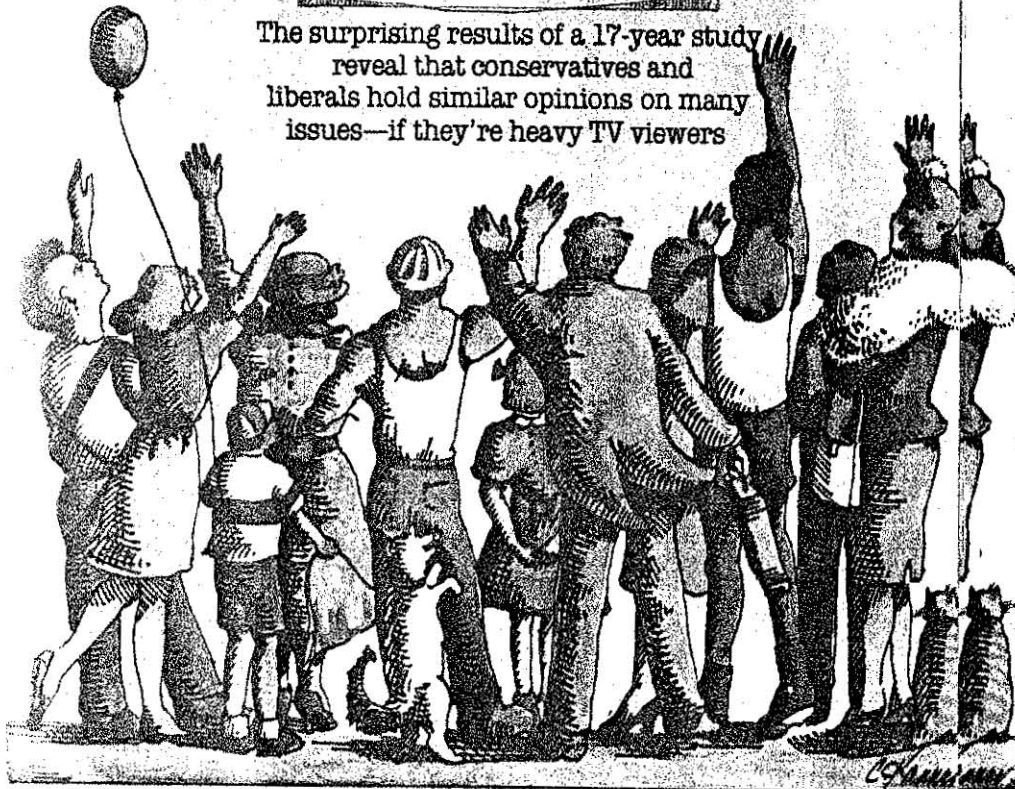


The mainstreaming of America

Television Makes Strange Bedfellows

The surprising results of a 17-year study reveal that conservatives and liberals hold similar opinions on many issues—if they're heavy TV viewers



By George Gerbner
If a man is permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who makes the laws of the nation. The Scottish

patriot Andrew Fletcher said that in 1704. He may have been the first to recognize that the legends, songs and stories of a cul-

ture exert a subtle and invisible power that kings, presidents and popes could only dream about.

Today, television actual-

Catherine Keener

ly wields that power. For the past 17 years, we have been systematically studying TV's effects on our conceptions of violence, health, occupations, religion and politics (see box, page 23). We analyzed patterns of responses to many questions about life and politics in many surveys of men and women, young and old, nonwhite and white, rich and poor, uneducated and highly educated, and other social groups of viewers. Each survey also asked how much television the respondents watch.

One conclusion became inescapable. Those who watch more television in any group—the heavy viewers—tend to think and act more like the heavy viewers in other groups than do the light viewers. (On most surveys, watching four hours or more of television a day defines a heavy viewer. That group includes almost half the American viewing population.)

Heavy viewers tend to have lower incomes, and less education than do light viewers. So, in order to separate the role of television from the effects of other circumstances in life, we must compare light and heavy viewers in the same social groups. When we do that, we find that the heavy viewers of otherwise very different groups tend to share many perceptions. In

short, television's slow but steady contribution to the way new generations define themselves politically is blurring traditional differences between groups. These general findings translate into some striking specifics. For example:

□ Heavy viewers in groups that tend to be the most reactionary and bigoted are less sexist than the light viewers in the same groups.

□ On the other hand, heavy viewers in groups that are otherwise the most liberal tend to be more sexist than their light-viewing counterparts.

□ Both low-income and high-income Americans who are heavy viewers tend to see themselves as plain working people of "average income."

□ The more television they watch, the less likely Republicans are to call themselves conservative—and the more likely they are to regard themselves as moderate or liberal.

How to explain these findings? Advertisers, television program producers and political parties share a common need—the need to appeal to the broadest possible audience. The advertiser wants to get his message to every nook and cranny of a vast and fragmented land. The producer, with millions of dollars riding on every ratings point, has little choice but to construct a symbolic world of the broadest possible sales appeal at the least cost. The political party wants to sway the greatest number of poten-

tial voters to its cause.

In each case, this shared need means shunning "extremes," presenting conventional consumer values and striving for a safe, respectable, middle-of-the-road balance in most things. Thus, television tends to blend otherwise divergent social orientations—and to modify political extremes—by pulling them into the current of its own broad mainstream.

One byproduct of this mainstreaming process is the potent political brew we shall call the New Populism. It is a new, curious and perplexing political-social orientation whose members hold views that are often inconsistent and paradoxical.

New Populists think like conservatives, want like liberals and call themselves moderates. They shun what they see as "extremism" but demand harsher verdicts (although not the death penalty) in the most jail-happy criminal-justice system in the civilized world. They hate revolts, except tax revolts. They want to cut taxes but improve education, medical care and social security. They distrust Big Government but want it to fix the economy and make the streets safe for their daughters.

New Populists scorn "The Establishment" but dote on the rich and famous. They graciously permit women to work both inside and outside the home, and allow that minorities have made →

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some progress, but resent and resist any loss of privilege. They are losing confidence in people who run virtually all institutions, including religion, but express trust in God, America—and television.

The role television plays in shaping attitudes toward basic political issues depends on who the viewers are and how they relate to the television mainstream. Consider the issue of women running for high office. The generally restricted and dependent role of women on television cultivates in the minds of viewers a generally restrictive attitude about women. At the same time, the television experience also makes most viewers believe that their outlook on life is "moderate."

The effect of heavy viewing is most noticeable among groups farthest from television's middle-of-the-road mainstream. For example, heavy viewers among reactionaries and bigots take a *less* sexist position, while heavy viewers among liberals are *more* sexist. Specifically, liberals who are light viewers generally say they would

vote for a woman for President (or Vice-President); heavy-viewing liberals, however, are less likely to say they would vote for a woman—thus joining the moderates and conservatives of the New Populist television mainstream.

The current runs in the same negative direction, but deeper, on the question of race. Viewing tends to moderate some extremely racist views, but it also undermines the support for racial equality, especially among those who provide the bulk of such support: the liberals.

Television also cultivates relatively restrictive attitudes about sex-related activities, personal rights and free speech. Heavy viewers—especially liberals—are more likely than light viewers to oppose communism, homosexuality, abortion and legalizing marijuana. Thus, contrary to the charges of some critics, television is no liberal conspiracy. Our data show that, if anything, its New Populism undermines liberal support for women, minorities, and political and personal freedoms.

The dangerous, crime-filled world that viewers see on television further compounds the paradox. The more they watch, the more they tend to express a sense of apprehension and fear of being victimized. They want more protection, more money for fighting crime and drug abuse, more money for defense, and also a nuclear freeze—but no more taxes. Among all political persuasions, heavy viewers hold these conflicting beliefs more than do light viewers in the same groups. That paradoxical mix cultivated by television is one reason the electorate is at odds within itself, as political analysts have noted. Can those paradoxes be resolved? That depends on whether those who are not well served by the television mainstream can make their voices heard, and find ways to equalize the flow of influence between television and the citizenry. What we need, perhaps most of all, is a prime-time television program alerting viewers to the hidden political messages behind the messages they know about. (E)

The Research Project

This report presents highlights from an ongoing research project whose findings have been published in more extensive form in scholarly journals. The research project, which has been conducted since 1967, is called Cultural Indicators and is conducted at The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, by a research team of social scientists that includes, besides Dr. Gerbner, Drs. Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan (now at the University of Massachusetts), and doctoral candidate Stewart Hoover. Readers with serious scholarly and research interests should consult the researchers' articles that have appeared in the Spring 1982 issue of the Journal of Communication and the Spring 1984 issue of Public Opinion Quarterly.

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