

CULTURAL INDICATORS

A prospectus and proposal for the
extension and diversification of
the research project on trends in
television content and viewer con-
ceptions of social reality

by

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We propose a major expansion and diversification of the research whose annual Violence Index and Profile has made a significant impact upon national policy in television. The research is the Cultural Indicators project tracing trends in network television's dramatic content and viewer conceptions of social reality. The plan is (1) to extend the periodic monitoring to news, commercials, and possibly other program types; (2) to launch both regional and multinational cross-cultural comparative studies of television content and effects; (3) to provide a specialized applied service as well as basic scientific and public policy reports; and (4) to develop indices and profiles in such additional areas of television-related images and behaviors as health, aging, family life, due process of law, professional and social roles; sex, minority and other group relations; energy and transportation; foreign lands and people; government and politics; business, labor, the military, education, and other institutions; and other selected issues, policies, products, and services.

Ten years of continuing research, a unique data bank, and a broad research design provide the foundations for the proposed extension of scientific activity and public service. The research has demonstrated significant associations between the content of television programs and the cultivation of popular conceptions of reality in areas such as violence and law enforcement. The data base is the computerized archive of coded observations of "facts of life" in samples of network television drama, and the responses of adult and child viewers reflecting what they learn from those "facts".

The extended Cultural Indicators research and information service marks a new departure in systematic social accounting. Like the Economic Indicators issued by the President's Council of Economic Advisors, it will monitor systems

of inputs and outputs. Like the Social Indicators compiled by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, it will assess continuities and change relevant to governmental, media, and corporate policy. Like any periodic survey of public opinion, it will show trends in popular conceptions of significant issues and aspects of life. But, unlike any of these, Cultural Indicators is designed to show the contributions the pervasive cultural environment of television makes to what people think and do.

Our 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 general patterns of life presented in television drama.

We propose to further broaden the scope and diversify the services of this project. It will continue to be a University-based, independent, non-profit scientific enterprise. But it will be supported from a variety of funding sources, and it will undertake both basic research and special investigations of an applied nature.

The research consists of two interrelated parts: (1) Message System Analysis -- monitoring of the world of television, and (2) Cultivation Analysis -- determining the conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in different groups of child and adult viewers. The analyses provide information about the geography, demography, character profiles, group relations,

and action structure of the world of television, and focus these images and lessons upon specific issues, policies, and topics.

Message System Analysis

Television is the chief creator of synthetic cultural patterns (entertainment and information) for the most heterogeneous mass publics in history, including large groups that have never before shared in any common public message systems. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produces messages and images is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality. 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.

Television drama is the heart of that process because it offers the most diverse audience of viewers a common and stable pattern of "facts" about life and the world. No member of society escapes the lessons of almost universally enjoyed entertainment, and many millions of viewers seek no other information.

Cultural Indicators research begins with Message System Analysis, a flexible but precise tool for making orderly, objective and cumulative observations of programming content. The technique allows us to identify almost any aspect of the television world, so that we can then test its contribution to viewers' conceptions of the real world.

Violence, for example, is one such aspect of the television world. By subjecting it to Message System Analysis, we've been able to determine not only the number of violent actions in dramatic programming, but their perpetrators,

victims and the contexts in which they occur. Message System Analysis employs teams of trained observers to record four features of programming content: the program as a whole; the characters who populate it; selected types of actions they perform; and family and other group relationships.

The utility of Message System Analysis lies in its applicability to all types of content. The instrument of analysis is neutral; it does not attempt subjective interpretations of single incidents, evaluations of artistic merit, or ratings of individual programs. Instead, Message System Analysis reveals centrally controlled production policies by monitoring the prevalence, rate, structure and distribution of clear and common terms in a defined sample.

We have developed a data bank that not even the networks can duplicate and we add to it each year. Message System Analysis has been performed on more than ten annual samples of prime-time and weekend daytime network programming. The data base includes more than a thousand television programs and several thousand characters, actions and relationships. Coded observations are stored in a computer, available for further analysis and study.

The cumulative data base enables us to identify long term trends. For example, our annual Violence Profile and Index has charted the fluctuations of violent relationships and action in dramatic programming for the last ten years. With the annual Message System Analysis and our unique data bank, we can trace similar fluctuations and developments for other types of programming content.

Cultivation Analysis

Our up-to-date data bank of patterns and trends in the world of television is the foundation for our studies of viewer's conceptions of social reality.

The second step of the research, therefore, determines what viewers learn about the real world from the world of television drama, a world in which Americans spend more time than in work or school or play. In order to uncover

this information, we turn the findings about the television world into questions about social reality. What are your chances of encountering violence -- one in ten or one in a hundred? Are doctors omniscient and nurses their young, white, beautiful helpmates? Is one out of every four persons a professional and one out of every twenty a policeman? What are the implications of men outnumbering women 3 to 1 in the world of television?

Each of these questions has a "television answer" -- the way it is in the world of television -- and another, different answer which is usually more typical of reality. These questions are presented to adults as part of national probability and quota surveys and to children in group tests and interviews.

While no member of society can remain unaffected by an influence so pervasive as television, those who spend more time in the world of TV have been found to be more likely to perceive the real world in terms of television's lessons. Responses to our questions allow us to assess the degree to which the more frequent viewers give answers which reflect television's image of the world. These patterns have been examined in light of various controls -- age, sex, education, occupation, etc. -- in order to determine the extent to which it is possible to view television's influence as independent, complementary or contrary to other major social variables.

Continuing and New Directions

The basic research effort will continue to explore the ways in which television cultivates public assumptions about the facts and issues of life, and to refine our understanding of television effects among various groups of viewers.

In addition to the basic effort, we plan to extend, broaden, and diversify the research and offer a variety of information services. We have already

undertaken some diversification by conducting special analyses for government agencies and private organizations. Continuing the basic monitoring and cultivation studies and further extending the research into specialized areas requires additional funding.

We hope to continue a part of the basic research under NIMH auspices. The American Medical Association has provided a three-year grant for partial support of the Violence Index and Profile. Other parts of the basic research, its extension into new areas, and its application to special issues and topics, will be undertaken in association with public and private foundations. Moreover, we will consider conducting specialized analyses for other organizations that may find Cultural Indicators information useful.

The extended Cultural Indicators research and information service calls for activity and support in four directions: (A) continuing the basic operation; (B) broadening the research base; (C) organizing multinational cross-cultural comparative studies; and (D) developing special concentrations and applications in a number of areas.

A. Continued basic research and extended information service (including the development of new Indices and Profiles) requires:

1. Periodic monitoring on the present basis, including analysis of space, time, demographic, personality, action, thematic, and inter-group relationship dimensions of the world of network television drama.
2. Periodic surveys of adult conceptions of social reality related to continuities and changes in program content.
3. Special studies of children's television viewing patterns and what they learn from television.

4. Continuing analysis of the interaction between television viewing, reading, other media use, educational and social influences, family context, and other variables.

B. We propose broadening the base of the research and information service in the following directions:

1. News: The development and testing of message analysis recording instruments for television news, including measures similar to those currently applied to dramatic programming. Development of appropriate questions for cultivation analysis focusing upon news content and respondents who do or do not watch the news.
2. Commercials: The development and testing of message analysis recording instrument to analyze commercials, including measures parallel with those applied to drama and news. Similar extension of cultivation analysis.
3. Daytime serials, game shows, talk shows: The development of suitable recording instruments and the inclusion of these program types in the annual sample; extension of the Cultivation Analysis to include these types of programs.

C. Multinational cross-cultural comparative studies

We have organized and conducted a series of planning meetings with communications researchers of other countries interested in comparative Cultural Indicators. Such meetings were held in Marlow, England in 1971; Leicester, England in 1976; and West Berlin in 1977. A final planning meeting will be held in Warsaw, Poland, in the late summer of 1978. After that, a series of short workshops and methodological training sessions will be necessary to develop common procedures of analysis.

The comparative research will attempt to discover which relationships between television viewing and conceptions of social reality are universal and which are specific to certain programming policies and structures. Cross-cultural comparisons will also help all participating countries understand the special characteristics of their own policies and the range of alternatives pursued around the world.

Researchers have attended one or more of the planning meetings and have expressed interest in participating in the cross-cultural project from Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Columbia, Denmark, Finland, France, The German Federal Republic, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, United Kingdom, USSR, and Yugoslavia.

D. Special topics and issues.

Because the Cultural Indicators archive contains the videotapes of the programs included in the annual samples, special topics can be studied in three ways: (1) making use of the appropriate variables in the computerized data banks; (2) designing special message analysis recording instruments to be used on subsets of videotaped programs; (3) new dimensions of analysis applied to new samples of programs as well as to the videotaped archives.

The list of special topics and issues on which analysis of both content and viewer conceptions and behavior can be focused is practically endless. Almost any social or institutional interest, policy concern, or product or service can find sources of images, concepts, and behavior formation in the Cultural Indicators message system or

cultivation analysis. The following areas of special concentration are listed either because such work is under way or because outside or staff interests have put them on the project's "agenda".

1. Representation of aging and of interactions between different age groups. What conceptions of aging do such representations cultivate in viewers of different ages and other characteristics? How do old people relate to television?
2. Images of the family and their relationship to viewer conceptions of family life. The mediating effect of family viewing context on what children learn from television.
3. Sex roles and their relationships to the development of gender-related ideas and behaviors.
4. Racial, ethnic, religious and other group representations and the assumptions they cultivate about minority group characteristics and relationships.
5. Health-related images, messages, and practices ranging from nutrition and drug use to medical professions, practitioners, and mental and physical illness.
6. Portrayals of law, crime, violence and other aspects of public authority.
7. Presentation of other countries and people; issues related to the conduct of foreign policy.
8. Portrayals of occupations and their effects on occupational stereotypes and the occupational choices of children.
9. Energy, mobility, and transportation as presented on television and as contributing to viewer conceptions on these issues.

10. Government and politics; how television portrayals contribute to public conceptions of the political process.
11. Images of industry, business, labor, and other institutions and their contributions to the formation of popular conceptions and policies.
12. Education, schools, teachers, students. Representation of the educational enterprise and its effect on popular conceptions of education. The relationship of television viewing to academic achievement.
13. Armed forces, war, and other issues related to international (or internal) conflict and national defense.
14. Consumer skills and practices. How they are presented on television and how they influence the styles of life and purchasing habits of children and adults.
15. Other media and cultural activities. The relationship of television and its content to reading, sports, music, theater, movies, and other recreational and cultural activities.

This is the general framework in which we intend to carry on the basic research and to provide specialized studies and services. We believe that the extended scientific activity and service will fill a critical gap in our understanding the common cultural sources of social behavior and will be useful to policy-making of all kinds.

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