Perception of sensationalism in TV news:* The respondents were first asked to indicate how much time they devote to watching the news in an average week and to name their preferred television channel for news. They were then asked to rank seven news categories that are typically presented in a relatively sensational manner: crime and conflicts, accidents and disasters, sex and scandals, gossip about celebrities, bizarre events, entertainment news, and news about the occult or superstition.

Next, the respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they believed that eight features of TV news—accuracy, responsibility, importance, credibility, professionalism, arousing viewer interest, invading privacy, and gossiping—are inherent in the notion of sensationalism.<sup>52</sup> The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the revised 8-item scale rose to a satisfactory  $\alpha=0.75$ .

A factor analysis using Varimax rotation was conducted and this indicated that all eight items were grouped into a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1.00, explaining 44.5 percent of the variance. A mean score of the eight items was calculated to create an overall measure of viewer perception of sensationalism in TV news.

---

<sup>52</sup>Regarding the five dimensions of viewers' perceptions, respondents were asked to what extent news items are accurate, responsible, important, credible, and professional. Response categories ranged from 1 indicating that almost all of the news items are accurate, responsible, etc., to 5 indicating that almost none of the news items are accurate, responsible, etc. The higher the number, the stronger the viewers' perception of sensationalism in the news. The other three dimensions of viewers' perceptions were interest-arousing, invading people's privacy, and gossiping about people. The same response categories were used but in the reverse order; that is, a response of 1 indicated that respondents strongly agree that none of the news items are interest-arousing, invading people's privacy or gossiping about people, and 5 indicated that respondents believed that almost all of the news items are interest-arousing, etc. The higher the number, the stronger the viewers' perception of sensationalism in the news.



*News topics:* Based on previous studies, this study identified seven categories of news that are typically presented in a sensational manner: crime and conflicts, accidents and disasters, sex and scandals, gossip about celebrities, bizarre events, entertainment news, and news about the occult or superstition.

*News production features:* The study identified seven TV news production features that may impact upon viewers' perceptions of sensationalism, including background music, news subtitles, graphics, special editing effects, editing pace, repetition of pictures, and reporting tone. The respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how they evaluated the perceived level of these production features as they appear in the news.<sup>53</sup>

A factor analysis using Varimax rotation showed that the seven items were grouped into three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00. The first factor, which consisted of music and tone, referred to as "audio features," explained 24.6 percent of the variance. The second factor, which consisted of subtitles, graphics, and special effects, termed "visual features," explained an additional 16.4 percent of the variance. The third factor which consisted of the repetition of pictures and editing pace, and was referred to as "editing features," explained an additional 14.2 percent of the variance.

*Motivations for watching TV news:* The respondents were also asked to rate six motivations for watching TV news on a 5-point scale: learning about social issues, obtaining information for making daily life decisions, being entertained, helping to kill time, having interesting topics to talk about, and knowing what other people are doing.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>The perception of production features in sensational news items was determined by asking a series of seven questions, one for each of the features. For each question, a 5-point scale was used. The responses were scored from low to high, and in each case were ordered so that a score of 1 would indicate a low level of sensationalism and a score of 5 would indicate a high level of sensationalism.

<sup>54</sup>The perception of the motivations for watching the news was determined by a series of questions relating to three motivations—surveillance, entertainment, and interpersonal utility—with two items per motivation. Each question was prefaced by "To what extent do you agree that you watch TV news in order ...": to learn about current social issues; to get necessary information for making decisions in life; to be entertained; to help kill time; to

A third factor analysis that employed Varimax rotation revealed that the six items were grouped in two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00. The first factor, consisting of entertainment, killing time, having topics to talk about, and knowing what other people are doing, explained 30.6 percent of the variance and was termed "entertainment/interpersonal motivations." The second factor, consisting of learning about social issues and information for daily life decisions, explained an additional 22.1 percent of the variance and was referred to as "social/information motivations."

The questionnaire also asked about the respondents' favorite news channel and asked them to rank seven specific sensational news topics, including crime and conflicts, accidents and disasters, sex and scandals, gossip about celebrities, bizarre events, entertainment news, and news about the occult or superstition. Finally, demographic information was obtained, including gender, age, education, employment, and family income.

### Findings

In terms of viewing habits, 40.3 percent of the respondents spent two to four hours per week watching TV news, 23.5 percent spent five to seven hours per week, and 21 percent watched news for over ten hours per week, while the remaining 15.2 percent watched eight to ten hours per week. In addition, 56.8 percent of the respondents preferred cable news as their primary TV news channels compared with 43.2 percent who still relied on broadcast terrestrial news.

As for the seven sensational news categories, 24.7 percent of the respondents rated gossip news as the most sensational news topic, followed by crime news (21.5 percent), accidents and disasters (16 percent), scandals (13.4 percent), occult news (7.8 percent), and entertainment news

---

provide interesting topics to talk about with family members and friends; and to know what other people are doing. For each question the respondents could choose between five possible responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

(3.8 percent). It is noteworthy that 12.7 percent of the respondents could not provide a ranking or refused to do so.

The current study includes various research questions probing seven independent factors affecting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. The following analyses use Pearson correlations to examine relationships between sensationalism and news topics (RQ1), TV news production features (RQ2), and viewers' motivations for watching TV news (RQ4). For categorical factors such as channel selections (RQ3) and gender (RQ7), t-test is used to examine these variables' relationships with sensationalism. For factors that can be grouped into more than two categories, such as age (RQ5) and education (RQ7), ANOVA is used to examine not only their relationships with sensationalism but also how age groups or education groups differ in their relationships with sensationalism. Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis is carried out to determine each factor's strength in affecting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism (RQ8).

The first research question examines the relationship between sensational news topics and viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. The Pearson correlation between news topics and viewers' perceptions of sensationalism was  $r=.03$  ( $p>.05$ ), suggesting sensational news topics appeared not to influence viewers' judgments.

The second research question investigates the relationship between TV news production features and viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. The Pearson correlation between the perceived amount of audio production features in the news and the perception of sensationalism was  $r=.33$  ( $p<.01$ ); the correlation between the perceived amount of video production features and the perception of sensationalism was  $r=.09$  ( $p<.05$ ); and the correlation between the perceived amount of editing production features and perceived sensationalism was  $r=.26$  ( $p<.01$ ).

The third research question focused on whether there is a relationship between viewers' selection of news channels and their perceptions of sensationalism in news. A t-test between cable and terrestrial viewers was significant ( $t=2.36$ ;  $p<.05$ ) with a greater amount of sensationalism perceived to exist on cable channels ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ) than on terrestrial channels ( $M=3.00$ ,  $SD=0.59$ ).

The fourth research question explores whether motivations for watching TV news are an additional factor affecting the audience's perceptions of sensationalism. Pearson correlations indicated that the relationship between entertainment/interpersonal motivations for watching news and perceptions of sensationalism was  $r=-.17$  ( $p<.01$ ), while for social/informational motivations the correlation was  $r=.13$  ( $p<.01$ ).

The fifth research question considers the relationship between viewers' age and their perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. The respondents were coded according to three age groups: 18 to 39 ( $n=308$ ); 40 to 59 ( $n=448$ ); and 60 years and above ( $n=138$ ). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference among the means of the three age groups ( $F=8.92$ ,  $df=2,892$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The younger viewers tended to perceive TV news as significantly less sensational ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ) than middle-aged viewers ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=0.62$ ) or senior viewers ( $M=3.38$ ,  $SD=0.55$ ). A post-hoc Tukey test indicated that the mean of the youngest group was significantly lower than that of the two higher groups but no significant difference was found between the means of the two older groups.

The sixth research question investigates whether or not the educational level of viewers is an influential factor affecting their perceptions of sensationalism in TV news. Based on the three levels of education, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference among the group means ( $F=8.28$ ,  $df=2,892$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The university-educated viewers tended to perceive TV news as significantly more sensational ( $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) than did high school graduates ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ) and viewers with a lower level of education ( $M=3.16$ ,  $SD=0.70$ ). A post-hoc Tukey test indicated that the mean of the university graduates was significantly higher than that of the other two educational groups.

The seventh research question examines the relationship between viewers' gender and their perception of sensationalism. A t-test for independent samples did not detect a significant difference for gender ( $t=0.81$ ;  $p>.05$ ).

Following the separate analyses for each of the independent variables, an attempt was made to determine which of the variables contributed the most toward predicting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. Four

**Table 1**  
**Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Affecting Viewers' Perception of Sensationalism in TV News**

Independent variables	Regression			
	1	2	3	4
<i>Block 1: TV production features and news topics</i>				
News topics	.03	.04	.04	.04
Audio features	.27***	.27***	.23***	.22***
Visual features	.01	.02	.01	.01
Editing features	.17***	.17***	.17***	.17***
Multiple R	.36			
Adjusted R square	.13			
<i>Block 2: Motivations for watching TV news</i>				
Information		.10**	.09**	.09**
Entertainment/interpersonal needs		.15**	-.13***	-.13***
Multiple R	.40			
Adjusted R square	.16			
Increased R square	.03			
<i>Block 3: Demographics</i>				
Age			.12**	.11**
Gender			-.03	-.03
Education			.03	.03
Family income			.05	.04
Multiple R	.43			
Adjusted R square	.18			
Increased R square	.03			
<i>Block 4: Media use</i>				
TV news watch time				.01
Favorite news channel				.10**
Multiple R	.44			
Adjusted R square	.19			
Increased R square	.008			

**Note:** Beta weights are from the final regression analysis including all the variables in the model (n=894).

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed (see table 1). In the first analysis, the first block of regression analysis (column 1), the variables entered were news topics and TV news production features. In the second block the motivations for watching TV news were added (column

2). The third block includes the demographic variables of age, gender, education, and family income (column 3). The final block consists of the media use variables, including the amount of TV news viewing and preferred news channel, terrestrial or cable (column 4). In the current study, the variables were entered according to the order of their expected contribution.

Results of the final regression analyses revealed that the audio production features in TV news were the most powerful in predicting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in news ( $\beta=.22, p<.001$ ), followed by editing production features ( $\beta=.17, p<.001$ ). News topics were not found to be a significant factor here. The entertainment/interpersonal motivation for watching news emerged as the third significant factor ( $\beta=-.13, p<.001$ ), followed by age ( $\beta=.11, p<.001$ ), preferred news channel ( $\beta=.10, p<.001$ ), and information motivation for watching news ( $\beta=.09, p<.001$ ). The multiple correlation was  $R=.44$  indicating that 19 percent of the variance in the perception of sensationalism is explained by these variables.

Thus, according to the respondents, audio production features, such as background music and dramatic reporting tones, exert the greatest influence on the perception of sensationalism, more than visual production features, such as emotional subtitles, graphic or special effects, or editing productions features, such as pacing or repetition of visuals. In terms of motivations for watching the news, on the one hand entertainment and interpersonal motivations were found to negatively predict viewers' perceptions of sensationalism, while on the other hand, informational motivations positively predicted their perceptions of sensationalism.

## Discussion

The tendency to sensationalize news has been one of the most significant issues in journalism in recent years. The main contribution of this study was to explore factors affecting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in TV news from their own points of view. We approached actual TV news viewers, who provided valuable information about what factors

influenced their perceptions of this significant news trend.

First, while it seems intuitive to assume that news content impacts viewers' perception of sensationalism, the current study surprisingly found no significant relationship between news topics and viewers' perception of sensationalism. It is speculated that this may be a result of the original questionnaire design. The only topics listed in the questionnaire were those that are commonly perceived to be sensational and respondents were asked to rate their perceptions of sensationalism. The questionnaire did not include what are typically non-sensational topics, and this may be one of the major research limits of the current study. Future work may include non-sensational news topics in order to further examine the impact of the news content, in contrast to the impact of sensational news content, on viewers' perceptions of sensationalism.

However, the research findings on sensational news content did exhibit a very interesting pattern. Taiwanese news viewers perceive gossip as the most sensational news topic, more sensational than topics such as crime, disasters, or scandals. While crime news was identified as the main staple of sensational news in previous studies on Taiwan, it is suggested that Taiwanese viewers may have become somewhat desensitized to such news, hence gossip about celebrities or bizarre events are now perceived as the most sensational topics.

In the mid-1990s, when the first cable news channels entered Taiwan's competitive TV news market, crime news was the most effective means to boost ratings. However, by the end of that decade, with eight 24-hour news channels emphasizing bloody news content, viewers appeared to be fed up with such sensational items.<sup>55</sup> After 2000, new themes, such as gossip about celebrities and bizarre events, became one of the primary means to grab attention and earn ratings.

---

<sup>55</sup>See Government Information Office, "Gallop Survey Shows News Reporting Too Sensational," *Xinwenjing zhoukan* (News Mirror Weekly), no. 499 (October, 1999): 48-49; and Yang Ma-li, "Retarded Media Is Degrading the Country," *Tianxia zazhi* (Common Wealth), no. 251 (April 1, 2002): 110-25. As noted above, there are now only six 24-hour news channels after two channels failed to withstand the competition.

The popularity of *Next Magazine* (壹週刊), a tabloid magazine imported in 2002 from Hong Kong, may also have accelerated the increase in this type of news content in cable news. Television news in Taiwan has long been accused of copying news content from the print media. As it grew more popular, *Next Magazine* soon became a new source for fresh and stimulating news materials. Its cover stories often became the lead items for prime time news. Stories featuring celebrity gossip or bizarre events have been perceived by viewers as the most sensational news content on TV in recent years.

From a more universal perspective, as Barkin points out, we now live in an age of "celebrity journalism,"<sup>56</sup> and there may never have been so much information available about the rich, famous, and infamous. TV news is now dependent on celebrity news, profiles, and scandals to sustain audience interest. Cultural critics identify a societal fascination with celebrities that may reflect a culture steeped in shallowness or the evaluation of the trivial.<sup>57</sup> In Taiwan, such gossip-based news reporting is judged as the most sensational category. It would be interesting to see if news audiences in other countries share a similar perspective, and what such similarity or variance might imply.

There was a positive relationship between TV formal features and the perception of sensationalism: the more audio, visual, and editing production features were perceived to be present in TV news, the more it was perceived to be sensational. Audio features were found to exert a greater influence on viewers' perceptions of sensationalism than visual and editing features. This finding seems to contradict the common understanding that the essential power of TV news comes from visuals. One possible reason may be the way the current study conceptualized audio, visual, and editing features. Audio features were defined as "background music" and "reporters' reporting tone." These two audio presentation ap-

---

<sup>56</sup>Barkin, *American Television News*, 117-36.

<sup>57</sup>Harold Brodkey, "The Last Word on Winchell," *The New Yorker* 70, no. 47 (January 30, 1995): 71-78.



proaches are common in Taiwan and may be more understandable and perceivable to general viewers. The visual features were defined as "news subtitles," "graphic pictures," and "repetition of pictures," while the editing features were conceptualized as "special editing effects" and "editing pace." During the survey, quite a few respondents asked what these visual and editing features exactly meant. This may indicate that some features in TV news are more difficult than others for general viewers to perceive and understand.

Another concern may be the selection criteria for structural features in this study. TV news production features were selected and defined on the basis of their typicality in Taiwan's TV news. However, there may be some other structural features highlighted in other countries. For example, several recent sensationalism studies from Europe have pointed out that the dimension of the "actors" in sensational news stories—that is, who is doing the talking—has long been neglected.<sup>58</sup> Who are the common actors in sensational news: celebrities, experts, politicians, private citizens, or other individuals? While these actors may also exert an impact on viewers' perceptions of sensational news, the current study has not included this research dimension. Future studies may conceptualize "actors in sensational news" and examine their impact on viewers' perceptions of sensationalism.

As for the motivations for news viewing, the study found that viewers who watched TV news mainly because of a need for information perceived the news as more sensational, while viewers who watched TV news for entertainment or interpersonal needs perceived the news as less sensational. This suggests that viewers with different motivations for watching TV news may form different judgments regarding how TV news is sensationalized. Future studies should explore whether judging news as less sensational indicates a shift in news values from the audience's perspective. Does the audience nowadays perceive "information" in TV news in a different way? Or do such judgments relate to an attitude of compromise

---

<sup>58</sup>Bek, "Tabloidization of News Media," 379; and Knut de Swert, "Sensationalism in a Television News Context" (Paper presented the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Stockholm, July 20-25, 2008).

with the degraded quality of TV news due to the trend toward sensationalism? Other motivations for watching TV news, such as social utility motivations, need to be included in future studies.

Regarding the impact of demographic factors, as expected, older and better educated viewers tend to perceive TV news as more sensational. Previous studies have consistently suggested that younger viewers prefer entertainment programs to news programs. The current generation of younger viewers may be less critical of professional performances in TV news compared with older generations, resulting in a tendency to be less concerned with the trend toward desensitization in the news.

As for gender, no differences were found between men and women regarding the perception of sensationalism in the news. The study suggested that sensationalism in TV news might be considered as a kind of sensual viewing experience, so that according to gender stereotypes men, who tend to prefer sensation-seeking experiences, would become less sensitive to sensationalism in the news compared with women. The current finding suggests that gender differences in news consumption ought to consider in a more sophisticated manner factors beyond mere biological categories of gender, such as the compound effects of socialization, education, and personality traits. Future studies might also attempt to separate the impacts of news presentation features and content in order to determine whether or not there is indeed a gendered perception of differences regarding sensationalism in TV news.

As for the impact of media use habits, cable TV news viewers did indeed perceive news content as more sensational than viewers of terrestrial television. Cable news in Taiwan has developed in parallel with the rise of local TV news in the United States. Cable news operators have expanded the news industry by using a more market-driven model of television journalism than that used by the networks. The notion of public service may not be entirely absent from the cable news channels in Taiwan, but it is evidently much weaker than in the terrestrial channels.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>See note 4 above.

Taken as a whole, the trends toward sensationalizing the news are evident in media markets where there is increasing competition for a shrinking news audience, as in the case of Taiwan. It is now known that audio features such as background music and dramatic reporting tone in TV news exert the most influence over viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. Since audio presentations are strongly related to viewers' negative evaluations of TV news performance, television news practitioners may need to reconsider the balance between the dramatic presentation of news aimed at engaging viewers' senses and the professional presentation of news in order to provide substantive information. As the present survey findings indicate, not all viewers welcome an era of "the journalism of outrageousness."<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, it was also found that viewers with a greater need for information appear to care more about the sensationalizing of TV news than viewers who watch for entertainment or interpersonal utility reasons. One may argue that the distinction between news and entertainment has never been easy for TV news, since television is first and foremost a medium rooted in the entertainment business. However, much of the evidence from other countries indicates that TV news is still the primary source for acquiring information about one's own country and the world at large. How television journalism is defined and to what extent it is trusted will depend to a certain degree on how TV news practitioners manage to strike a balance between the audience's needs to be informed and to be entertained.

One possible approach to achieving this balance is to increase the use of "sensational formal features" in "non-sensational news topics," and to decrease the use of these features in topics perceived as sensational. The current study confirmed a positive relationship between viewers' perceptions of sensationalism and TV's formal features such as audio, visuals, and editing. However, sensational formal features may not necessarily be a

---

<sup>60</sup>Matthew C. Ehrlich, "The Journalism of Outrageousness: Tabloid Television News vs. Investigative News," *Journalism & Mass Communication Monographs*, no. 155 (February 1996): 1-15.

bad thing in TV news if their tendency to attract the attention of viewers can be directed toward public affairs-related issues. The coverage of non-sensational news topics such as public affairs provides the basic information required by citizens, but for general viewers, these topics may not be as attractive as sensational news topics like "gossip." If sensational formal features can be used in public affairs reporting in order to attract the attention of citizens, then sensationalism can possibly be made to serve the public interest. On the other hand, sensational news topics such as gossip, crime, or disasters are already eye-catching enough and do not need the addition of sensational formal features.

Finally, the current study has several research limits. First, the factors examined in the present study explained only 19 percent of the variance. It is suggested future studies be conducted that incorporate theoretical concepts from other disciplines, such as social psychology, in order to further explore viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in news. Using social psychological perspectives, such as psychological state of mind of crowd or audience effects, it may be possible to identify other factors that trigger audiences to watch sensational news and to judge the news as "sensational." Future studies may also consider the possible influence of the disposition of individual viewers. For example, could an individual's sensation-seeking personality cause them to seek out more sensational news content, thereby influencing their judgments about sensationalism?

Another relevant theory from the persuasion research tradition, message sensation value (MSV), appears to be helpful in constructing a future measurement of sensationalism. This theory examines audiences' message evaluation, particularly in the context of public service announcements.<sup>61</sup> More newly developed variables, such as "instantaneous shock or non-instantaneous shock" or "vivid visuals or non-vivid visuals," can be considered in future sensationalism studies. However, when applying MSV theories to sensationalism in the area of news, the "valence" of the MSV

---

<sup>61</sup>Philip Palmgreen et al., "Perceived Message Sensation Value (PMSV) and the Dimensions and Validation of a PMSV Scale," *Health Communication* 14, no. 4 (January 2002): 403-28.

scales needs to be reconsidered. The original MSV scales tend to give positive values to features that induce message sensation, as long as they are able to attract the audience's attention to public service announcements. However, this is obviously different in the case of news. In future studies, the authors suggest the addition of "topic sphere" (public or personal sphere) as the first dimension of measurement of sensationalism, which may need to be weighted to emphasize the public responsibility of news.

Secondly, the current study does not include the use of Delphi techniques to develop the measurement of viewers' perception of sensationalism. Delphi techniques are effective in constructing a scale from the point of view of the expert. The current research was aimed at gaining an understanding of the perspective of the general TV audience and therefore did not include Delphi techniques to probe experts' opinions of "sensationalism." Future studies should include Delphi techniques to develop a more comprehensive scale for measuring the concept of sensationalism.

Thirdly, the current study lacks cultivation theory perspectives. While sensationalism in news is a long-term cultural phenomenon, previous studies tend to focus primarily on news content and as a result lack longitudinal or accumulated data on viewers' perceptions of sensationalism. The current study may serve as a starting point for longitudinal studies of the cultivation impacts of sensationalism on TV viewers.

All in all, sensationalism in television news is clearly increasing around the globe; thus further conceptualization of sensationalism and a more thorough list of factors comprising viewers' judgments are needed in future studies to better understand the phenomenon, which has become an issue of concern, not only in Taiwan but in other countries as well.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Adams, William C. 1978. "Local Public Affairs Content of TV News." *Journalism Quarterly* 55, no. 4:690-95.
- Allan, Stuart. 1999. *News Culture*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Armstrong, Cory L. 2006. "Writing about Women: An Examination of How Con-

- tent for Women Is Determined in Newspapers." *Mass Communication and Society* 9, no. 4 (January): 447-60.
- Barkin, Steve M. 2002. *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Barnhurst, Kevin G., and Ellen Wartella. 1991. "Newspapers and Citizenship: Young Adults' Subjective Experience of Newspapers." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 2 (June): 195-209.
- Bek, Mine Gencil. 2004. "Tabloidization of News Media: An Analysis of Television News in Turkey." *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 3 (August): 371-86.
- Bernstein, Carl. 1992. "The Idiot Culture: Reflections of Post-Watergate Journalism." *The New Republic*, June 8, 1992, 22-25.
- Brodkey, Harold. 1995. "The Last Word on Winchell." *The New Yorker* 70, no. 47 (January 30): 71-78.
- Bucy, Erik P. 2003. "Media Credibility Reconsidered: Synergy Effects between On-Air and Online News." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (Summer): 247-64.
- Chang, Bao-yuan. "Poor Quality News Media Is Isolating the Country." *Taipei Times*, July 18, 2005, 8.
- Davis, Hank, and S. Lyndsay McLeod. 2003. "Why Humans Value Sensational News: An Evolutionary Perspective." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24, no. 3 (May): 208-16.
- de Swert, Knut. "Sensationalism in a Television News Context." Paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Stockholm, July 20-25, 2008.
- Dsilva, Margaret Usha. 1999. "Individual Differences and Choice of Information Source: Sensation Seeking in Drug Abuse Prevention." *Communication Reports* 12, no. 1 (Winter): 51-57.
- Ehrlich, Matthew C. 1996. "The Journalism of Outrageousness: Tabloid Television News vs. Investigative News." *Journalism & Mass Communication Monographs*, no. 155 (February): 1-15.
- Esposito, Steven A. 1996. "Presumed Innocent? A Comparative Analysis of Network News', Prime-Time News Magazines', and Tabloid TV's Pretrial Coverage of the O.J. Simpson Criminal Case." *Communications and the Law* 18, no. 4:49-72.

- Government Information Office (行政院新聞局). 1999. "Gallop Survey Shows News Reporting Too Sensational" (蓋洛普民調顯示：節目暴色嚴重，新聞報導太過煽情). *Xinwenjing zhoukan* (新聞鏡周刊, News Mirror Weekly), no. 499 (October): 48-49.
- Grabe, Maria Elizabeth, et al. 2000. "Packaging Television News: The Effects of Tabloid on Information Processing and Evaluative Responses." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no. 4:581-98.
- Grabe, Maria Elizabeth, Shuhua Zhou, and Brook Barnett. 2001. "Explication Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 45, no. 4:635-55.
- Grabe, Maria Elizabeth, Anne Lang, and X. Zhao. 2003. "News Content and Form: Implication for Memory and Audience Evaluations." *Communication Research* 30, no. 4:387-413.
- Hallin, Daniel C. 2000. "Commercialism and Professionalism in the American News Media." In *Mass Media and Society*, third edition, edited by James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 218-37. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Hvitfelt, HaEkan. 1994. "The Commercialization of the Evening News: Changes in Narrative Technique of Swedish TV News." *Nordicom Review* 15, no. 1: 33-41.
- Ibelema, Mineabere, and Larry Powell. 2001. "Cable Television News Viewed as Most Credible." *Newspaper Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (January): 41-52.
- Kawabata, Matsuharu. 2005. "Audience Reception and Visual Presentations of TV News Programs in Japan." Paper presented at the conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Taipei, July 25-27, 2005.
- Klein, Roger D. 2003. "Audience Reactions to Local TV News." *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 12 (August): 1661-72.
- Knight, Graham. 1989. "Reality Effects: Tabloid Television News." *Queen's Quarterly* 96, no. 1 (Spring): 94-105.
- Lin, Yu-huei (林育卉), and Chuang, Bo-zhong (莊伯仲). 2003, 2004, 2005. *Dian-shi xinwen guanjian baogao* (電視新聞關鍵報告, TV news key report). Taipei: Broadcasting and Television Development Fund (廣播電視事業發展基金).
- McClellan, Steve, and Ken Kerschbaumer. 2001. "Tickers and Bugs: Has TV Got ten Way Too Graphic?" *Broadcasting & Cable* 131, no. 50 (December 3): 16-20.

- Mills, Kay. 1990. *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Pages*. New York: Dodd, Mead.
- Öngen, Demet E. 2007. "The Relationships between Sensation Seeking and Gender Role Orientations among Turkish University Students." *Sex Roles* 57, no. 1-2 (July): 111-18.
- Palmgreen, Philip, et al. 2002. "Perceived Message Sensation Value (PMSV) and the Dimensions and Validation of a PMSV Scale." *Health Communication* 14, no. 4 (January): 403-28.
- Pasadeos, Yorgo. 1984. "Application of Measures of Sensationalism to a Murdoch-Owned Daily in the San Antonio Market." *Newspaper Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer): 9-17.
- Perry, David K. 2002. "Perceptions of Sensationalism among U.S. and Mexican News Audiences." *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (January): 82-87.
- Pfetsch, Barbara. 1996. "Convergence through Privatization? Changing Media Environments and Televised Politics in Germany." *European Journal of Communication* 11, no. 4 (December): 427-51.
- Porter, Michel E. 1980. *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York: Free Press.
- Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking.
- Robinson, Michael J., and Andrew Kohut. 1988. "Believability and the Press." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 2:174-89.
- Rubin, Alan M. 1994. "Media Uses and Effects: A Uses-and-Gratifications Perspective." In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, edited by Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 417-36. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Scourfield, Jonathan, and D. E. Stevens, and K. R. Merikangas. 1996. "Substance Abuse, Comorbidity, and Sensation Seeking: Gender Differences." *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 37, no. 3:384-92.
- Slattery, Karen L., and Ernest A. Hakanen. 1994. "Sensationalism versus Public Affairs Content of Local TV News: Pennsylvania Revisited." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 38, no. 2:205-16.
- Sparks, Collin, and John Tulloch. 2000. *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates over Media Standards*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tannenbaum, Percy H., and Marvin D. Lynch. 1960. "Sensationalism: The Con-



- cept and Its Measurement." *Journalism Quarterly* 37, no. 2:381-92.
- Vettehen, Paul Hendricks, Koos Nuijten, and Johannes Beentjes. 2005. "News in an Age of Competition: The Case of Sensationalism in Dutch Television News, 1995-2001." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 49, no. 3:282-95.
- Vincent, Richard C., and Mike D. Basil. 1997. "College Students' News Grati-  
fications, Media Use, and Current Events Knowledge." *Journal of Broad-  
casting & Electronic Media* 41, no. 3:380-93.
- Wang, Tai-Li (王泰俐). "The Shifting Cultural Space of Television News: From  
Public Affairs toward Entertainment" (電視新聞文化空間的遷徙:從公共事  
務領域到娛樂領域). Paper presented at the annual conference of the Chi-  
nese Communication Association, National Taiwan University, Taipei, July  
13-15, 2006.
- Yang, Ma-li (楊瑪利). 2002. "Retarded Media Is Degrading the Country" (弱智媒  
體，大家一起來誤國). *Tianxia zazhi* (天下雜誌, Common Wealth), no. 251  
(April 1): 110-25.
- Yiu, Cheung. "CTV Redefines What It Considers 'News'." *Taipei Times*, Septem-  
ber, 29, 2004.
- Zuckerman, Marvin, 1979. *Sensation Seeking: Beyond the Optimal Level of  
Arousal*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.