

SEX AND TELEVISION

George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli

Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104

Television is undoubtedly the largest single common contributor to young people's ideas on sexual behavior and relationships. Our 11-year cumulative archives of systematic observations of network television's dramatic content, and our 5-year cumulative studies of viewer conceptions of social reality, show that much of what the public knows (and does not know) about the "facts of life" is learned from their daily exposure to vivid images of life -- and love -- in television's dramatic content.

Trends in sexual attitudes, knowledge, and behavior patterns can no longer be understood in isolation from the cultural climate that sustains them. Television is the mainstream of that common climate. What have been its contributions to young people's conceptions of sexual relations? Have these contributions changed in the past ten years? What have viewers learned from television's most vivid lessons -- its dramatic fare -- about the facts of sex, including contraception?

A recent study at Michigan State University* found that in a typical viewing week intimate sexual behavior will be presented in prime-time at the rate of 2.7 incidents per hour. It also found that intercourse between unmarried partners was seven times as frequent as between husband and wife.

Other studies**

* Bradley Greenberg and Carlos F. Fernandez-Collado, "Substance Use and Sexual Intimacy on Commercial Television," Michigan State University, 1978. March, 1978.

Other studies* found persistent reticence among young men and especially young women to use specific terms for genitals and intercourse. The Rockefeller-supported Harvard Project in Human Sexual Development (to which we have contributed data) has dealt with the broader characterizations and aspects of the subject. Upon approval, we propose to convene an advisory board of the relatively few researchers who have investigated the cultural and particularly media sources of sexual knowledge and behaviors in order to share information and avoid duplication of effort.

An increasing number of health-related professionals and industries recognize the need to become familiar with -- and active in -- the cultural arena affecting so much of their professional life and business. In order to do so, however, they must have the information with which to diagnose the relevant facts and to determine policy for the future. We propose to provide that information and to help apply it to policy.

The proposed project is based on a data bank and research design called Cultural Indicators. This research began with the investigation of violence in network television drama in 1967-68 for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Medical Association. Although violence-related findings and indicators have been published most widely, the approach was broadly based from the beginning to collect observations on the role and symbolic functions of several specific aspects of life -- including romantic and sexual relations -- presented in television drama. A new set of items added in 1977 refined the analysis of sex in the program content.

* Janet S. Sanders and William L. Robinson, "Talking and Not Talking About Sex: Male and Female Vocabularies in Four Communication Contexts," 1978, Unpublished Manuscript, University of Missouri - St. Louis.

The research consists of two interrelated parts: (1) Message System Analysis -- monitoring the world of television, and (2) Cultivation Analysis -- determining the conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in different groups of viewers. The analyses will focus upon uncovering images and lessons related to sex and contraception in this medium.

The research plan is in four parts:

- (1) Secondary analysis of the existing Cultural Indicators Message System data base.
- (2) Development and implementation of a refined analysis focusing upon the portrayal of sex and contraception since 1967.
- (3) Cultivation Analysis focusing upon relevant ideas and behaviors that television viewing tends to cultivate.
- (4) A national conference of clinical, research and media personnel to discuss policy implications of the findings.

(1) Secondary Analysis of the Cultural Indicators Message System Data Archives

Message System Analysis is designed to investigate the aggregate and collective premises defining life and its issues in representative samples of mass-produced symbolic material. Such analysis rests on the reliable determination of unambiguously perceived elements of communications. Its data base is not what any individual would select but what an entire national community absorbs. It does not attempt to interpret single or selected units of material, or draw conclusions about artistic merit or ability to "sell" products. The analysis is limited to functions implicit in the prevalence, rate, symbolic structures and distribution of clear and common terms in the samples.*

* A description of the analytical framework can be found in "Toward Cultural Indicators: The Analysis of Mass Mediated Public Message Systems" by George Gerbner, in the Analysis of Communication Content: Developments in Scientific Theories and Computer Techniques, edited by George Gerbner, et.al., New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969; and George Gerbner, "Cultural Indicators: The Third Voice" in Communication Technology and Social Theory, edited by George Gerbner, Larry Gross and William H. Melody, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973.

The initial analysis will sketch the general contours of sexual activity in prime-time and weekend daytime network dramatic television programming since 1967. It will present a more detailed description of the portrayal of sex in dramatic programs broadcast in the 1977-78 season. This analysis will focus upon several aspects of sexual interactions in these programs, including the nature (verbal, innuendo, physical), type (heterosexual, homosexual), and degree (minor, major) of sexual interaction. In addition, information is available about the appearance of a number of sex-related activities such as kissing, seductiveness, sexual inadequacy and contraception.

(2) Development and implementation of a more specific recording instrument focusing upon the portrayal of sexual activity and contraception

The second step calls for an in-depth analysis of all programs in the Cultural Indicators Project videotape archive that deal with sexual activity. The analysis will be conducted according to the procedures used in the basic Cultural Indicators Message System Analysis Research.* It will establish indicators of portrayal since 1967.

(3) Development and Implementation of a Cultivation Analysis Instrument focusing upon medicine and health

The third phase of the proposed study will involve Cultivation Analysis to determine the notions about sex and contraception that television may cultivate in adolescent viewers.

Cultivation Analysis begins with the patterns found in a "world" of dramatic programming. It then goes on to investigate how this image is

* These procedures are fully discussed in George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, Suzanne Jeffries-Fox, and Nancy Signorielli, Violence Profile No. 9: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1978.

reflected in the expectations, definitions, interpretations and values held by its viewers. Do people see the world as it is -- or as it is presented in television?

Findings about the portrayal of sexual activity will be turned into questions about the facts of sex, intercourse and contraception. Each of these questions will have a "television answer" (the way it is in the world of television) and another, different answer (usually the way it really is).

The developed Cultivation Analysis instrument will be given to adolescents in a specially commissioned survey. Responses to these questions will be related to television viewing as well as a number of demographic characteristics of the respondents. The responses of light, medium and heavy television viewers -- with other characteristics held constant -- will indicate what conceptions of social reality the viewing of television tends to cultivate in what groups and to what extent.

- (4) The organization and conducting of a national conference to discuss the implications of the findings and to recommend corrective social and media policy

This will be a practical policy-oriented study. Therefore, its final phase should be a forum developing and focusing attention upon the policy implications of the findings. The conference participants will include experts and policy-makers in research, the health professions, social services, and television executives.

Budget

At this point, we are submitting a budget for the first step only. The results of the initial analysis can be available in three months after approval. They will be indicative of some aspects of the scope and directions of the rest of the project.