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Thomas J. Neville, Ph.D.
Warner Amex Cable Communications, Inc.
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11252 Cornell Park Drive
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Dear Dr. Neville:

Our Cultural Indicators team (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and myself) have read your dissertation and found it rather interesting. We have a few comments you might find helpful and apologize for the long delay in our response.

Overall, we felt that your dissertation was conceptually quite tight although sometimes the logic was just a little forced. Your central argument (that the cultivation of interpersonal mistrust stems not from exposure to violence per se, but from exposure to the very structure of most dramatic programming) is interesting and you build a good theoretical case for it.

Nevertheless, we think that the distinction between content and structure may be spurious. Basically, we do not feel that structure, as you define it, can be easily isolated from content and that the particular structural features you are stressing -- pretense, manipulation, paranoia, etc. -- are probably better defined as characterization attributes. Moreover, you do not indicate that a systematic content analysis was used to isolate these dimensions. In particular, we are concerned with reliability since, over the years, we have found that these types of items are extremely difficult to code reliably.

We especially want to bring to your attention a possible weakness in the data analysis. Your analysis of CPS data revealed that frequent viewing of police and crime, and daytime, shows correlates with mistrust; but watching news (network and/or local) does not. Since news contains considerable violence but does not cultivate mistrust, you do not attribute mean world patterns to exposure to violence. Rather you postulate that the difference between news and drama is the plot-centered connectedness of the latter, which engenders complex social scenarios of good and evil, in a game-like structure of fakery and pretense. This, not the viewing of violence, gives rise to mistrust.

We think, however, that there is a possible alternative explanation. The CPS questions do not measure hours of exposure; they deal with whether each type of program is watched "frequently, sometimes, rarely, or never." This raises a number of problems. First and foremost, even watching news "frequently" probably does not compare, in terms of actual hours of exposure, to amount of time spent watching "police and crime shows" if they too are watched "frequently." This variable is thus extremely confounded by other viewing. Certainly, some respondents watch mainly news-type programs and, in actual hours of viewing, may be overall light television viewers. Consequently without separating them out from those who watch more of everything, the results may be misleading.

In all likelihood this is confirmed by the negative relationship between late-night news viewing and mistrust; those who "never" watch late news are extremely mistrustful, and the proportion who are wary decreases monotonically as frequency of viewing news increases. This finding may imply either a kind of "mainstreaming," or that the non-viewers may be comprised of many "real" heavy television viewers. We would thus suggest controlling for crime show viewing to try to isolate light and heavy television viewers and seeing if the relationship remains.

We appreciate the chance to read and comment upon your research. If you have any questions about our comments, please feel free to get in touch with us.

We hope that your work with QUBE remains rewarding and interesting.

Sincerely,

Nancy Signorielli

Nancy Signorielli, Ph.D.
Research Coordinator

cc: G. Gerbner
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