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On Hughes's Contribution: The Limits of Advocacy Research⁷

Imagine that five years ago, Gerbner and his associates had reported a linear relationship between amount of television viewing and: a lack of fear, greater trust, less anomia, better personal adjustment, and negative views towards isolationist foreign policy—that watching television, in short, was *good* for people. Everything we know about public and scholarly predispositions toward mass entertainment suggests such a reported finding would have been reanalyzed and challenged immediately upon publication. Michael Hughes's valuable article, showing virtually *no* relationship between these variables and how many hours people watch television, reasserts scholarly standards and also stands as an indictment of the research community for permitting the widespread promotion of the cultivation hypothesis—stated as a scientific finding—to go unchallenged for so long. To be sure, the staying power of the assertion of cultivation effects is bound up with our own culture's predisposition to embrace it. But it also required that the research community fail to enforce standards of quality control, which the general public correctly presumes lend the status of "science" to reports emanating from prestigious research centers and published in scholarly journals.

Many of Hughes's findings are duplicated and affirmed in an extensive reanalysis of the 1975–78 NORC dataset reported in Hirsch.⁸ On the basis of the latter, my only criticism of Hughes's contribution is that the story gets worse and that his technical critique did not go *far enough*. In their analysis, for example, Gerbner et al. failed to separately analyze responses of nonviewers to items tapping fear, anomia, and other attitudes. Nor were nonviewers excluded from the analysis. Rather, they were collapsed into the "light viewer" category, obscuring the finding that nonviewers typically score higher than light viewers (one to two hours) on "television answers," and often higher than medium and extreme viewers as well. The "cultivation hypothesis," however, requires that nonviewers score *lower* than these other viewing categories, since this group should be the least likely to agree

⁷ The research on which this comment is based was generously supported by the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation. The writer is grateful to Horace Newcomb, Thomas Panelas, and Sally Kilgore for their suggestions and critique.

⁸ "The 'scary world' of the nonviewer and other anomalies: a reanalysis of Gerbner et al.'s findings on cultivation analysis." *Communication Research* 7 (October 1980).

with "television answers" derived from exposure to the program content of this medium. Similar results obtain for unreported items concerning alienation⁹ and attitudes about the conditions under which suicide is justified. When separately analyzed, "extreme" viewers (eight or more hours per day) also tend to be less alienated, anomic, and fearful than "heavy" viewers (four to seven). The main points here are that even before introducing (virtually any two) multiple controls, the apparently monotonic relationships collapse with a more appropriate breakout of nonviewers and extreme viewers than occurs in the Annenberg group's definition and coding of viewing categories. In support of Hughes's finding of no linear pattern but a tendency toward curvilinearity, we further report:

[A] consistent and important pattern throughout the dataset [is that] the only viewing category where respondents least often provide the "TV answer" and most consistently give the "nontelevision response" is that of light viewers (1-2 hours per day). But there is no clearcut pattern beyond that for respondents coded as nonviewers, medium, heavy or extreme. For example, persons providing "television answers" do not cluster in any one of these categories. In terms of the attitude items, only the light viewers' mean scores are (statistically) "normal" and all other categories, including nonviewers, exhibit no stable pattern. Since nearly 50 per cent of the sample are light viewers, we think this suggests more about Americans' lifestyles and demographics than about the experience of television-watching or its effects.¹⁰

Hughes also observes in passing that items employed by Gerbner et al. are not strictly comparable across the surveys they examined. In the CPS study, for example, respondents were asked specifically about hours spent viewing entertainment programs about crime and police, while NORC's item asked for the total amount of television viewing. This raises the likelihood that "light" viewers in the former can be coded as "medium" or "heavy" in the latter. More specifically, Gerbner et al. themselves report that children viewing two or more hours in one sample were defined as "heavy" viewers, while those reporting three hours or less became "light" viewers in another sample.¹¹ These and other discrepancies raise obvious questions con-

⁹ The 1978 NORC General Social Survey contains six items designed to tap "alienation." These are not reported by Gerbner et al. Technically, what Hughes reports as alienation appears in NORC's 1977 GSS under the variable name "anomia."

¹⁰ Hirsch, *op. cit.* See also Leo Bogart, *The Age of Television*, 3rd edition (New York: Frederick Unger, 1973).

¹¹ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, Michael Morgan, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, "The demonstration of power: violence profile no. 10." *Journal of Communication* 29 (1979):177-96.

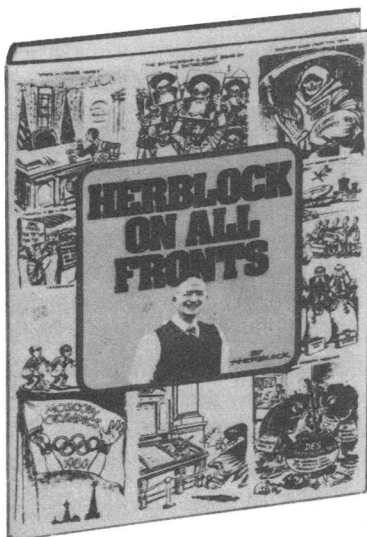
cerning the computation and comparability of "cultivation differentials" within and between samples.

In sum, Hughes's article lays bare conceptual and methodological errors and ambiguities throughout the cultivation analysis portions of the Annenberg group's Violence Profiles. In so reasserting research standards, he has rendered an important service to the field. Beyond the rhetoric in the text of the articles by Gerbner, there is little in the data brought to bear that lends empirical support to the assertion of cultivation effects. Considering the number of questionable statistical procedures and interpretations on which the Annenberg group's findings are based, the assertions of cultivation analysis should be transformed from the status of a scientific finding to an interesting speculation lacking empirical support.

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