MEDIA DIVERSITY AND AUDIENCE CHOICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

By
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A *New York Times* editorial on the last day of 1989 looked back at a decade of development in communications. It observed that things were moving ever faster and farther. Telephones became portable. Computers drive business, industry, transport, government, and many professionals in offices and homes. The video cassette recorder (VCR) appeared from nowhere to become a fixture in two-thirds of American homes. And more was still to come:

> Before cable, Manhattan residents could watch only seven channels... Today's Manhattanite can graze among 37 channels, and others are on the way.
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> Because of cable, culture now travels faster. MTV provides throbbing music day and night. There are channels for movies, channels for children, channels for talk, channels for sports. And, of course channels for news -- news that seemed to sweep through living rooms at gale force.

This, declared *The Times*, gave viewers "control over what was watched."

Received opinions about new diversity and active audience control reverberate in the media and often also in the academy. There is no doubt that the development and convergence of powerful new communications technologies revolutionized business, institutional and professional life. But does the average home user really gain and exercise greater control? That is the question we address in this paper by looking at the actual availability and choice of diverse media materials by the vast majority of people.

The media proliferation of the 1980s strained some traditional client relationships (such as network advertising) and sharpened competition for existing markets. But it did not increase the supply of original sources of ideas or productions. On the contrary, the apparent market fragmentation was accompanied by an unprecedented wave of mergers, acquisitions, and cutbacks. Trying to finance their growth and still return a profit, giant conglomerates cut costs, reduced staffs, curtailed experimentation, and limited or abandoned specialized and public affairs programming.(For a report see Donahue, 1989.) They seemed to be secure in the knowledge that large and otherwise diverse groups of media consumers exercise new media choices along existing lines. These are tastes and preferences cultivated mostly by television.

The overwhelming fact of cultural life is that television has become the common everyday symbolic environment into which children are born and in which they live and learn from cradle to grave. The set is on an average of 7 hours a day in the average American home. Viewing is a relatively non-selective daily ritual. It fits styles of life, income, education, and work. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program. The content preferences and "predisposition" so important to selectively used media do not apply to the over-arching patterns of the world of television.

The more viewers watch (and the more electronic media they own the more they seem to watch) the fewer basic content choices they have. This fact is obvious if we compare what is available through electronic media with what is available through print. But it is also true for electronic media choices themselves.

Our long standing "Cultural Indicators" research on network television content and the consequences of exposure (Gerbner, 1986, 1990, Signorielli 1986, Signorielli and Morgan, 1990,) demonstrates that many of the most typical content patterns of life on television -- action structure, casting, social typing, and fate -- are common to most types of programming and news. They are inescapable. Exposure to them depends more on how much than on what the viewer watches. Independent stations and syndicated program originators cater mostly to the same markets and audience expectations and follow the same basic production and programming patterns.

Most cable companies do not engage in new production. Those that do compete for the most popular network-type fare. (And also charge for it, and increasingly also carry advertising.) Specialized channels duplicate and compete with similar content on other (mostly print) media.

Movie theaters, once an endangered species, now adjust to and reap record profits from the convergence of new technologies. Industry analysts report that "The box-office surge has been helped along by broadcast TV, cable TV and home video. . . Producers are using sales of foreign, cable TV and home video rights to virtually guarantee a film's profit before it even reaches theaters." Movie marketers are singing praises of the new technologies as efficient ways to promote movies that appeal to the largest audiences. (Walley, 1989, p. 80)

Video production has of course been fully integrated into the new electronic system. Rentals concentrate on the most profitable titles. They also specialize in "adult" fare and other features that are more likely to imitate and even

exceed some of the most exploitive features of standard productions and programs than to offer alternatives or challenges to it.

It is, then, a political myth and intellectual conceit to assume that diverse audiences are clamoring for varied ideas, new knowledge and fresh experiences. Often ignored by promoters of new technologies is the fact that cultural enrichment and diversity come from investment in education, art, science, and talent in general, and from resources devoted to the abolition of barriers to creative work such as minority status or assembly-line dramatic and news formulas.. In the decade of media explosion, the proportion of resources devoted to such social investment declined.

While media proliferate and consolidate, the numbers of writers, directors, journalists, and other creators of information and entertainment shrink. Under these circumstances, the entry of new communication technologies into the home means, on the whole, more time spent on the most popular types of electronic entertainment delivered by a greater variety of means. The new orchestration of media has fewer players sounding more novel instruments but playing fewer tunes for audiences who want more of what they already know and like.

Audience research from many countries confirms the fact that media diversification and novelty, as such, do not create new audience interests. On the contrary, they provide more means and styles (and markets) through which existing interests can be more single-mindedly exploited and pursued. (See, for example, Becker and Schoenbach, 1989, p. 354.)

Just as video rentals gravitate toward the "block buster" product, two-thirds of those who record programs on their VCRs tape popular network fare to view more often and at more convenient times. The A.C. Nielson Company reports that instead of diversifying viewing patterns, most VCR users provide their own "reruns." "Grazers" change channels frequently but relatively aimlessly. They are more creatures of chance than choice. There is no evidence that their choices differ from those of habit.

Viewer inertia and repeat viewing are the rule, eclectic and diverse choices the exception. These facts need not be interpreted as denigrating "passive" and "powerless" audiences. Respect for audience choices comes from a recognition of the cultural context in which they are made. Given a particular cultural situation, audiences use their powers as they, not wishful thinkers, like to use them. In his summary of audience behavior Comstock (1980, p. 11)

concluded that "Viewers do watch programs they are familiar with and like, when they can."

Cable homes watch more television and have more channels to pursue their preferences. Although VCR and remote control use led to a decline of viewer inertia (staying with the same channels through program changes), most cable and VCR users seek more of the same content types through a greater variety of outlets. Cable penetration even increased channel loyalty among those who stay with standard channels (Walker, 1988). By staying with regular station and network schedules, many of these "loyal" viewers may actually see a greater variety of programs than those who pursue more limited preferences through the availability of more media choices.

Evidence that this is indeed happening comes from several large-scale media market surveys. Neuman (in press) examined these data looking for diversity of viewer perceptions and choices. He was disappointed. Audience perceptions of program themes and motivations for viewing are strikingly similar across gender, income, educational and age groups. Furthermore, the correlations of actual viewing patterns with perceptions are also similar in the different demographic categories. The highest positive correlation is with "relaxation" and the lowest (negative) correlation with program perceived as "informative," or "sophisticated."

"People like television to be funny and action-filled," Neuman concludes. "That is true for the teenager and the grandmother, the construction worker and the tax lawyer...The overwhelming pattern is one of rather uniform motivation and choice."

Even newspaper preferences and interest differences among different social groups are slight (an average of less than 5 percent). These, Neuman notes, "are not likely to inflame the souls of targeting marketeers or those whose financial investments are based on the narrowcasting concept."

Our "cultivation analysis" of television viewing (Gerbner et al., 1986; Signorielli and Morgan, 1990) also shows the erosion of traditional differences in different generations born into television homes. The more viewers watch television, the more they share common conceptions of reality regardless of other group differences. Cable, VCR, news viewing or other program preferences and selections do not significantly alter the basic "mainstreaming" pattern. Diversified media investments also imprint the book publishing business with their homogenizing tendencies.

All that does not mean the death of diversity. Credit should be given to the creative people who manage from time to time to produce thoughtful, challenging, magnificent works. Significant and restive pockets of resistance, alienation, and polarization also exist side-by-side with pervasive homogenization and "mainstreaming." But it is clear that the global spread of mass marketing in all media, new or old, will not address, let alone satisfy, the human and public need for genuine diversity and choice.

The increasingly diversified electronic discharge of ever more massive content configurations into the mainstream of the cultural environment, and of their ever deeper penetration into the dynamics of opinion-formation and choice, confronts communities all over the world with a major new social policy challenge. The need is to build an international constituency participating in and supporting the development of cultural policies that address that challenge. A new environmental movement, dedicated to the cultural environment that will shape and guide the fate of those who survive the degradation of the physical environment, is needed to tackle that task.

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