

# Is Soft News a Turn-Off? Evidence from Italian TV News Viewership\*

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## Abstract

We analyze minute-by-minute, individual level data on viewership for Italian TV news broadcasts (from Auditel), matched with detailed data on content (from Osservatorio di Pavia). We are interested in the behavior of viewers, and in particular in their decision to switch from a news program as a function of the type of story they are currently watching. Somewhat surprisingly, we find that “soft” news systematically induce viewers to switch, even more than “hard” news. On the other hand, stories about crime, and stories about accidents and disasters, are associated with less switching. We also find significant differences in this switching behavior according to gender, age,

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and the specific TV channel being watched. For example, young people (below the age of 30) are more turned off by hard news than older people, while the opposite holds for soft news. Women also appear to be less turned off than men by soft news. The results are robust to the inclusion of viewer-specific fixed effects.

## 1 Introduction

Political scientists and communication scholars have often remarked how news consumption has moved away from “hard” news—news about public policies, the economy, the general functioning of government, and foreign affairs—towards “soft” news about sports, fashion, food, travel, celebrity gossip, and the like. Often those descriptive remarks come with complaints about how civil discourse, public opinion and voter knowledge are actually deteriorating because of those trends in news consumption (Patterson 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Because of the presence of strong social norms regarding their perceived “civic-mindedness”, we think that self-reported behavior is not the best way to empirically check whether it is really the case that citizens avoid hard news and prefer soft news: respondents might be systematically willing to overstate their appreciation for hard news and understate their love for soft news. But other types of response bias might show up, in directions whose “signs” are hard to pin down *ex ante* (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2001; McFadden *et al.* 2005).

Thus, we use data on the actual behavior of news consumers, rather than self-reported accounts of it. More precisely, we focus on minute-by-minute individual level TV ratings on Italian TV news broadcasts during the 2009-2010 period. TV ratings for Italy are provided by the Auditel consortium, which in turn makes use of meter-based data from Nielsen.

In addition to the advantages stemming from the use of “revealed preference” data—i.e., data on the actual behavior of TV viewers—rather than self-reported data, the use of

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<sup>1</sup>But soft news might also capture the interest of citizens that otherwise would be inattentive to news in general, and thus help political knowledge to “trickle down” (Baum 2003). See Reinemann *et al.* [2012] for a discussion of how communication scholars have operationalized the distinction between hard and soft news.

individual level ratings allows us to investigate the details of how TV viewers behave, without facing the risk of aggregating very different behaviors at the “micro” level.

We match the TV ratings data with equally granular data on the issues covered by Italian national evening news broadcasts minute by minute. This data is provided by the *Osservatorio di Pavia*. Combining the two databases, we know the type of news story that each individual in the sample is watching—or not watching—every minute of the two-hour time evening time period during which the major national news programs are broadcast.

We then run a series of regressions in which the dependent variable is a dummy indicating that the viewer changed channel (or turned off the television), in either case leaving the program he or she was currently watching. The key independent variables indicated the type of news story that was being aired during or just prior to the switch (or non-switch). We find the following: (1) viewers are more likely to switch away during a soft news story than a hard news story; (2) viewers are less likely to leave the channel during a story about crime or an accident or disaster than either a hard or soft news story; and (3) much more than any type of news story, viewers change channels when they see advertisements. Thus, our findings are inconsistent with the simple hypothesis that TV consumers always seek entertainment rather than politically relevant information.

We also analyzed each channel separately, and find results consistent with the conventional wisdom that Channel 3 (“TG3”) viewers are more “serious” news watchers, while Channel 6 (“Studio Aperto”) viewers are younger and generally seek entertainment.

Finally, there appear to be clear differences in switching behavior between young and old, and also between men and women. Compared to old viewers, young viewers are more likely to switch away from hard news stories, news about accidents and disasters, and news about religion. They are less likely to switch away from soft news stories. They are also less likely to continue watching crime stories than older viewers. Interestingly, while older viewers are more likely to switch away from soft news stories than hard news stories, the opposite is true for younger viewers. Older viewers also appear to be more turned off by advertisements. In

relative terms, men are much more likely to switch away from soft news than hard news, compared to women. They are also somewhat less likely than women to switch during stories about crime or accidents and disasters. Men also appear to be more turned off than women by news about religion, and by advertisements. Overall, these patterns are generally consistent with other research on preferences.

The paper is organized as follows: in section 2 we discuss the ratings data and provide some descriptive statistics, while in section 3 we present our descriptive analysis and regression results. Section 4 concludes.

Expand literature review (see new folder). Link with poliscience literature

More descriptive patterns. Low R2 from observables when we try to explain total news-watching. What happens when we throw in individual fixed effects?

Descriptive stats of news from osservatorio (fraction of story in each category and graph minute by minute what fraction of news is soft and hard)

sumstats of daybyday people we have in sample (pooled) + total people in sample

## 2 Data

We use minute by minute individual level ratings for Italian TV, as provided by Auditel. We focus on the 2009-10 period and restrict our analysis to evening TV news broadcasts. As a first cut to the data, it is worthwhile to check how it compares with survey data tapping into the same topic, i.e. (in our case) TV news consumption.

As extensively discussed by Prior [2009], U.S. citizens display a strong, systematic tendency to overestimate the frequency with which they watch TV news broadcasts. This is apparent by looking at the difference between self-reported frequency of viewership vis a vis “true” viewership data that come from Nielsen ratings.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Comparing NAES (National Annenberg Election Survey) data for 2009 and Nielsen ratings, Prior shows that on average U.S. citizens overstate TV news viewership by a factor of three, which rises to eight for specific subgroups, e.g. young people aged from 18 to 34.

We can replicate this analysis on Italian data by comparing TV news viewership aggregate data in Auditel (based on real viewership) with ITANES self-reported weekly viewership.<sup>3</sup> Since our Auditel data refer to 2009 and 2010 the most comparable ITANES study is the 2008 one.

The outcome of this exercise is shown in Figure 1, where we see huge differences when comparing Auditel true viewership and ITANES self-reported viewership data. There are two Auditel lines in the figure: the former computes the average number of days of TV news watching per week by considering “all days”—i.e., all calendar days during the period—while the latter only looks at those days when the individual does watch some TV. We report both types of data, because it is unclear whether ITANES respondents have in mind *any week* when answering to the question about TV news viewership or only those weeks when they actually watched some TV. While 80 percent of ITANES respondents say they watch the news every day, when focusing on “all days” Auditel data about 80 percent of individuals watch the TV news broadcast less than once a week, i.e. the pattern is completely reversed. On the other hand, in the case of “TV days” Auditel data there is an increasing percentage of viewers that watch TV news once, twice three times etc. per week, with a spike of about 35 percent for 6 days a week, and less than 10 percent that watch it every day. So, the difference with ITANES data is less pronounced than with “all days” data, but still very sizeable.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to check whether those differences between self-reported data and ratings data are not confined to frequency of viewership but also affect other dimensions. For example, one can compare the favorite channel for TV news—as self-declared by ITANES respondents—to the actual most watched TV broadcast according to Auditel ratings. Differently from Figure 1, Figure 2 shows virtually no difference between self-reported and actual news choices across channels: as it is well known, Channel 1 (“TG1”) is the first channel ac-

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<sup>3</sup>ITANES is the Italian National Election Study, see <http://www.itanes.org/en/questionnaires/>.

<sup>4</sup>Notice that ITANES data does not need weighting, while Auditel data would need it. In this preliminary version of the paper Auditel data are *unweighted*.

ording to viewership and self-reported preferences, closely followed by Channel 5 (“TG5”). Channel 3 (“TG3”) follows, then Channel 2 (“TG2”), Channel 6 (“Studio Aperto”) and Channel 4 (“TG4”). If anything people tend to slightly overstate their preference for TV news on Channel 1.

Our broad aim is to analyze the real-time behavior of viewers, as a function of they type of content that is actually covered during each minute of each TV news broadcasts. In order to implement this analysis, we match Auditel data with content data on TV news broadcasts, as provided by *Osservatorio di Pavia*. For each story appearing on each TV news broadcast, the database contains the starting minute and ending minute, a manually coded summary, and a classification of the main type of issue being covered. The summaries and issue classification allow us to classify each story as “hard” or “soft” or some other type. For the present paper the other types we distinguish are stories about crime, accidents and disasters, and religion. We also separate advertisements.

As a starting point, for each TV channel we can classify the number of minutes that individuals in the Auditel sample spend by joining that channel, staying on that channel, leaving it or “surfing”, i.e leaving that channel in minute  $t$  and coming back in minute  $t + 1$ . Those summary statistics are displayed in Table 1. There are some noticeable patterns to remark. First, by far the most common behavior is “to stay”, i.e. there is a lot of inertia in viewing, since on average about 92 percent of all minutes are spent by *staying* on that TV channel. This percentage is somewhat smaller for less strong TV channels, such as Channel 2, 4 and 6. Second, on average 5.3 percent of all minutes are spent by joining the channel, while 2.6 percent are spent by leaving it. Interestingly, the percentages of minutes spent leaving the channel are larger for the weak channels, i.e. again Channels 2, 4 and 6. The opposite holds for the strong channels, i.e. Channels 1, 5 and 3.

With individual level ratings data one can obtain a distribution of viewership for each TV news broadcasts, i.e. the percentage of viewers/days that watch the entire show, and the corresponding percentage of viewers for any percentage of the total time. This is shown in

Figure 3 for all channels jointly, and separately for each channel in Figure 4. All histograms are U-shaped, with a taller spike at the top bin, i.e. for those that watch from 90 to 100 percent of the TV news broadcasts. Those spikes at the top bin are taller for the most viewed broadcasts (Channel 1 and Channel 5) and for Channel 3 (see the top histograms in Figure 4) than for Channel 2, 4 and 6.

Another and perhaps more natural way to exploit the individual-level ratings data is to show the raw number of people watching a given TV news broadcast—a minute-by-minute “stock” variable—together with the flow of people that leave that broadcast in any given minute, and the corresponding flow of people that join it. This is done in Figures 5 and 6. Generally speaking, the stock of viewers does increase at the decreasing pace as time goes by, reaches a peak around minute 30, and then decreases at a fast pace (this occurs in the case of channels 1, 5, 2 and 6).

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Descriptive Analyses

First, in order to have a initial picture about the viewership of hard vs. soft news, one can check the “hard vs. soft news diet” of viewers as a function of the intensity of their TV news viewership, i.e. as a function of the percentage of a TV news broadcast’s total time length each viewer does watch on average. So, building on Figure 3, for each decile of TV news intensity we can pin down the average percentage of hard news and of soft news being watched. Of course, for those who entirely or almost entirely watch the news show the hard vs. soft news consumption bundle exactly corresponds to the bundle aired by that TV news broadcast.

Figure 7 shows the hard and the soft news bundles for each decile of viewership intensity, in relative terms. More precisely, we obtain this relative measures by dividing the individual level consumption by the channel-specific average amount of hard or soft news, i.e. its average across the entire year. Interestingly, low intensity viewers watch soft news significantly more

than the average bundle, while hard news consumption converges to the aired bundle in a smoother way, i.e. the more intense the TV news watching, the more hard news is watched by that decile.

### 3.2 Econometric Analyses

In this section we study the switching behavior of news viewers. In particular, we want to know whether viewers appear to avoid hard news, and whether they are more attracted to soft news.

We estimate the following model

$$\begin{aligned} Switch_{it} = & \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \theta_t + \beta_1 Hard\ News_{it} + \beta_2 Soft\ News_{it} + \beta_3 Crime\ News_{it} \\ & + \beta_4 Accidents\ \&\ Disasters_{it} + \beta_5 News\ About\ Religion_{it} + \beta_6 Ads_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

where  $i$  is an index for individual viewers,  $j$  is an index for news program (channel), and  $t$  is an index for time (more specifically for the number of minutes elapsed since the beginning of the news show). Each observation is a given viewer  $i$  in a given minute  $t$ , watching a given news program  $j$ . The independent variables are indicators:  $Switch_{it} = 1$  if viewer  $i$  switches away from the channel he/she is watching sometime during minute  $t$ , and zero otherwise;  $Hard\ News_{it} = 1$  if the news story  $i$  is watching at time  $t$  is a hard news story and zero otherwise;  $Soft\ News_{it} = 1$  if the news story  $i$  is watching at time  $t$  is a soft news story and zero otherwise;  $Crime\ News_{it} = 1$  if the news story  $i$  is watching at time  $t$  is a crime story and zero otherwise; and so on. The omitted category is a mixed bag of stories on miscellaneous topics.<sup>5</sup> We also control for a variable indicating whether the observation is on a weekday or the weekend.

The results are shown in Table 2. We estimate the model for all channels pooled (column 1) and also separately for each channel (columns 2-7). We also estimate the model both with (bottom panel) and without (top panel) the viewer-specific fixed-effects.

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<sup>5</sup>As noted above, the “standard” length of a news broadcast varies across stations. The overall median is 33 minutes, and the mean is about 34 minutes. In the regressions we drop observations that occur after the first 35 minutes of a broadcast.



Consider Column 1. First, note that the estimated coefficients on *Hard News* and *Soft News* are both positive, while the estimates coefficients on *Crime News* and news about *Accidents & Disasters* are both negative (they are all statistically significant at the .01 level). Thus, viewers are more likely to switch away from a channel during a hard or soft news story, but they are less likely to leave the channel during a story about crime or an accident or disaster.

Second, and perhaps more surprisingly, the coefficient on *Soft News* is, in terms of absolute magnitude, more than twice as large as the coefficient on *Hard News*. Thus, the point estimates suggest that on average TV news viewers are turned-off more by soft news—stories about sports, celebrity gossip, fashion, food and cooking, etc.—than by hard news. This is inconsistent with the simple hypothesis that TV consumers always seek entertainment rather than politically relevant information.

Third, the estimated coefficient on *Ads* is positive and huge. It is by far the largest point estimate—ten times as large as the coefficient on *Hard News*, for example. Much more than any type of news story, viewers change channels when they see advertisements.

Fourth, the estimated coefficient on *News About Religion*—often, stories about the Pope—is positive and rather large. Evidently, Italians are not attracted to news stories about religion. Despite this, there is much more coverage of the Pope and of the Catholic religion on Italian television than there is on other European countries. The estimates suggest that this is not driven by audience demand, but by some other factor—e.g., the fact that the Pope lives in the Vatican, surrounded by Rome and Italy.

Finally, note that the estimates do not differ dramatically across the two panels. Thus, although the viewer-specific fixed effects do account for a considerable amount of variation—e.g., between those who watch a lot of TV news and those who do not—it does not change the estimated coefficients on the variables of interest.

Importantly, we must remember (i) that all of the estimates are conditional, the condition being that the viewer watches at least some TV news, and (ii) that the sample is weighted

toward those who watch more news.

The channel-by-channel results are also interesting. First, note that Channel 3 (“TG3”) viewers appear to be especially turned-off by soft news relative to hard news, compared to the viewers of other channels. That is, although for all but one channel the estimated coefficient on *Soft News* is larger in magnitude than the coefficient on *Hard News*, the difference between the point estimates is largest for Channel 3, and noticeably larger than for the other channels. In fact, Channel 3 viewers are both less likely to switch during a hard news story than the viewers of other channels, and also more likely to switch during a soft news story. Channel 6 (“Studio Aperto”) is the only channel for which the estimated coefficient on *Hard News* is larger in magnitude than the coefficient on *Soft News*. These estimates are consistent with the conventional wisdom that Channel 3 viewers are more “serious” news watchers, while Channel 6 viewers are younger and generally seek entertainment.

Other patterns in the coefficients may deserve attention. For example, Channel 2 (“TG2”) viewers appear to be especially turned on by *Crime News* and news about *Accidents & Disasters*. This appears to be consistent with the hypothesis that channel 2 viewers are more conservative. The estimates also suggest that Channel 3 and Channel 6 viewers are especially uninterested in *News About Religion*. Perhaps this reflects the audiences—a disproportionate number of Channel 3 viewers may be non-religious, and a disproportionate number of Channel 6 viewers are young.<sup>6</sup>

Since we have individual level data we can also study whether different types of viewers respond differently to hard and soft news. As an exploratory exercise, we compare younger and older viewers, using 30 years old as the dividing age (so about 30 percent of the sample is young), and separately we compare men and women. The results are shown in Table 3.

Evidently, there are clear differences in switching behavior between young and old, and also between men and women. Compared to old viewers, young viewers are more likely to switch away from hard news stories, news about accidents and disasters, and news about

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<sup>6</sup>On the other hand, the coefficient on *News About Religion* is also large for Channel 2 viewers in the specification with viewer-specific fixed effects included.

religion. They are less likely to switch away from soft news stories. They are also less likely to continue watching crime stories than older viewers. Interestingly, while older viewers are more likely to switch away from soft news stories than hard news stories, the opposite is true for younger viewers. Older viewers also appear to be more turned off by advertisements.

The data also suggest clear gender differences. In relative terms, men are much more likely to switch away from soft news than hard news, compared to women. They are also somewhat less likely than women to switch during stories about crime or accidents and disasters. Men also appear to be more turned off than women by news about religion, and by advertisements.

Overall, these patterns are generally consistent with other research on preferences. In future work we will explore more differences, such as comparing the switching behavior of heavy news consumers (based on average news consumption in the past) with other viewers.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have analysed individual level ratings data for Italian TV news broadcasts, in order to check whether and to what extent viewers are “turned off” by hard news. Quite surprisingly, we find that soft news lead viewers to leave the TV news broadcast they are currently watching. This also holds for hard news, but the correlation coefficient is smaller in size. On the other hand, stories about crime, and stories about accidents and disasters—which often happen to have a sensationalistic slant—make viewers significantly more willing to “stay” on the TV broadcast they are watching. We also find significant differences in this switching off behavior according to gender, age, and the specific TV channel being watched.

Starting with this preliminary analysis, the next step is to investigate more thoroughly the heterogeneity in the decision to switch off. In particular, individual level data allows us to condition viewers’ decisions on their viewing history, e.g. how faithful they are to a given TV news broadcast, or a specific issue being covered.

Moreover, we plan to study the decision to switch on a given news broadcast. From

an informational viewpoint, the “joining” behavior is trickier than the “leaving” behavior, since viewers do not know with certainty what they will find on the channel to which they switch to, while they know for sure what they decide not to watch anymore when leaving the channel.

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Table 1: **Classification of Minutes**

Channel	% of Minutes Where Viewer Is:				Total Minutes
	Joining	Staying	Leaving	Surfing	
1	4.6	93.0	2.0	0.4	27,034,948
2	7.2	87.4	4.4	1.0	9,350,670
3	5.6	91.8	2.2	0.5	9,384,581
4	5.9	89.0	3.9	1.3	4,204,601
5	4.7	92.8	2.2	0.4	23,571,386
6	7.6	87.7	3.9	0.9	3,895,938
All	5.3	91.6	2.5	0.6	77,442,124

Footnotes here.

Figure 1: Frequency of TV news watching. Auditel ratings vs. ITANES self-reported data

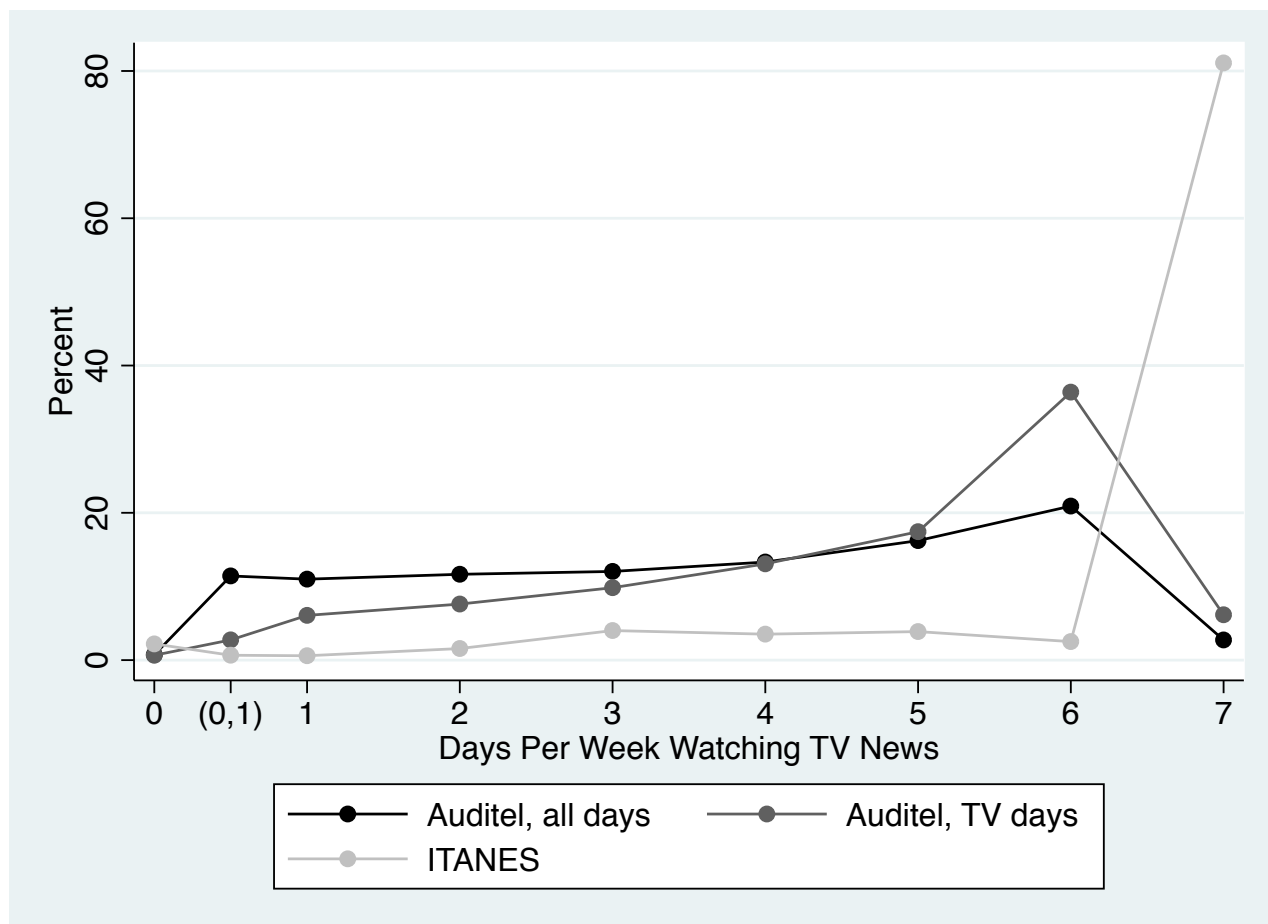


Table 2: **Viewer Switching Behavior (DV = Percent of People Switching Away From Channel)**

Variable	All	Channel					
	Channels	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Without viewer-specific FE</i>							
Hard News	0.197 (0.014)	0.073 (0.018)	0.361 (0.053)	0.156 (0.054)	0.416 (0.075)	0.181 (0.024)	0.584 (0.083)
Soft News	0.558 (0.023)	0.299 (0.026)	0.640 (0.070)	0.792 (0.087)	0.520 (0.091)	0.367 (0.032)	0.156 (0.081)
Crime News	-0.140 (0.014)	-0.066 (0.016)	-0.244 (0.052)	-0.045 (0.048)	-0.016 (0.073)	-0.039 (0.021)	-0.001 (0.067)
Accidents & Disasters	-0.059 (0.017)	-0.066 (0.022)	-0.231 (0.068)	0.011 (0.065)	0.302 (0.094)	-0.006 (0.027)	0.183 (0.084)
News About Religion	0.266 (0.034)	0.102 (0.037)	0.435 (0.109)	0.968 (0.179)	0.435 (0.174)	0.261 (0.061)	0.530 (0.315)
Other News	0.009 (0.019)	0.007 (0.025)	0.086 (0.075)	0.199 (0.082)	0.442 (0.090)	0.102 (0.032)	0.182 (0.112)
Ads	-0.274 (0.164)	–	–	–	0.837 (0.206)	0.299 (0.129)	–
<i>With viewer-specific FE</i>							
Hard News	0.227 (0.015)	0.098 (0.017)	0.472 (0.053)	0.237 (0.053)	0.674 (0.078)	0.239 (0.024)	0.636 (0.082)
Soft News	0.553 (0.023)	0.265 (0.025)	0.566 (0.067)	0.782 (0.084)	0.520 (0.089)	0.336 (0.031)	0.130 (0.081)
Crime News	-0.130 (0.014)	-0.054 (0.016)	-0.233 (0.050)	-0.034 (0.048)	0.059 (0.073)	-0.033 (0.021)	-0.013 (0.066)
Accidents & Disasters	-0.082 (0.017)	-0.109 (0.022)	-0.395 (0.069)	-0.102 (0.065)	0.144 (0.092)	-0.025 (0.028)	0.145 (0.084)
News About Religion	0.307 (0.034)	0.133 (0.037)	0.564 (0.109)	1.144 (0.176)	0.631 (0.170)	0.348 (0.060)	0.300 (0.317)
Other News	0.013 (0.019)	0.002 (0.025)	0.110 (0.074)	0.210 (0.077)	0.669 (0.093)	0.111 (0.032)	0.116 (0.110)
Ads	-0.057 (0.166)	–	–	–	1.177 (0.205)	0.521 (0.127)	–
Observations	14275121	5935553	1978391	1195800	727771	3728207	709399

Standard errors, clustered by individual, are in parentheses.

Table 3: **Viewer Switching Behavior by Age and Gender (DV = Percent of People Switching Away From Channel)**

Variable	By Age		By Gender	
	Old	Young	Men	Women
<i>Without viewer-specific FE</i>				
Hard News	0.181 (0.015)	0.438 (0.080)	0.112 (0.029)	0.257 (0.023)
Soft News	0.567 (0.025)	0.448 (0.118)	0.849 (0.061)	0.354 (0.041)
Crime News	-0.137 (0.015)	-0.197 (0.058)	-0.198 (0.027)	-0.099 (0.020)
Accidents & Disasters	-0.065 (0.017)	0.012 (0.072)	-0.095 (0.030)	-0.032 (0.022)
News About Religion	0.266 (0.036)	0.250 (0.143)	0.356 (0.057)	0.203 (0.044)
Other News	0.009 (0.020)	0.005 (0.079)	0.032 (0.032)	-0.006 (0.024)
Ads	-0.278 (0.175)	-0.200 (0.415)	0.356 (0.285)	-0.684 (0.206)
<i>With viewer-specific FE</i>				
Hard News	0.214 (0.015)	0.419 (0.077)	0.145 (0.028)	0.285 (0.022)
Soft News	0.562 (0.025)	0.444 (0.118)	0.841 (0.061)	0.350 (0.041)
Crime News	-0.131 (0.015)	-0.125 (0.058)	-0.185 (0.026)	-0.091 (0.020)
Accidents & Disasters	-0.087 (0.018)	-0.029 (0.071)	-0.123 (0.030)	-0.054 (0.022)
News About Religion	0.312 (0.036)	0.237 (0.139)	0.401 (0.057)	0.242 (0.044)
Other News	0.013 (0.019)	-0.007 (0.077)	0.035 (0.031)	-0.003 (0.024)
Ads	-0.063 (0.175)	0.031 (0.391)	0.592 (0.274)	-0.485 (0.200)
Observations	14275121		14275121	

Standard errors, clustered by individual, are in parentheses.



Figure 2: TV news watching, favorite channel. Auditel ratings vs. ITANES self-reported data

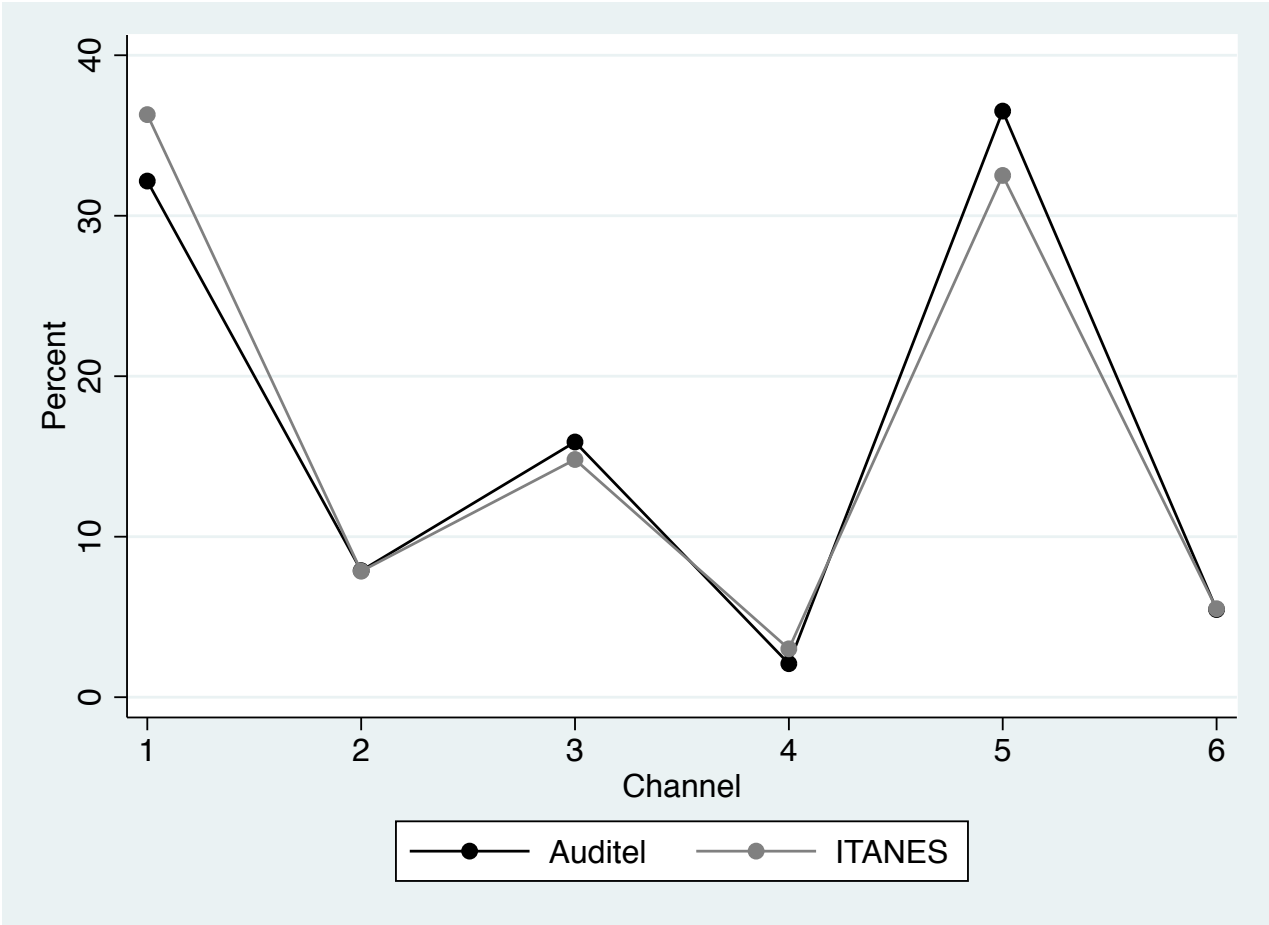


Figure 3: Percentage of TV news broadcast being watched, all channels

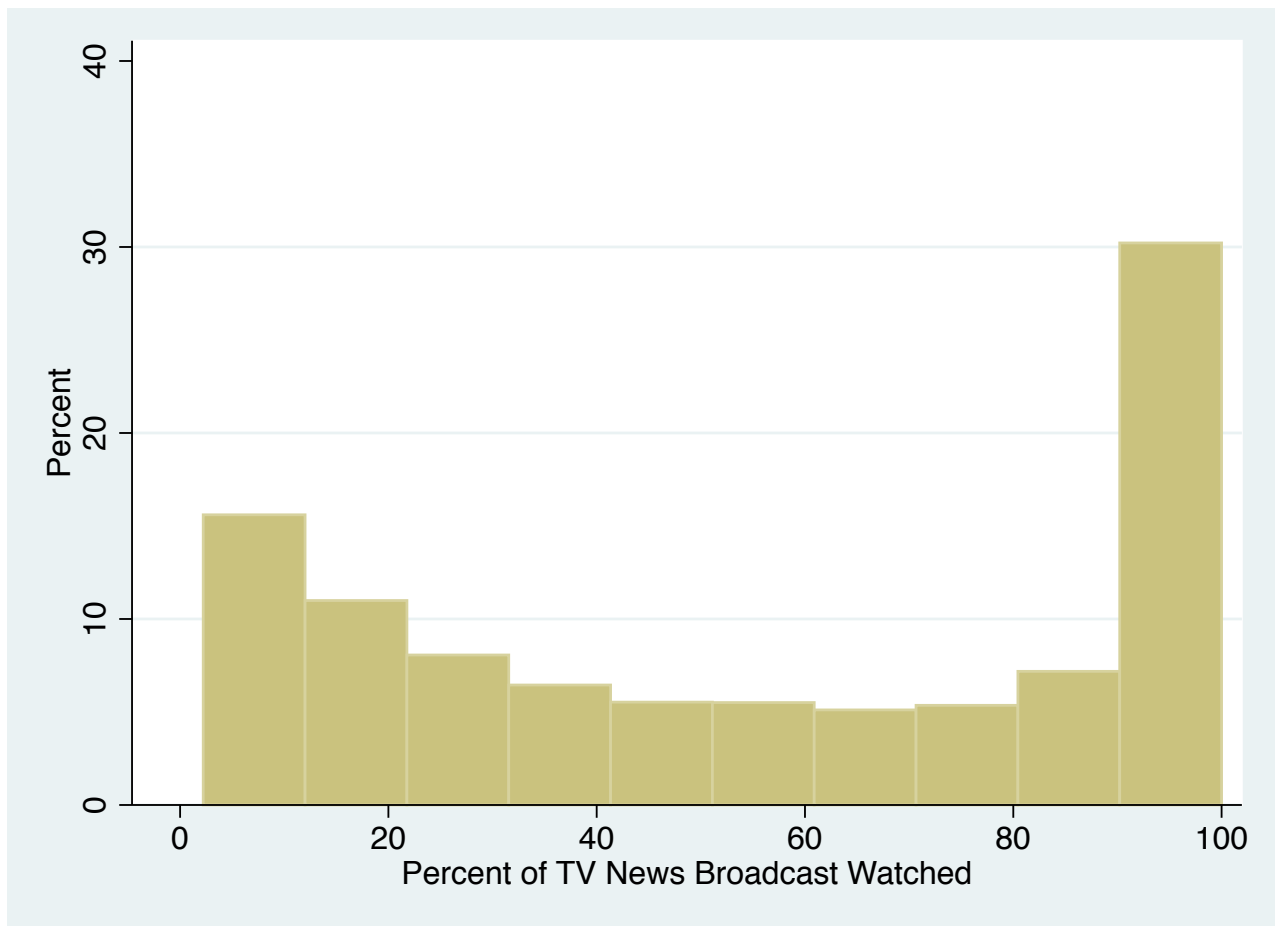


Figure 4: Percentage of TV news broadcast being watched, channel by channel

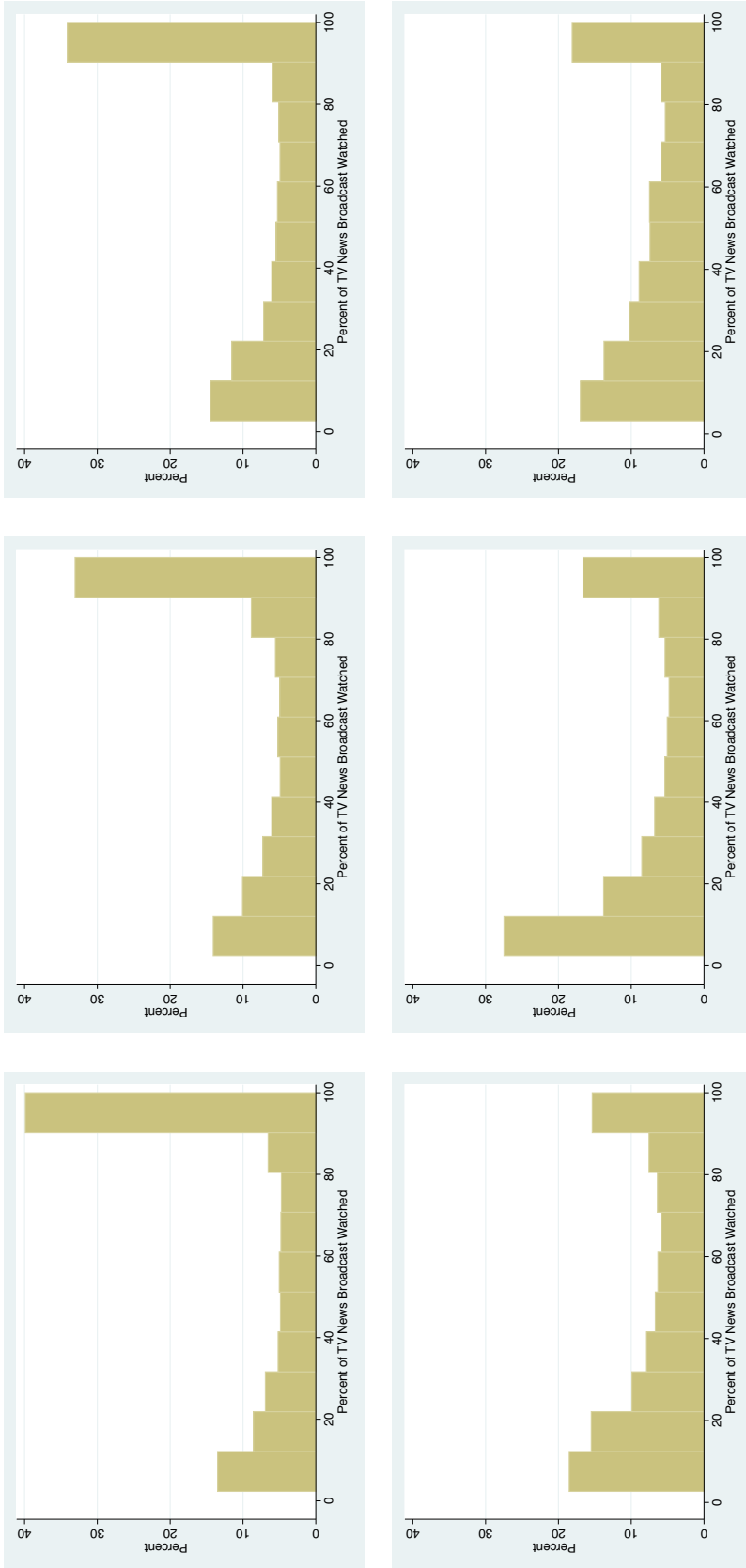


Figure 5: Minute-by-minute stock and flows of TV news viewers, Channel 1, 5 and 3

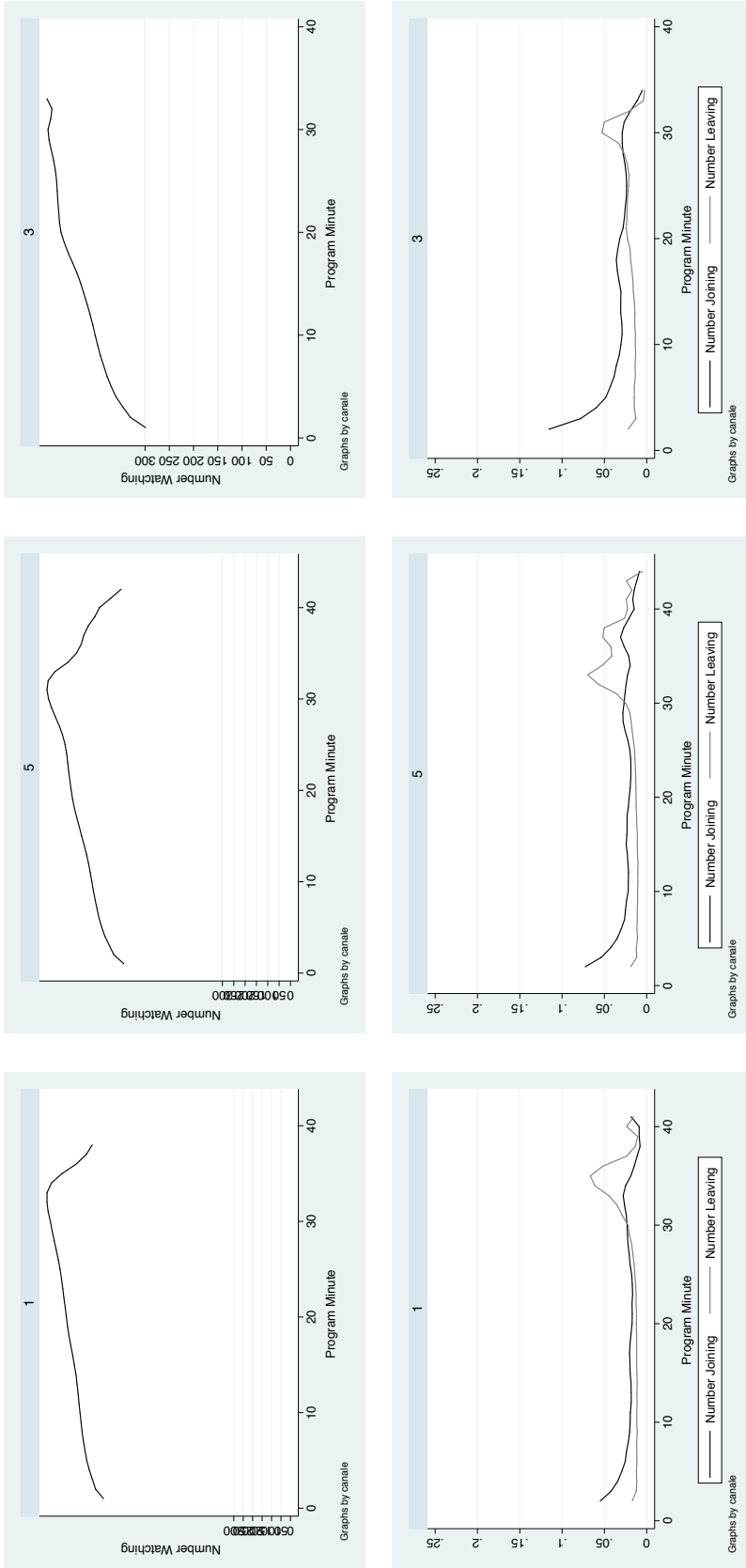


Figure 6: Minute-by-minute stock and flows of TV news viewers, Channel 2, 4 and 6

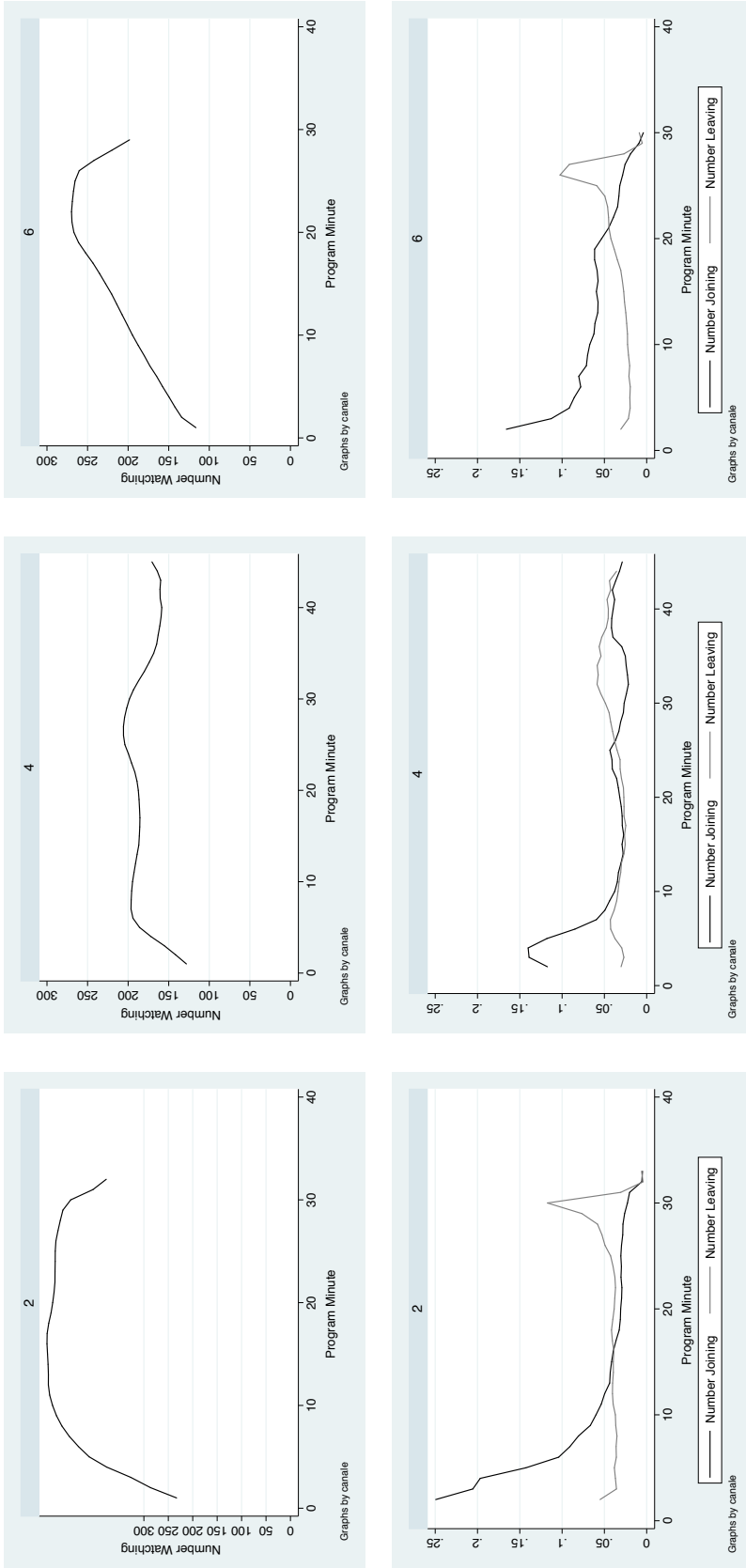


Figure 7: Hard vs. soft news “diet”, as a function of percentage of TV news being watched

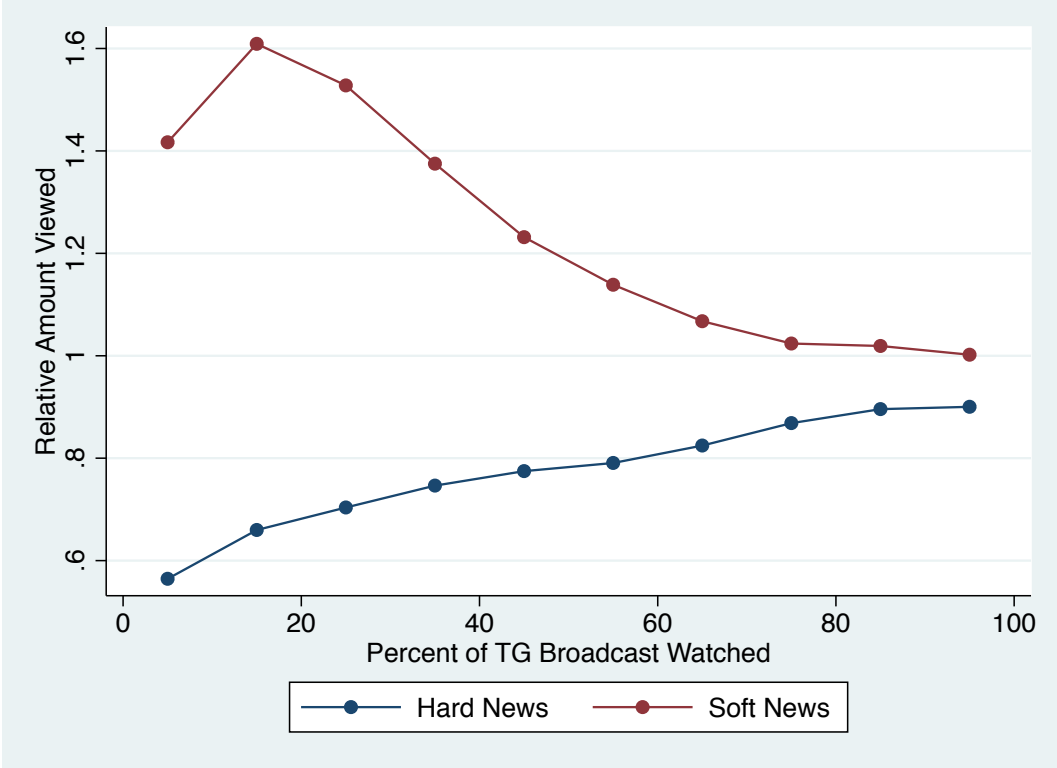


Figure 8: Distribution of relative amount of hard and soft news being watched

