



**A research project on trends in
television content and viewer
conceptions of social reality**

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Initiated 1967

Prospectus updated July, 1996

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In the last few decades, television has become the mainstream of the cultural environment that affects much of what most people think and do. Public conceptions of and responses to issues, policies, people, products, and institutions can no longer be understood without relating them to their most central, common, and pervasive source. Television is that source.

Cultural Indicators is a data bank and research project that relates long-term exposure to recurrent features of the world of television to viewer conceptions about the real world and to actions based upon those conceptions. Cultural Indicators is designed to investigate television's contribution (by itself as well as in combination with other demographic and media use characteristics) to viewers' conceptions of and responses to a number of issues and topics.

The research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Hose Bunka

Foundation of Japan, the Screen Actors' Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Ark Foundation, Inc., the Turner Broadcasting System, the AARP Women's Initiative, the Institute for Mental Health Initiatives, the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Public Health Service the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and other organizations.

Although violence-related findings and indicators have been published most widely, the approach was broadly based from the beginning to collect observations on the role and functions of many aspects of life presented in television drama (see Bibliography). The database contains detailed coded information on more than 40,000 characters and 3,000 programs. Extensive survey information about viewer and the long-range consequences of viewing is also available.

Past reports and current projects focus on television's contributions to images of women and minorities; sex-role stereotypes; occupations; political orientation; aging; disability; mental illness; death and dying; school achievement and aspirations; health-related issues such as safety, nutrition, and medicine; science and scientists; family life; religion;

adoption, images of animals, expressions of anger; gender and aging, the representation of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; and other issues. The research has also been extended to comparative studies of television content and effects in several countries.

The research consists of three interrelated parts: (1) message system analysis, monitoring of the world of network television programs (and other media when included in a grant or contract); (2) cultivation analysis, determining the contributions of television to viewer conceptions of social reality; and (3) policy analysis.

The message analysis provides information about the historical and social dimensions of the television world, its cast of characters, their occupations and actions, and the values that govern their fate. The cultivation analysis focuses these messages upon specific lessons that living with television might cultivate in different groups of viewers. The policy analysis investigates the commercial and other forces driving certain types of content.

The Violence Profile has been published periodically since 1972. Other reports and publications, based mostly on prime-time and weekend-daytime dramatic programs, relate television to various aspects of conceptions of reality. Cable-originated dramatic programs, the Fox network, news, commercials,

daytime serials, and game shows have been included in some of the studies. In each case, the focus of the investigation is the contribution of recurrent, stable, and pervasive features of the world of television to viewer conceptions and actions. The following is a brief description of methodology.

Message System Analysis

Cultural Indicators research begins with the monitoring and analysis of the "world" of network television drama. Message system analysis is a flexible tool for making systematic, reliable, and cumulative observations of program content. The technique permits the identification of many aspects of the television world and the testing of its contribution to viewers' conceptions of the real world.

Message system analysis focuses on the relatively, unambiguous, and commonly understood facts of portrayal. These are the features that can be expected to provide bases for interaction and common conceptions among large and otherwise heterogeneous mass publics.

Message system analysis has been performed on annual samples of prime-time and weekend-daytime network dramatic programming since 1967 by trained analysts who observe and code various aspects of television content.

Measures of reliability, computed on the study's entire corpus of double-coded data, determine the acceptability of information for analysis and provide guidelines to its interpretation. All data are stored on computer for retrieval and analysis.

Cultivation Analysis

Cultivation analysis builds on the common and recurrent patterns found in the "world" of television. The message system composing that world presents coherent images of life and society. How are these images reflected in the conceptions and values held by audiences? How are the "lessons" of symbolic behavior applied to real life?

These are not easy questions to answer when today nearly everyone "lives" to some extent in the world of television. Experiments do not solve the problem, for they are not comparable to people's day-to-day television viewing. Our approach has developed as the early results of this project were supported and refined by independent investigations as well as our own continuing studies. These results show that generally the more people watch television the more likely they are to understand certain aspects of reality in terms presented on television.

While television is only one of the many factors that influence people, it may well be the single most common and pervasive source of certain conceptions and actions. They are most likely to be those recurring and systematic features of the world of television, like social roles, types, and fates, that conform to conventional views but not

necessarily to facts and are not easily amenable to independent confirmation or judgment.

For example, it is not unreasonable to assume that there might be some consequences of daily exposure to a dramatic world in which men outnumber women three to one, young people comprise one-third and old people one-fifth of their real numbers, professionals and law-enforcers dominate the occupations, and an average of five acts of violence per prime-time hour (and four times that number per weekend-daytime "children's" hour) involve more than half of all leading characters.

In order to assess the contribution of television's system of messages to viewers' conception of reality (and to behavior based on those conceptions), we use a research strategy that recognizes that television viewing is integrated in different ways into different styles of life. These patterns are relatively stable; television viewing leads to few changes over time (except perhaps in childhood, as shown in our longitudinal study). The research task is to trace the independent contribution of television as it interacts with age, sex, education, income, and other social and media use characteristics. That task is accomplished by controlling for these characteristics and focusing on the conceptual and behavioral correlates of television viewing in otherwise relatively homogeneous subgroups.

This investigation relates respondents' television viewing to their responses to survey questions about facts and

values. The questions are based on our monitoring and analysis of the world of television. They typically have one answer closer to the facts in the world of television and another closer to the facts of the real world. We have found that the amount of viewing is related to the likelihood of giving the "television answer" to these questions.

The direction and strength of these relationships vary according to the nature of the questions, their relevance to representations on television, and the respondents' social and other characteristics. In general, television appears to cultivate relatively homogeneous "mainstream" conceptions of life. Traditional differences of perspective among different social groups remain mainly

The International Dimension

Each country's system reflects its own historical, political, social, economic and cultural contexts. We know something about how different television systems are organized but very little, in comparative terms, about how program policies are developed and administered or about the themes, values, images, and "facts of life" different countries project and cultivate through their television news and entertainment. We know even less about how exposure to television's messages influences people's beliefs, and actions in different countries and cultures.

The lack of reliable comparative knowledge about the role of television and about the consequences of different systems and policies makes the process of planning, assessment, and decision making within each country and across countries difficult and unreliable. This project is designed to address that problem.

Planning meetings with communications researchers of other countries interested in comparative Cultural Indicators were held in England in 1971 and 1976; West Berlin in 1977; Warsaw, Poland, in 1978; and Philadelphia in 1979 and 1980. International Symposia on Cultural Indicators were held in Vienna, Austria, in February 1982, and in Prague, Czechoslovakia in August 1984. In 1987, the W. Alton Jones Foundation of Virginia awarded a grant to the Carter Center of Emory University and the Cultural Indicators project for the Soviet-American part of the project. The International

Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) supported the international communication and coordination of the Soviet-American and Hungarian-American comparative studies.

In December 1987, the American team visited Moscow and developed a joint analysis scheme with the Russian and Hungarian researchers. The analysis was done on the videotaped sample of national programs during the week of December 5 through 11, 1987. Other countries were invited to tape the same week's national television programs and join the study. They were Canada, The People's Republic of China, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, South Korea, and Singapore. Co-principal investigator on the U.S.-Russian project was Professor Ellen Mickiewicz, then of the Carter Center in Atlanta, more recently at Duke University.

In June 1988 the U.S. team met with leaders of Belgian, French, Finnish, Hungarian, Malaysian, and Turkish research teams in Budapest, Hungary, for a week-long coder-training workshop in preparation for the analysis in those countries. Subsequently the U.S. team visited Moscow and Tblisi and conducted further interviews on Russian television policy.

In June 1989 the American team participated in a working conference with Professor Boris Grushin and the staff of the National Public Opinion Research

Center in Moscow and developed a survey research instrument for the cultivation phase of the U.S. - Russian comparative study. The survey was fielded in November 1989 (a second wave in the fall of 1991) and in Hungary in the

spring of 1990. The Hosokawa Foundation of Tokyo awarded a grant in February 1990 to fund a Japanese research team under the direction of Prof. Shunji Mikami of Tokyo University to join the study.

Since that time, research results have been presented and/or published in Athens, Greece; Cairo, Egypt; Seoul, South Korea; Lyubljana, Slovenia; and Rome, Italy.

Special Topics and Issues

The Cultural Indicators archive contains the videotapes of all program materials included in the annual monitoring, and all cultivation analysis data. Therefore, special topics can be studied in three ways: (1) making use of the appropriate variables already in the data banks; (2) designing special analyses based on existing data; (3) developing new dimensions of analysis using both existing and new data.

The list of special topics and issues on which the analysis of both content and viewer conceptions can be focused is practically endless. Almost any social or institutional interest, policy concern, and product or service can find sources of images, concepts, and behavior formation in the Cultural Indicators message system or cultivation analysis. The following areas of special concentration are listed either because such work is under way or because outside or staff interests have put them on the project's "agenda."

1. Representation of aging and of interactions between different age groups. What conceptions of aging do such representations cultivate in viewers of different ages and other characteristics? How do old people relate to television?

2. Images of the family and their relationship to viewer conceptions of family life and family life expectations. The mediating effect of family viewing context on what children learn from television.

3. Portrayals of sex roles and their relationships to the development of gender-related ideas and behaviors. Sexual depictions, conceptions and behaviors.

4. Racial, ethnic, religious and other group representations and the assumptions they cultivate about minority group characteristics and relationships.

5. Health-related images, messages, and practices ranging from nutrition and drug use to medical professions, practitioners, and mental and physical illness.

6. Portrayals of crime, violence, victimization and their consequences.

7. Representation of other countries and people; issues related to international relations.

8. Portrayals of occupations and their effects on occupational stereotypes and the occupational choices of children and adolescents.

9. Energy, mobility, and transportation as presented on television and as contributing to viewer conceptions on these issues.

10. Government and politics; how television portrayals contribute to public conceptions of the political process.

11. Images of industry, business, labor, and other institutions and their contributions to the formation of popular conceptions and policies.

12. Education, schools, teachers, students. Representation of the educational enterprise and its effect on public conceptions of education. The relationship of television viewing to academic achievement and aspirations.

13. Armed forces, war, and other issues related to international (or internal) conflict and national defense; issues of peace and war, arms control.

14. Law enforcement and the judicial process. Courtrooms on television and viewer conceptions of court procedure.

15. Consumer skills and practices. How they are presented on television and how they influence the styles of life.

16. Religion and religious programs; viewers' religious conceptions, affiliations, and attitudes.

17. Other media and cultural activities. The relationship of television and its content to reading, sports, music, theater, movies, and other recreational and cultural activities.