

TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS

Issues in Content Research

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The World of Television News

George Gerbner
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UNDERLYING MOST TELEVISION NEWS RESEARCH are the assumptions 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. These popular assumptions are not totally false, but they are sufficiently wrong to be misleading. In this essay, we shall challenge these basic assumptions and then present a new, realistic, and more appropriate framework for such research.¹

Television is unlike any other medium in several important respects (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). For purposes of this discussion, 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. Non-selective viewing means that people watch television not by the program, but by the clock. Their lifestyle rather than their specific interests determines when they watch. Time, in turn, determines what they watch, because program schedules are stable and similar across networks.

Television is a regular ritual of which news is a minor part. Therefore, while the news reader is a social type, there is no such significant social type as the television news viewer. 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. This 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 a larger 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 news content was the viewer's main source of information.

Regular television news viewers are also heavy television viewers. For example, our secondary analysis of the 1976 American National Election Study (conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan) shows that 30 percent of light viewers of police and crime shows watch television news and that 73 percent of them are regular (daily) readers of newspapers; on the other hand, 58 percent of heavy viewers of these programs watch television news and 66 percent are regular readers of newspapers.² One must suspect that heavy television viewers derive most of their information from the material to which they are the most exposed: television drama. And news that fits the world basically shaped by drama would probably find a more receptive framework and be assimilated by most viewers. Such news 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.³ Television news that does not fit that context gets lower ratings and viewers may not be as receptive to information presented in this way. In either case, the viewers' main source of information from television is drama, with television news playing an interactive and subsidiary role that is different from that of news reading.

Our study of television viewers provides some support for these suppositions. 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 of fact and value cultivated by viewing as a whole. All programs regularly viewed during the habitual viewing period play interrelated and inseparable roles. That is the 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 and in relation to which it is absorbed and understood, is the necessary and realistic task of research on television news.

In order to investigate that hypothesis, we recommend adoption of the conceptual framework and methodological tools of a research project already underway, *Cultural Indicators*. (See Gerbner, 1973.) This project 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.

Cultural Indicators Research and Message System Analysis

Culture is the system of messages that regulates the social relationships and cultivates the prevailing outlooks of a community. 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 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 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. Television tells them all through news, drama, and advertising to almost everybody.

Message System Analysis is designed to investigate the aggregate and collective premises defining life and its issues through 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 to 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.

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" (Gerbner, 1969, p. 127). This framework could be applied to television news just as it is already applied to dramatic programming—by focusing upon four analytic measures: attention, emphasis, tendency, and structure.

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 (Gerbner, 1969, pp. 129-131).

The Methodology of Message System Analysis

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.

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 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 focus on the demography, roles and relationships, traits, and fates of the people who populate the world of television news. The recording instrument used to analyze news should be comparable with instruments used for the 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.

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. Their task is to generate data that permit interpretation of the common message elements and structures available to a public of diverse viewers.⁴ The degree to which the recorded data truly reflect the properties of the material being studied rather than coder bias or instrument ambiguity is ascertained through reliability measures. Theoretically, both types of contamination are correctable by refining the instrument, intensifying coder training, or, as a last resort, by eliminating the unsalvageable variable or dismissing the incorrigible coder. Measures of coding 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 the actual recorded data.⁵

Reliability of the analysis is thus ascertained by multiple codings and by 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. Cultivation Analysis begins with patterns found in a "world" of television programming (news, drama, and 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 phase of the research would turn findings from the Message System Analysis of news into questions suitable for Cultivation Analysis. The goal would be to determine what viewers learn about the real world from the world of television news by turning findings about the news world into questions about conceptions of social reality. Then "television answers" (the way a subject is presented in the world of television) could be contrasted to other, different answers (frequently closer to reality). For example, which people (men, women, whites, blacks) are more likely to be involved in violence, or in politics, in our society? Responses of children and adults 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 heavy news viewers with those of light news viewers and nonviewers. These results can also be compared with notions of the world cultivated by the viewing of television drama.

The theory and methods of the approach that has been outlined offer a realistic, useful, and promising new direction for future research on television network news. The end product of this research would be a comprehensive description of the world of network television news programs and how it relates to the world of prime-time network dramatic programming. A comprehensive description of the world formed by combining these two types of programming would uncover the lessons about life that children and adults learn from television.

NOTES

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

2. Light viewers are respondents who rarely or never watch police and crime shows; heavy viewers frequently watch these programs.

3. Dominick, Wurtzel, and Lometti (1975). The authors note that in *Eye-witness 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" (p. 218).

4. To apply this type of Message System Analysis to television news and to illustrate steps involved in coding and training in a large-scale television research project, procedures such as the following may be envisioned: 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; 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.

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 discussed further 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 might 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.

5. 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 (1955). Thus, in the case of the binary variable, all formulae yield identical results. For the derivation of the formulae and discussion of their properties, see Krippendorff (1973). For a more extended discussion by the same author of part of this family of coefficients, see Krippendorff (1970).

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