

THE WORLD OF TELEVISION NEWS

George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli

The Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104

April, 1978

Prepared for publication in Adams, W., and Schreibman, F. (eds.),
Television News Archives: A Guide to Research, Washington, D.C.:
George Washington University, 1978.

THE WORLD OF TELEVISION NEWS

George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli*

The Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104

INTRODUCTION

Is television news research for real? We doubt it. To support our view, we shall first challenge the basic assumptions underlying most television news research (and this volume), and then discuss a new, realistic and more appropriate framework for such research.

The assumptions underlying most research in this area are that television is similar to other media; that television news is a major source of factual and public affairs information; and that the television news viewer receives the majority of such information from television news. We do not claim that these assumptions are totally false, only that they are sufficiently wrong to be misleading.

Television is unlike any other medium in several important respects.** For our purposes, the most salient differences are that television is viewed non-selectively and that many (if not the majority) of the most ardent news viewers are also heavy viewers of television drama.

By non-selective viewing, we mean that people watch television not by the program but by the clock. Their lifestyle rather than their specific

** The authors would like to thank Howard Fatell and Colleen Cool for their assistance.

** George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," Journal of Communications, Spring, 1976, 26:2, 173-199.

interests determines when they watch. Time, in turn, determines what they watch, since program schedules are stable and similar across networks.

Television is a regular ritual of which news is a minor part. Therefore, while there is such a social type as the news reader, there is no such significant social type as the television viewer per se. Heavy viewers of television watch three, four or more hours per day, with the weekly series of prime-time drama providing the main staple of their television fare. That fare dominates the acquisition of images and information about the entire spectrum of facts and values in life and society, including that of public affairs. At any rate, the non-selective viewing of television makes the unit of analysis "television fare" and, in effect, that chunk of time which most viewers watch, cutting across program types during that time period.

The methodological approach that conceives of and analyzes such program types as "information" or "entertainment" is rooted in the print era. We are now in the television age, where these types and styles are interrelated. As a result, news is embedded as a relatively minor element in the larger chunk of an image and message system that includes drama, commercials and other types of programs. Therefore, news analyzed in isolation, as a discrete element, leads to results that contain misleading implications, namely that the news content was the viewer's main source of information.

We know that the regular television news viewer is also a heavy television viewer. For example, our secondary analysis of the 1976 American National Election study* shows that while 30 percent of light viewers of police and crime shows watch television news and that 73 percent are regular (daily) readers of newspapers, 58 percent of heavy viewers of these programs watch

* Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.

television news and 66 percent are regular readers of newspapers.* We suspect that heavy television viewers derive most of their information from the material to which they are the most exposed; television drama. We also suspect that the news that fits the world basically shaped by drama will find a receptive framework and will be assimilated by most viewers. It may provide some confirmation of the fantasies (some true, some false, all highly selective and synthetic) cultivated by drama. Television news is increasingly conceived and presented in the marketing and ratings terms of drama and is increasingly produced to fit that framework.** Television news that does not fit that context gets lower ratings and the viewer may not be as receptive to information presented in this way. In either case, the viewers' main source of information is drama, with television news playing an interactive and subsidiary role that is different from that of news reading.

Our own study of television viewers provides some support for these suppositions. We have found that while news reading makes a difference in the responses of both heavy and light viewers to a series of factual questions, television news viewing does not -- especially for the heavy viewer. This suggests that the heavy viewer of television watches news in relation to a total perspective on fact and value cultivated by viewing as a whole. All programs regularly viewed during the habitual viewing period play inter-related and inseparable roles.

That is our hypothesis. The investigation of that hypothesis, namely that news must be analyzed in terms of a total viewing period (e.g., prime-time) in

^{which it is embedded} Light viewers are respondents who rarely or never watch police and crime shows; heavy viewers frequently watch these programs.

** Joseph R. Dominick, Alan Wurtzd and Guy Lometti, "Television Journalism vs. Show Business: A Content Analysis of Eyewitness News," Journalism Quarterly, 1975, 52(2), pp. 213-218. The authors note that in Eyewitness News, "the emphasis on the violent, the humorous and the emotional represents a shift toward those elements more likely to create viewer interest rather than viewer edification; in short, they signal a shift toward the entertainment aspect of news."

which it is embedded and in relation to which it is absorbed and understood, is, we submit, the necessary and realistic task of research on television news.

In order to investigate that hypothesis, we recommend the adoption of the conceptual framework and methodological tools of a research project already underway, Cultural Indicators.* Cultural Indicators is a long-range, comprehensive and cumulative study examining trends in television content and viewers' conceptions of social reality. The most significant feature of Cultural Indicators is the joining of two methodologies; that is, Cultivation Analysis -- the study of viewers' conceptions of social reality -- is linked to Message System Analysis -- the study of mass media content. Thus far, Message System Analysis has been limited to network dramatic programming aired during prime-time (8 to 11 p.m.) and weekend daytime programming. To understand the symbolic world of television more completely and to evaluate its cultivating effects more thoroughly, Message System Analysis should be expanded to include news and commercials.

Assumptions Underlying Cultural Indicators Research

Culture is the system of messages that regulates the social relationships and cultivates the prevailing outlooks of a community. The production of that message system has become increasingly centralized and industrialized. The process has shifted from handicraft to mass production, and from religion and formal education to the media of communications, particularly television.

Television is the chief creator of such synthetic cultural patterns as entertainment and information for the most heterogeneous mass publics in history, including large groups that have never before shared in any common

* A good description of Cultural Indicators may be found in the following source: George Gerbner, "Cultural Indicators: The Third Voice," Communications Technology and Social Policy, George Gerbner, Larry P. Gross, and William H. Melody (eds.), New York: Wiley, 1973, pp. 555-573.

public message systems. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality.

The basic assumption of Cultural Indicators research is that we live in terms of the stories we tell -- stories about what things are, stories about how things work, and stories about value and worth -- and television tells them all through news, drama and advertising to almost everybody most of the time.

Message System Analysis

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, nor does it draw conclusions about the material's artistic merit or its ability to inform or to "sell" products. Rather, the analysis is limited to functions implicit in the prevalence, rate, symbolic structures and distribution of clear and common terms in the samples.

Message System Analysis rests upon a theoretical framework designed to define and describe mass produced message systems (such as television news or dramatic programs) in terms "of what is, what is important, what is right, and what is related to what."* This framework could be applied to television news in the same way it is already applied to dramatic programming -- by focusing upon four analytic measures: attention, emphasis, tendency and structure.

* George Gerbner, "Toward 'Cultural Indicators': The Analysis of Mass Mediated Public Message Systems," The Analysis of Communications Content, George Gerbner et.al. (eds.), New York: John Wiley, 1969, pp. 127.

Attention is concerned with determining the presence and frequency of individual subjects in a message system. For example, how are the sexes distributed in network television news programming? Are the participants in the news stories evenly divided into men and women or does one of the sexes predominate? Emphasis isolates the things that are important in the message system. For example, what themes appear in the news stories -- which themes are significant and which themes are given minor or incidental treatment. Tendency is concerned with how things are presented. That is, are certain people, themes or subjects presented more favorably than others? Finally, structure is concerned with determining relationships that exist among the previously described components of the message system.*

The principal aspects of the methodology of Message System Analysis are the instrument of analysis, the samples of news programs, the training of analysts, the coding procedures, and the assessment of the reliability of the observations.

Recording Instrument Development

An important part of Cultural Indicators' Message System Analysis is the development and testing of an appropriate recording instrument. This instrument would have to consist of items that can be used to isolate the lifestyle and world view communicated by network news programs. For example, it must include items to note the presence of such themes, actions and aspects of life as government, business, sports, violence, family, sex, friendship, love, health, illness, nature and science. Another important part of the instrument must include items focusing on the demography, roles and relationships,

* Ibid, pp. 129-131.

traits, and fates of the people who populate the world of the television news.

An important aspect of the recording instrument used to analyze news must be its comparability with instruments already used in the ongoing study of the world of television drama. Thus we will be able to determine if the "lessons", "rules of life" and "lifestyle" portrayed in news programs are similar to those found in dramatic programming.

Coding and Training Procedures

In Message System Analysis coders are trained in a specialized kind of observation. They must make the reliable discriminations required by the recording instrument and record them in a specified form. Coders focus on what is presented in the material and not how it might be judged by a critical viewer. Their task is to generate data that permits interpretation of the common message elements and structures available to a public of diverse viewers.

To apply this type of analysis to television news, a staff of between ten and twelve coders would be recruited. The training period would require two to three weeks of instruction and testing, with an introductory session devoted to item-by-item discussion of the recording instrument. The trainee group would then be split into randomly assigned coding teams of two each, and all pairs would view and code two selected news programs that had been previously viewed and coded by the staff. Each coding-pair would work independently of all other pairs, and would return a joint coding for both news programs. In the next general meeting, the entire staff would discuss the difficulties encountered in the two-program exercise. When these problems had been resolved, the coder-pairs would code an additional six news programs.

pairs would code an additional six news programs.

The data generated by the coder-pairs on the eight training news programs would be keypunched and subjected to computerized analysis. On the basis of these results, instructions and variables could be further discussed and if necessary, revised. Moreover, idiosyncratic coder-pairs would be identified. The coder-pairs who survived this testing process would proceed to analyze the sample of news programs.

During both the training and data-collection phases, coder-pairs would be able to monitor assigned videotaped news programs as often as necessary. All of the programs would be coded independently by two separate coder-pairs to provide double-coded data for reliability comparisons.

The final set of data would be compiled from the double-coded data base by random selection of one of the two codings for each news program. As a last check against biased coding, and before the final data selection, reliability measures would be computed for each coder-pair. This procedure would help identify problem coder-pairs who may not have been screened out in the training and pre-test phase. In such an instance, the data recorded by the questionable pair would be excluded from the selection.

Assessment of Reliability

Reliability measures are designed to ascertain the degree to which the recorded data truly reflect the properties of the material being studied rather than observer bias or instrument ambiguity. Theoretically, both types of contamination are correctable by refining the instrument, intensifying the coding training or, as a last resort, by eliminating the unsalvageable variable or dismissing the incorrigible coder. Measures of reliability thus serve two functions: as a diagnostic tool in the confirmation of the recording process, and as final evaluators of the accuracy of the phenomena's representation in

and as final evaluators of the accuracy of the phenomena's representation in the actual recorded data.

Five computational formulae are currently available for calculating the coefficients of agreement. The variations are distinguished by a difference function, the form of which depends upon the scale type of the particular variable being analyzed. Except for their respective scale-appropriate sensitivity to deviations from perfect agreement, the coefficients make the same basic assumptions as the prototype for nominal scales devised by Scott. Thus, in the case of the binary variable, all formulae yield identical results.

The reliability of the analysis is thus ascertained by multiple codings and the measured agreement of trained analysts on each usable item. If one were to substitute the perceptions and impressions of casual observers, no matter how sophisticated, the value of the investigation would be reduced, and its purpose confounded. Only an objective analysis of unambiguous message elements, and their separation from personal impressions left by unidentified clues, can provide the basis for comparison with audience perceptions, conceptions and behavior. That becomes the task of Cultivation Analysis.

Cultivation Analysis

The final phase of this research paradigm involves the development and implementation of Cultivation Analysis instruments to determine what notions of social reality are learned by viewers from watching network television news.

^{16*} William A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, 17:3, 321-325, 1955.

** For the derivation of the formulae and discussion of their properties, see Klaus Krippendorff, "A Computer Program for Analyzing Multivariate Agreements, Version 4," Mimeo, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, the Annenberg School of Communications, July 1973. For a more extended discussion by the same author of part of this family of coefficients, see "Bivariate Agreement Coefficients for the Reliability of Data," in E.F. Borgatta, eds., Sociological Methodology, 1970, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Cultivation Analysis begins with the patterns found in a "world" of television programming (news, drama, or commercials). The common message system composing that world presents a coherent image of life and society. How is this image reflected in the images, expectations, definitions, interpretations and values held by its audiences?

This part of the research would determine what viewers learn about the real world from the world of television news; that is, findings about the world of news would be turned into questions about conceptions of social reality. Each of these questions has a "television answer" (the way a subject is presented in the world of television) and another, different answer (usually closer to the way the subject exists in reality).

Some examples of the types of questions that can be developed are given below:

- Which people (men or women) are more likely to be involved in politics in our society?
- Which people (men, women, whites, blacks) are more likely to be involved in violence?

This phase of the research would turn findings from the Message System Analysis of news into questions suitable for Cultivation Analysis. These questions along with the important cultivation questions (violence, fear, "mean world"), asked in previous implementations of the research design, could be incorporated into a Cultivation Analysis instrument. Finally, the instrument should contain questions about viewing habits that can be used to differentiate news viewers from nonviewers.

Full implementation of the Cultivation Analysis instrument requires asking adults the questions included in the instrument in specially commissioned surveys (national probability or quota) and asking children in group (classroom) tests and interviews. Responses to these questions would then be related to television exposure and other media habits, as well as demographic

characteristics. The responses of light, medium and heavy television viewers -- with other characteristics held constant -- can be used to indicate what conceptions of social reality the viewing of television news programs tends to cultivate in what groups and to what extent. An important part of this analysis would be the comparison of responses given by light news viewers and nonviewers. The results of cultivation analysis questions can also be compared with notions of the world the viewing of television drama cultivates in viewers.

The end product of this research would be a comprehensive description of the world of network television news programs, how this world relates to the world of prime-time network dramatic programming, and a comprehensive description of the world formed by combining these two types of programming. The research would also uncover the lessons about life children and adults learn from these worlds of television programming.