



COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

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Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
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AUDIENCE RESEARCH

W. Russell Neuman - M.I.T.

Neuman initially presented the historical background of communication effects research. The first models of communication effects were developed in the 1940s and 1950s, when mass media were thought to have been a tool for audience manipulation and propaganda. This stage is categorized as "content determinism." A typical example, he said, was Hitler's World War II propaganda effort.

The second model, with the advent of TV, was built on the "technological determinism" theory, initially developed by Marshall McLuhan. In this theory the medium is the message. This was the period of the 1960s when such ideas as subliminal advertising to persuade the subconscious mind were popular. The audience, according to this scenario, was seen as a helpless group that could be easily moved/persuaded using the right technology.

The last twenty years of audience research has resulted in the development of a third model based on uses and gratifications research. This model places more emphasis on audience perception and relates to what audiences do, and what they draw from the media. The model describes a two-step flow in which the audience will discuss among themselves the perceived message, and form opinions following such discussions.

The audience research done at MIT is based, Neuman said, on a fourth model, a balanced model linking three elements - content, technology, and audience. This model describes not only the elements mentioned, but also the nature of their interactions. It takes into account social and cultural aspects even as it considers these interactions. For example, different kinds of messages might or might not be effective in different media. Neuman noted that their research group at the Media Laboratory focus on what kinds of messages are effectively communicated by different media. What they seek to understand is what might change individuals' understanding of the world around them as a result of technological developments such as high resolution TV, interactive and broader diversity of information sources that are being made available. Such a perspective covers not only an individual's ability to draw out facts and images but also the economics of providing news and entertainment. Current technology, he said, provides multiple avenues to carry information into the home but what is not yet clear is whether the economics will support many more channels than are currently available. One example is despite the number of channels cable TV provides, there is so much overlap in programming and re-runs

that there is not much more diversity than one finds in over-the-air broadcasting.

Neuman then played a video that briefly described the audience research facility located off-campus at a mall in Danvers, Massachusetts. It is a 1200 square foot facility with four research areas. The facility enables them to test people's response to prototype technology without having to carry it around to different homes. Further, it allows the different participants, over a period of time, to gain a better understanding of the technology and the features provided by the technology. It gives the research group the opportunity to study the response of average individuals to the possibility of more interactive behavior with the media that is available.

The results, Neuman asserted, are mixed. While the participants have greater control over the media, not everybody exercises the option. Most people are enthusiastic about controlling the flow of news, but with regard to drama, individuals are more content not to interfere and would rather watch the author's version. So the question is, in spite of the negative results so far, whether people, young people in particular, will develop the skills and the interest once they become more familiar with the options and seek to exercise their ability to interact to a greater degree.

Philip A. Harding - CBS/Broadcast Group

Harding began by describing the establishing of the Office of Social and Policy Research (OSPR) at CBS. He then discussed its purpose, which was to study the social effects brought about by TV. These effects include not only the anti-social influences attributed to it by its critics, but also the place of TV in the lives of the American people, its uses, and the satisfactions (and dissatisfactions) derived from it. The OSPR, he said, has been operating independently of CBS's day-to-day business concerns, and has been more academic than commercial in nature.

Discussing audience research, with particular reference to TV, Harding asserted that "it is high time some new directions were taken." This, he said, was needed because of the change in our inherited ideas about the nature and effects of mass communication, and also, significant changes in the relationship between the medium and its audience since its arrival on the American scene.

In describing the new directions his own unit is taking, Harding first referred to the common criticism

that TV is contributing or perhaps the major influence causing unhappy social outcomes (criminal behavior, problem drinking, and drug abuse, etc.). The underlying model for this view is stimulus-and-response. However, so simplistic a model is now very much in question and more recent empirically grounded constructs suggest, he said, the highly interactive relationship between the viewer and TV. The raw content of TV is constantly being processed in the individual's consciousness: modulated, shaped, and even changed outright, so that the correspondence between that content and actual perception is apt to be rather loose. In this connection, he cited the British social scientist, Anthony Smith, who stressed the cultural context in which the medium and the viewer interact. This was similar to what was hypothesized by Joseph T. Klapper in 1960 (The Effects of Mass Communication).

Harding said that CBS in 1985 commissioned the Center for Studies in Public Communication at the University of Denver, to undertake the first phase of a long-term research program having these broad objectives:

- To identify the factors - psychological, social, environmental, experiential - which operate in the lives of children and adolescents to produce the various anti-social outcomes so often attributed to TV.

- Having identified and, where possible, quantified those factors, to assess the residual contribution which TV - operating as only one among many of these influences - can realistically be thought to make. This, he hoped, would put us in a far better position than at present to develop an agenda of future research to be addressed by social scientists at academic centers throughout the country.

The second direction being pursued by the OSPR relates to TV's capacity to foster socially positive attitudes and behaviors among audiences. One question addressed was whether children's programs could be less "preachy" and still successfully impart useful lessons. Series of regularly-scheduled children's programs, Harding stated, were developed with the aid of a committee of educators and child development specialists. The research on these programs was published (Communicating with Children) and showed that the intended messages were extremely well conveyed to preteen audiences. He made no claim that these programs made actual changes in viewer behavior. "That is much more difficult to measure," he said. The goal, he asserted, was to assess message communication, and that objective continues to guide more recent studies of children's programming OSPR is conducting.

As part of this thrust to study the socially-positive facets of commercial TV, OSPR has developed a systematic procedure for analyzing prime-time programs on the three networks

in terms of "pro-social behavior" (i.e. content analysis.) Formally recording acts of caring, cooperation, empathy, etc., this procedure is able to characterize the central theme beyond merely counting individual acts. Though the actual audience perceptions of these behaviors cannot be characterized, this approach does identify with considerable precision the nature of the elements actually present in TV programming. Harding then listed the findings based on a relatively short (four week) period during during the 1985-86 season.

- Nearly all (97%) of the 235 programs analyzed did include at least one instance of behavior characterized as pro-social.

- For 25% of the programs, a main theme was pro-social in nature. Examples - lessons of racial tolerance, the idea that relationships with people were more important than material gain, and the destructive effects of deceit.

- Situation comedies are the most common vehicles for pro-social themes. But, this same kind of content was also found in action/adventure programs, dramas, and made-for-TV movies.

Still another area of research being pursued re the socially-beneficial effects of TV is the medium's role in the socializing of adolescents. Harding said that OSPR has just begun to develop the instrument for a nationwide quantitative investigation. This research seeks to learn whether and to what extent the socially desirable elements and themes yielded by content analysis are in fact perceived, accepted, and internalized by the viewer. Further, it will attempt to identify how significant a contribution TV is able to make in the development of values and behaviors of the adolescent viewer.

The last and most innovative of the new directions in TV research Harding described is the project in which Prof. Joseph A. Mazzeo (Columbia University), a renaissance scholar, is studying, among other topics, how advances in science and technology through history have influenced cultural values, popular tastes, and language. This, he hoped, will contribute to understanding whether television is involved in defining the nature and level of popular taste, or whether it only reflects trends and fashions spawned by other social forces. The work is being undertaken via an unrestricted grant for a two-year project titled Cultural Studies in the History of Television.

The project's primary goal, according to Prof. Katherine U. Henderson (College of New Rochelle), the managing editor and recipient of the grant is:

"...to analyze the long-term meaning of TV in our civilization rather than to evaluate any short-term impact it might have. We will place TV in a very broad historical perspective by asking such questions as (whether) the myths

embodied in TV drama (are) similar to classical or medieval folk myths. If so, what does this tell us about our imaginative needs as human beings?...."

John Fiske - Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia.
University of Wisconsin - Madison.

Fiske described his view as that of a cultural humanist. He pointed out that there is no such thing as a single TV audience but rather there are many, plural audiences. He believed that TV is the most influential and persuasive medium of popular culture. "Cultural industries of all capitalist industries are the ones most vulnerable to popular taste." He stressed that as a "popular culture" TV is "made" by the people not the industry. The people (TV audiences) make the choice. They are of different social groups, very discriminatory, highly active, and nothing like the passive viewers described in older scientific models of communication. The audiences make meanings out of what TV delivers to them, and it does not deliver ready-made meanings, nor ready-made pleasures. The meanings are derived from the interaction between audience groups and what they see on the screen. The pleasures are derived, he said, from the relevance of those meanings to people's everyday lives. Culture, he believed, is a combination of meanings and pleasures. Meanings are the ways people think about their social experiences.

Fiske then went on to discuss recent research. He stated his bias toward qualitative rather than quantitative research. His first analysis was of the Australian TV serial "Prisoner," set in a women's prison. This was very popular, he said, among nine to thirteen year old school kids. Research found that these children understood the program as a version of their experience in school. The program provided these students with a cultural language and concepts by which to think through their experience of subordination, how to come to terms with it and what strategies to use in negotiating with it. The program seemed to be influencing the students in that the network had complaints from teachers regarding insubordination, bad behavior, etc. The pro or anti-social nature of the program, he said, is arguable.

Other research in Australia looked, he said, at the way in which Aborigines use TV, and the meanings they derive from it. Aboriginal children had created out of TV a way of making sense of the world and their social experience that included themselves, American Indians (in Westerns,) and Arnold, the black child in the TV sitcom, "The Different Strokes." The

meanings they made by identifying with each of these groups/ individuals were quite different from the intentions of the producing company and probably could not even have been predicted by the producing company. A similar example is the popularity of "Miami Vice" among Columbians, because it shows wealthy, successful, South Americans, particularly Columbians, living in luxury. The fact that they are drug runners and villains is far less important for the audience of Columbians than seeing these minorities represented as successful and powerful.

People, he said, are highly selective in the meanings they take from TV and are very active in that selection. Traditional content analysis, he pointed out, may tell a little about the "menu" TV offers, but does not tell anything about how or why people select from that "menu." People seem to find in TV much more than what appears to have been put there.

The study of "Dallas," Fiske said, is fascinating partly because it has the largest viewing and is the most popular media presentation ever. Researchers have found that specific subgroups of viewers read the program very differently.

Newly arrived Russian Jews in Israel see "Dallas" as capitalism's self-criticism (America baring its soul).

Moroccan Jews perceive "Dallas" as a moral fable showing that pursuit of money does not make people happy (misguided pursuit.)

Libyans see "Dallas" as affirming the importance of kinship and family.

Dutch women find the Americanism of "Dallas" irrelevant but respond to the characters as versions of Dutch politicians and some members of the family.

Fiske noted that TV is received in the home and not in the laboratory. Therefore, family politics, relationships, are important. Australian research has shown that children do twenty different things while the TV is on, and only in a minority of cases do they watch it intently. All this happens within the singular category of "watching TV." An English study showed that only 80% of the time was anyone in the room when the TV was on. Only a tiny percentage of the time was the screen given full attention. The same study showed that over 50% of the reactions to commercials was very negative.

"People make out of TV what they want or need to, and if they cannot or do not they will turn it off," Fiske said. The audience, therefore, is a variety of different social groups very actively and discriminately engaging with TV and making their culture out of the "raw menu" that the industry provides.