Interpreting the tv world

By George Gerbner

Institutional interests, both within and outside broadcasting, purposely confuse the results of scientific research into television's effects on and in society. Yet it is a more powerful medium than any since pre-industrial age religion.

In the television world, action revolves around questions of power and is expressed in violence. Tv's main influence lies in amplifying and spreading established cultural patterns.

Broadcasters need resources and freedom to portray a better 'television world, reflecting a better society'.

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TELEVISION IS TOO much with us to be able to see it clearly. It is part of a series of technological innovations that have changed the way we live, think and govern ourselves. Discussion about its effects is the current version of the great popular culture debate that has raged since the spread of another technology – rapid printing – aroused apprehension of passivity, immorality and violence especially by children and the lower classes. (They always seem more corruptible than their elders and presumably betters.)

With that background, it has been difficult to sort out scapegoating and self-serving arguments from an objective determination of tv's independent contribution to what we think and do. Yet television has been the subject of more social research, reports, investigations and books than any other medium in history. Of course, we still research and debate the effect of print on society. Nevertheless, I believe that the essential research on television is mostly completed and the results are clear, significant and credible. Why, then, the great uncertainty?

The major reason is that, like print, television is closely intertwined with the structure of society. Its analysis and critique are inevitably the analysis and critique of some of our basic institutions. Therefore, regardless of the amount and conclusiveness of research on television, agreement cannot be expected as long as powerful institutions with competing and conflicting vested interests disagree in their interpretations of scientific evidence.

The second and related reason for the uncertainty is that, unlike other media, television is the central cultural arm of the business and industrial or the political establishment. Its direct clients are not consumers of specific programmes but business and industrial sponsors or public corporations or governments. Therefore, it is relatively insulated from direct public involvement (although keenly aware of the importance of

public relations). In the United States, the basic financial formula supporting commercial television is not box office or popularity but *cost per thousand.* The price of tv. time is its cost divided by its audience rating. The product sold is the audience. The price is the revenue of the broadcaster.

The television industry has no incentive to conduct or recognize independent social research; it can only lose by criteria other than its own formula. The industry has a large investment, however, in combating and confusing the results of scientific research. When a single percentage rating point is worth several million dollars, it is cheaper to appoint what I call Vice Presidents in Charge of Hysteria than to act on any social research that implies departure from the cost-per-thousand rule.

The socio-political smokescreen that blurs issues touching powerful interests also compounds conceptual difficulties of understanding television and research on television. In over ten years of such research,* my associates and I have come to the conclusion that these difficulties stem from misconceptions about the nature of television itself, about research appropriate to that medium and about the process of learning from its stories.

What is television?

Television comes to us as a combination of radio, movies, the pulps, games, circuses, comics and cartoons and a dash of journalism, but it is none of these. It is the first mass-produced and organically composed symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which they will live from cradle to grave. No other medium or institution since pre-industrial age religion had a comparable influence on what people of a tribe, community or nation learned, thought or did in common. No emperor or pope could ever dream of having a pulpit in every home with an inexhaustible supply of charismatic ministers delivering messages – and audiences – every day.

Television demands no mobility, literacy or concentration. Its repetitive patterns come into the home and show, as well as tell about, people and society. Presidents, policemen, surgical operating rooms, courtrooms, spies and celebrities are familiar parts of a selective and synthetic world most people 'know'. Television is a total cultural system (as was tribal religion) with its own art, science, statecraft, legendry, geography, demography, character types and action structure. Tv mythology encapsulates those selected features of the larger culture that lend themselves best to its basic sales and socializing functions. Television now fills the symbolic life space of the young, the less-educated, and the formerly isolated or deprived people who have never before been plugged into a central cultural system.

'Most people watch television as they used to attend church except that they watch television more religiously'

The television audience is not only the most heterogeneous public ever assembled but also the most non-selective. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the programme. Viewing is a ritual governed by styles of life and time. Different kinds of programmes serve the same basic formula designed to assemble viewers and sell them at the least cost. The classifications of the print era with a relatively sharp differentiation between news, drama, documentary, etc., do not apply as much to television. Heavy viewers watch more of everything. Different time and programme segments complement and reinforce each other as they present aspects of the same symbolic world.

There is little age-grading or regional and even ethnic separation of the symbolic materials that socialize members of an otherwise heterogeneous community into the common culture. Most children control their own (if not the whole family's) sets and watch mostly adult programmes and problems. Minority groups see their own image shaped by the dominant interests of the larger culture. Broadcasting in every country is an officially licensed enterprise operating in the public domain. Television thus becomes an organ of governance as well as of acculturation, relating to the establishment as only the Church did in ancient times. Its nearly universal and ritualistic use fits well the repetitive patterns of its programming. Most people watch television as they used to attend church except that they watch television more religiously.

The world of television

Our annual monitoring of United States network television drama (now in its eleventh year) shows a remarkably consistent pattern despite changes in programme titles, formats and styles. Many times a day, seven days a week, the dramatic pattern defines situations and cultivates premises about society, people and issues. Casting the symbolic world has a meaning of its own. The lion's share of representation goes to the types that dominate the social order. Less fully represented are those lower in the domestic and global power hierarchy and characters involved in familiar social

**The research is a team effort called Cultural Indicators. This article draws upon previous reports in a series co-authored with members of the research team including my principal collaborators Larry Gross and Nancy Signorielli and others whose names appear in the bibliography at the end of this article.*

contexts, human dependencies and other situations that impose the real-life burdens of human relationships and obligations upon freewheeling activity.

Approximately five in ten characters can be unambiguously identified as gainfully employed. Of these, three are proprietors, managers and professionals. The fourth comes from the ranks of labour – including all those employed in factories, farms, offices, shops, stores, mining, transportation, service stations, restaurants and households, and working in unskilled, skilled, clerical, sales and domestic service capacities. The fifth serves to enforce the law or preserve the peace on behalf of public or private clients.

Types of activity – paid and unpaid – also reflect dramatic and social purposes. Six in ten characters are engaged in discernible occupational activity and can be roughly divided into three groups. The first group represents the world of legitimate business, industry, agriculture, finance, etc. The second group is engaged in activity related to art, science, religion, health, education and welfare, as professionals, amateurs, housewives, patients, students or clients. The third makes up the forces of official or semi-official authority and the army of criminals, outlaws, spies, and other enemies arrayed against them. One in every four leading characters acts out a drama of some sort of transgression and its suppression at home and abroad.

Not surprisingly, men outnumber women four to one. In such a world, much action naturally revolves around questions of power: how to manage, and maintain the hierarchy of powers on which the established order of society depends.

Violence is the key to the rule of power. It is the cheapest and quickest dramatic demonstration of who can (and cannot) get away with what against whom. About one-third of all the male characters in American television (but very few women) take part in the social-typing and norm-setting exercise depicting violations and enforcement of the rules of society.

Violence is clearly a scenario of social relationships. It can represent a blow by the oppressed and exploited against their rulers. This is often the subject of tragedy in which the hero dies but inequity and injustice are exposed. Entertainment, however, insists on happy endings which prove fate and society right and just, as well as strong. Entertainment – the most informative and educational force of any culture – is designed to cultivate conventional morality and to massage conventional egos. Violence in entertainment tends to demonstrate patterns of power that support rather than subvert the established order.

For example, in American television drama, 46 per cent of all major characters inflict and 55 per cent suffer some violence every week. (We define violence as the expression of physical force compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing. With all the hue and cry, the frequency of violence by this most unambiguous and conservative definition, requiring the agreement of four trained coders before an incident is recorded as violent, has not changed more the 10 per cent up or down from the norm of over ten years.)

If one sees violence as a demonstration of power and a cultivation of a differential sense of the risks in different groups of the population, it becomes a simple exercise to obtain an indicator of risks for different groups. We do that by relating the percentage of violents to the percentage of victims within each group. That index, called risk ratio, shows the chances of men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, etc., of coming out on top instead of on the bottom from a violent encounter.

As we have noted, overall dramatic television has 46 per cent violents and 55 per cent victims (with many being both, of course). The ratio is obtained by dividing the higher figure (victimization) by the lower. That ratio is 1.2, meaning that for every violent there are 1.2 victims in general in the world of U.S. dramatic television. The same ratio for women is 1.3, meaning that for every violent woman there are 1.3 victims – a higher rate of victimization. For non-white women that ratio is 1.8 and for old women it is 3.3. So, if and when involved, women, non-whites and the elderly are more like to suffer than to inflict violence compared to majority types.

The pattern shows the power of the dominant types to come out on top; it cultivates obedience (or at least acquiescence) to their rule. If it also incites some (usually relatively very few) of the *ruled* to commit violence agains the rulers, that may be the price paid for the tranquilization of the vast majority. To change that it is not enough to reduce violence; the patterns of power and risk would have to give way to a more diversified and equitable demonstration.

Research on television

What do viewers learn from the world of television? The question of the influence of broad enculturation on values and behaviour patterns is different from the usual applied research question about individual messages, campaigns or programmes. Traditional procedures of media effects research must be re-conceptualized and modified for television.

First, we cannot presume consequences, as the conventional research paradigm tends to do, without the prior investigation of content. Nor can the content be limited to isolated elements (e.g., news, commercials, specific programmes) or to individual viewer selections. The 'world' of television is an aggregate system of stories and images. Only system-wide analysis of messages across types of programmes and over time can reveal the aggregate patterns of the symbolic world which

structures common assumptions and definitions for the generations born into it. The system as a whole plays a major role in setting the agenda of issues to agree or disagree about; it shapes the most pervasive norms and cultivates the dominant perspectives of society.

'We cannot isolate television from the mainstream of modern culture because it is the mainstream'

Another conventional research assumption is that the experiment is the most powerful method, and that change (in attitudes, opinions, likes-dislikes, etc., toward or conveyed by 'variable X') is the most significant outcome to measure. In the ideal experiment, you expose a group to X and assess salient aspects of the state of the receivers before and after exposure, comparing the change, if any, to data obtained from a control group (identical in all relevant ways to the experimental group) who have not received X. No change or no difference means no effect.

When X is television as an institution, however, we must turn this paradigm around. Stability (or even resistance to change) may be a significant outcome of the sum total of its cultivation of concepts of reality.

Furthermore, if nearly everyone 'lives' to some extent in the world of television, clearly we cannot find unexposed groups who would be identical in important respects to the viewers. We cannot isolate television from the mainstream of modern culture because it *is* the mainstream. Obviously, then, we cannot look for change as the most significant accomplishment of the chief arm of established culture; its main social function is to maintain, reinforce, and exploit rather than to undermine or subvert conventional beliefs and behaviours. In fact, the relative ineffectiveness of isolated campaigns may itself be testimony to the power of mainstream communications.

Neither can we assume that tv cultivates conceptions easily distinguishable from those of other major entertainment media. (But we cannot emphasize too strongly the historically novel role of television in standardizing and sharing with all as the common norm what had before been more parochial, local and selective cultural patterns.) We assume, therefore, that tv's standardizing and legitimizing influence comes largely from its ability to amplify, ritualize and spread into hitherto isolated or protected subcultures, homes, nooks and crannies of the land the potent capsules of mass-produced information and entertainment. The effects of television are most likely to be those of the centralization and efficient organization and popularization of those elements of mainstream culture that best support the medium's institutional mission.

The lessons of television

To find out what viewers in fact learn from television we search for those assumptions about 'facts' of life and society that tv tends to cultivate among its viewers. That search requires two different but related methods of research.

The first is the periodic analysis of large and representative aggregates of television output (rather than individual segments) as the system of messages to which total communities are exposed. The purpose of message system analysis is to establish the composition and structure of the symbolic world. The second step is to determine what, if anything, viewers absorb from living in that world. Here we turn the findings of message system analysis about the world of television into questions about social reality.

To each of these questions there is a 'television answer', which is like the way things appear in the world of television, and another and different answer which is biased in the opposite direction, closer to the way things are in the independently observable world. We ask these questions of samples of adults and children. All responses are related to television exposure, other media habits, demographic characteristics. The margin of heavy viewers over light viewers giving the 'television answers' within and across groups is the 'cultivation differential' indicating conceptions about social reality that viewing tends to cultivate.

The findings themselves add up to a complex and dynamic picture. Viewers tend to learn 'facts' outside their own experience and values and standards with which to interpret their experience. We are accumulating results and studying patterns in such areas as sex and age role socialization, family life, law and politics, occupational choices, health and medicine, etc. Years of cumulative research by our own staff and independent social scientists in the US and other countries following similar methods provides convincing evidence of systematic learning as the result of regular tv exposure.

'Living in the world of television makes a measurable, consistent and pervasive difference in the way children and adults think . . . and act'

The differences in conceptions of social reality between light and heavy viewers – after controlling for other social and cultural factors – is systematic and robust across

many different groups. Living in the world of television makes a measurable, consistent and pervasive difference in the way children and adults think – and act – about being men or women, black or white, rich or poor, young or old, and about occupations, about school and education, about their own aging, health, government, politics and safety.

Heavy viewers tend to respond to our survey questions more in terms of the world of television than do light viewers in the same demographic groups. Television seems to cultivate an exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust in heavy viewers compared to similar groups of light viewers. When asked about chances of encountering violence, about the percentage of men employed in law enforcement and crime detection and about the percentage of crimes that are violent, significantly more heavy viewers than light viewers respond in terms characteristic of the television world. Mistrust is also reflected in responses suggesting that heavy viewers believe that most people just look out for themselves, take advantage of others and cannot be trusted.

Our findings, set forth in greater detail in the publications listed in the bibliography, indicate strong and stable associations between patterns of network dramatic content and viewer conceptions of social reality. What can be done about that?

The majority of heavy viewers watch television because they have few equally attractive alternatives physically or socially as available, and because it is the only thing they share with the rich, the famous, and the beautiful. For them, television is an enrichment of cultural horizons and the abolition of isolation, provincialism and parochialism. It provides for them a transcendent socio-cultural context which only the strong hold or religions exercised in earlier times.

Larger resources and greater freedom for the creative professionals of television are needed to diversify and make more equitable the world of television. A fairer and more democratic dramatic world may then reflect a fairer and more democratic society, one whose social norms and relationships may be cultivated without having to pay so great a price for it. That is the only way to reduce violence and its human fall-out to what is artistically valid, socially desirable and humanly defensibe.

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