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ABSTRACT

The literature relating television viewing to the cognitive, social, moral, and behavioral development of children can be divided into three general areas: investigations of the relationship between televised violence and aggressive behavior, studies of television as an agent of consumer socialization, and examinations of the role of television as a behavioral model. This paper provides a review of research in each of these areas and suggests that the development of children's critical awareness of the dynamics of television programing is essential. Goals for analyzing the nature and uses of television in the United States, for evaluating entertainment programing, commercials, and news, and for establishing awareness of personal uses of television and awareness of value conflicts implicit in the medium are summarized. The five curricular modules which have been extrapolated from these goals suggest, among other techniques, keeping a personal diary of viewing habits, investigating the role of news and documentary programing, and analyzing the values presented in entertainment programing.

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TELEVISION RECEIVERSHIP SKILLS:  
THE NEW SOCIAL LITERACY

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## TELEVISION RECEIVERSHIP SKILLS: THE NEW SOCIAL LITERACY

It hardly seems necessary to point out that television occupies a significant portion of the lives of many children. It is probably also not necessary to highlight the concern that has been expressed by parents, social activist groups, and scientists alike about the consequences of this activity. The continuing rhetoric of the Action of Children's Television and the current regional meetings of the national PTA are good examples. Both groups have adopted the standard that present television fare is harmful to some degree and should be changed.

Research findings, however, have shown substantially less surety. Even at the beginning of a review of the scientific literature in the area of television's effects and the child, one is struck by a continuing confusion of conflicting results. In 1961, Schramm, Lyle, and Parker concluded their study of television and children with "For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful" (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961, p. 1). This conclusion was echoed some 10 years later in a report by the Advisory Committee to the US Surgeon General which stated: "The evidence (indicates) that televised violence may lead to increased aggressive behavior by certain sub-groups of children . . ." (p. 7).

Others have disagreed both with the evidence and with the call for action. Howitt and Cumberbatch, two British scholars, after a thorough review of all studies up to 1974, flatly state: "The mass media do not have any significant effect on the level of violence in society" (p. 1). Our own National Science Foundation in their 1976 solicitation for policy related research on the social effects of broadcast television noted that

" . . . a lack of satisfactory information about the social effects of television has been a consistent problem. . ." (p. 2).

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With these conflicting overviews in mind, we can turn to the specific studies themselves. There is a fair-sized body of literature relating television effects on the cognitive, social, moral, and behavioral development of the child. For our purposes, it can be divided into three areas: The first, and by far the most extensive, has been the investigation of the relationship between televised violence and the performance and acceptability of aggressive behavior; the second has been the study of television as an agent of consumer socialization; and the third has researched the role of television as a behavioral model. We will examine each in turn.

#### TV Violence and Aggression

Looking first at the relationship between televised violence and subsequent aggression, research supporting a relationship divides again into three areas: 1) Studies which provide evidence for television as an instigator of aggression; 2) Studies which support a catharsis or reduction of aggression; 3) Studies which support a differential effect.

Instigation. The instigation hypothesis has been closely identified with Berkowitz and his replicators (Berkowitz and Rawlings, 1963; Berkowitz 1965a, 1965b; Berkowitz and Geen, 1966, 1967; Geen and Berkowitz, 1966, 1967; Meyer, 1969, 1970; Phillips, 1969; Hoyt, 1970; Johnson, 1971a, 1971b; Rosene, 1971; Liebert and Baron, 1972; among others). They have consistently found that subjects who were (usually) angered and given a socially approved avenue for aggression and shown a segment of mediated violence were more likely to

do so than similar subjects who saw a non-violent presentation or no presentation at all. The Berkowitz type studies are important to us in that they are the primary scientific basis for the current concern for violence on television. These studies are not without their critics, some of whom were the authors themselves (Weiss, 1969, 1971; Johnson, 1971a, 1971b; Zillmann, 1971; Kaplan, 1972; and see Carter and Strickland, 1975). The major point of these criticisms is that the paradigm itself encourages aggressive behavior and is sufficiently contrived as to prevent generalization to real behavior.

The funding which led to the Surgeon General's report also supported a number of studies attempting to correlate aggressive behavior patterns with television viewing preferences (McIntyre and Teevan, 1972; McLeod, Atkin, and Chaffee, 1972; Friedman and Johnson, 1972; Chaffee and McLeod, 1972). Although some positive correlations were found, the sum of the findings were inconclusive (see Becker, 1972).

The instigation hypothesis, then, has found support from one class of studies which, in turn, has been criticized for methodological weakness. The instigation hypothesis, nevertheless, maintains both popular and scientific support.

Catharsis Hypothesis. Much less support has been garnered for the catharsis hypothesis which holds that there should be a reduction of the tendency to aggress following the viewing of mediated violence. This finding identified early in the study of television (Feshbach, 1961; Feshbach and Singer, 1971, 1972a, 1972b) has found support from a single study. Arguments continue to be advanced, however, to establish catharsis as a potential effect of viewing violence.

Differential Hypothesis. The differential hypothesis essentially states that violent television (and, in fact, any exciting television) establishes a predisposition for action or an arousal state. Whether a particular action is taken will depend on the cues available to and interpreted by the individual (see Zillmann, 1972; Zillmann, Katcher, and Milavsky, 1972; Zillmann and Johnson, 1973; Zillmann, Johnson, and Day, 1974; Zillmann and Bryant, 1974; and Tannenbaum and Zillmann, 1975). The differential hypothesis directs attention from the content of the medium to the cognitive states of the receiver, a direction which appears to hold substantial promise for addressing the problems of television and potential effects on young viewers.

#### Television and Consumer Socialization

Most of the concern generated about the role of television advertising in children's lives has focused on two areas: 1) the effects of television advertising on specific consumer habits, desires, and preferences; and 2) the role of television advertising in the socialization process including: gaining an awareness of advertisers' intent, the incidental learning of life-style orientation, the part which advertising plays in the learning of sex and occupational roles, and the expectations fostered by the "happiness" that is promised through the acquisition of goods and services. From a theoretical perspective it is in the second area of concern that television advertising has the greatest potential for far-reaching and long-term consequences. For example, educators, legislators, and parents are beginning to question seriously the cumulative impact of tens of thousands of TV ads on children's perceptions of society and its institutions. Is it possible that the commonly acknowledged "puffery" used in TV advertising is fostering a distrust of adults and institutions? When children learn that products often

do not perform as demonstrated and that the acquisition of specific goods seldom leads to the level of happiness experienced by the consumers depicted in the ads, they may develop a sense of distrust of advertising. To what extent does this skepticism generalize to other institutions which attempt to communicate with children?

Systematic research directed to these questions clearly indicates that all children do not respond to television advertising in the same way. There seems to be a substantial relationship between response to television commercials and the stage of cognitive development. The pioneering research in this area suggests that, as children grow older, they become more aware of the manipulative intent of commercial messages and, hence, cynical of their worth (Ward and Wackman, 1972; Ward, Reale, and Levinson, 1972). Studies on cognitive defense (Rossiter and Robertson, 1974; Bever et. al., 1975; and Mayer, Donohue and Henke, 1977) have shown that by age 11, the white middle-class child believes that advertising is a sham and that other societal institutions like "business" were replete with manipulative lies. These children were not, however, more capable of detecting faulty reasoning in commercials -- at least as traditionally measured. Culturally deprived children show less cognitive defense and may, therefore, be especially vulnerable to the manipulative attempts of TV advertising.

Studies of commercials as role and behavioral models (Cheles, 1974; Atkin and Miller, 1975; Donohue, 1975; and Atkin, 1976) suggest that commercial messages can influence judgments concerning occupational roles, perceptions of husband/wife roles, perceptions of good nutrition, notions of well-being, and behaviors appropriate to minor illnesses.

In general, the findings indicate that younger children may be more susceptible to commercial influence, but that as children reach the 8-10 year old age bracket, they become increasingly suspicious of advertising's manipulative attempts. Evidence also suggests that television plays either an initiating or supporting role in a) influencing certain consumer decisions of children; b) decreasing resistance to advertisers' frequent and repeated influence messages; c) altering children's perceptions of products' effectiveness and attractiveness; d) influencing perceptions of appropriate behavioral roles; e) influencing children's judgments of appropriate ways of caring for one's own health problems, and that these effects are differentiated by development stage and ethnicracial membership. The research is limited in these respects: a) it deals only with generalized responses to questions about TV commercials; b) it fails to corroborate children's actual purchases or their influence on parent's purchases; c) or it fails to consider that the perceptions evoked may be inappropriate to the child's environment and other social influences.

#### Television As A Value Agent

Studies documenting the imitative behavior which follows exposure to television (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963a, 1963b, etc.; Stein, Fredrick, and Vonderacek, 1972) initially raised the issue that exposure to specific behaviors, whose consequences for the individual are shown, may result in the attachment of value to such classes of behavior by the receiver. Studies following this lead have investigated television contents and the perceptions of the appropriateness of anti-social behavior (e.g. violence) and to a lesser extent certain forms of pro-social behavior (e.g. altruism). Some

studies have shown that children's perceptions of the behaviors of TV characters are strongly related to children's own behaviors in a limited number of situations (Meyer, 1976; Donohue, 1975; Baran and Meyer, 1975). Other investigations have contended that TV shapes occupational and sex role stereotypes, and that it helps to reinforce existing values of a political or social nature (Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974; Surlin, 1974; Frueh and McGee, 1974).

It remains to be demonstrated under what conditions TV plays a significant role in shaping human values, and most importantly, how other environmental influences operate as mediating facilitators or inhibitors of various value states. Television's potential for influencing value formation -- whatever it is -- is the question crucial to understanding television's long-term effect on society.

#### CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To summarize our review of these three areas, we have found: 1) that current investigations of the relationship between violent content and aggression are shifting the focus from content to the cognitive states of the receiver; 2) that the effects of television as an agent for consumer socialization is related to development state and cultural factors; 3) that the force of television as a value agent is largely unknown. In studying this literature, one is struck by the fact that few definitive findings have appeared<sup>1</sup>, and such findings that have appeared have been challenged on methodological grounds. This observation may lead one to conclude that there are no strong, consistent effects of viewing television which can be

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<sup>1</sup>Imitative learning studies may be the exception.

systematically associated with large segments of the viewing audience. Rather, there may be particular effects which may be associated with given motivational, attitudinal, and cognitive states. And, as those states change from time to time, or even moment to moment, the effects of televised messages change. This notion is a substantial reconceptualization of the potential effects of television. It directs our attention, not to classes of content nor to groups of individuals, but to critical states of receptivity when particular consequences are more likely to occur.

This redirection would appear to be singularly useful in the determination of policy statements vis a vis content and effects. The regulation of broadcast television content is stringently constrained by the 1934 communication act, and, of course, by the first amendment of our Constitution. In the specific instance of the regulation of violent content, we have the precedential ruling of Judge Warren Ferguson whose opinion was written on the recent family viewing case. Family viewing, to briefly review, was a rulemaking by the National Association of Broadcasters Code Board to reserve the 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. hours of evening viewing for programming suitable to all members of the family. The notion has been claimed by the now ex-president of CBS, and was strongly encouraged by FCC Chairman Richard Wiley. Judge Ferguson struck down the family viewing requirement saying, "Censorship by government or privately created review boards cannot be tolerated" (Broadcasting, 1976, p. 46). He went on to write: "The right and the duty to make independent and final decisions as to who shall and shall not get access to the media resides (sic) not with the networks..., not with the NAB, not with the FCC. . . . The

constitutionality of the broadcast system depends on the conclusion that the right and duty to make these decisions reside in hundreds of different "licensees" (p. 46).

Rejecting prior constraint of content is not only a constitutional imperative, it is also supported by the scientific evidence which we have. That evidence indicates that for any given audience, a broad spectrum of effects are potentially possible. Some of these behavioral consequences may be identified as anti-social, others as pro-social. Current theory (Zillmann, 1971; Anderson and Meyer, 1974; Anderson, Meyer, and Donohue, 1976; Anderson, 1976) would maintain that it matters not what the particular content is, a full range of response is a possibility. Consider if you will, this description in "The Wheel Comes to Social Science" (Anderson, Meyer, and Donohue, 1976, pp. 9-11). The article describes an actual lesson that appeared on Sesame Street. The lesson was apparently designed to point out how important friends are to one's happiness. The principal characters in the segment were the puppets, Bert and Ernie, and the real-life person, Maureen. The segment begins with Bert and Ernie arguing about rights to a cookie that is in Ernie's possession. To prevent Bert from getting any, Ernie quickly eats the cookie, whereupon Bert informs Ernie that he will never speak to him again and pokes Ernie in the stomach. Because of the disagreement, they decide to terminate their friendship and pursue lives as far apart from each other as possible -- one chooses the North Pole; the other will become a cowboy. Maureen enters and points out how empty their lives will be without one another. Bert feels guilty and apologizes to Ernie for his aggressive behavior. Ernie reminds Bert that he was positive that the cookie was his.

Bert asks Ernie how he can be so sure, to which Ernie counters, "Because I ate yours this morning." The nature of this scenario allows a large number of interpretations and consequent effects.

Child A may perceive the segment exactly as intended -- that indeed people are more important than possessions, and that one should not be willing to abandon a friendship because of a dispute over a material object, however important at the moment. Because of the child's psychological and situational condition at the time, the content may even be perceived to have a great deal of application to his/her own behavior at that particular time.

Child B perceives a totally different lesson for the segment based on different psychological conditions brought about by an incident similar to that depicted by the puppets. He has just experienced a playmate's reluctance to share any of his toys and was frustrated by the encounter. After seeing the segment, he may perceive that people who don't share deserve to be aggressed against and may seek out the playmate to seek revenge or retribution for the behavior. This person may miss the intended central point of the message and focus on that part of the segment that possesses more immediate relevance in his life. For this individual, the immediate resolution of the initial conflict may have more immediate application than the broader issue of friendship.

Child C has found that in his experience, people cannot be trusted to keep promises. He has developed a suspicious nature. She/he perceives that people seldom really care about one another and consequently does not have or want friends. This child may find the final exchange where Ernie admits having eaten Bert's cookie earlier in the day to be entirely

consistent with behavior or incidents he has observed. His basic distrust of individuals' motivations and intentions are reinforced. Perhaps he perceives there is no such thing as real friendship, and people who are led to believe that friendship does exist may, in the final analysis, end up with nothing. Thus, the child's determination not to enter into trust-based relationships may actually be increased.

Child D is an only child who lives in the country, devoid of peer relationships. He may watch the segment and then return to playing with his toys with no observable change in his behavior. Because the child has no siblings and few peers, the concept of sharing may be totally foreign to him. Since he has never had the opportunity or need to share, he may find the concept of sharing-leads-to-friendship an incredulous one. Moreover, because he has not had a great many friends, he may find the notion that one needs friends to be less than totally believable. For this child, the whole segment may be totally irrelevant and have no transfer or application. Further, the child may reject Bert and Ernie as appropriate behavioral models, thus lessening their capacity to influence him in other areas.

The precept of this rather extended example is that content is a poor predictor of subsequent behavior in the audience. Assuming, however, that we can agree on a definition of pro-social, heightening the pro-social effects of any medium, including television, is a desirable goal. What we have seen to this moment is that the control of content is not a very useful means for achieving that goal.

There are other avenues, one of which leads us to the development of cognitive skills and value states appropriate to translating the content

of our media into pro-social behaviors. If the behavioral consequences of any particular message is dependent on the cognitive states of the receiver, why not heighten the likelihood of those states which result in pro-social behaviors? Why not indeed. Those of us in this field believe we can succeed in this aim through a curriculum for the elementary grades which teaches critical, receivership skills appropriate to the pro-social uses of the domestic mass media. The curriculum is based on two assumptions: 1) That children can utilize certain viewing, listening, reading skills and analytical procedures to modify source, message, and medium effects toward pro-social consequences; and 2) that these skills and procedures can be taught in the ordinary classroom using curricular materials and instructional approaches specially designed for that purpose. The significance of this approach lies in the fact that if successful, policy concerns with the content of television can be properly transferred to a concern for the education of the viewer. Given proper implementation, we can move from the confusion of results from a naive audience to the relative security of the predictability of a sophisticated audience. The notion of media literacy has had widespread support. Most recently Workshop IV of the Television and Children Conference sponsored by the Ford Foundation, The Markle Foundation, and the National Science Foundation concluded:

Basic research is needed to develop the content for a media literacy curriculum. The curriculum could include such subjects as production conventions, analysis of media appeals, the character and role of non-verbal cues, overview of the history and structure of the broadcasting industry, the economic basis for television, analysis of typical formats for entertainment programming, major concerns about negative effects of programming, analysis of the values portrayed in television content, standards for criticism of television content, and, if possible, some direct experience with television equipment (Ford Foundation, 1976, p. 31)

A consortium of Scholars at Ohio University and several school districts throughout the United States have been working on that basic research since 1970.<sup>2</sup> In this research curricular elements have been developed and pretested. The development of the curricular elements was<sup>a</sup> guided by several specific goals:

1. To raise the levels of understanding about the nature and uses of television in the U.S.
2. To provide the young person with analytical tools that will be useful in the evaluation of the content of entertainment programming, so that the young viewer will be increasingly sensitive to those uses of violence and explicit sex which contribute little or nothing to the development of a plot, to the reasonable resolution of a problem, or to the esthetic quality of a program.
3. To provide youngsters with concepts and skills that enable them to analyze the persuasive messages of commercials; to discriminate between product appeals and affective appeals, and to become sensitive of the subtle persuaders. We recognize that this may have more to do with the youngster as a consumer of hard goods than with violence, but awareness and sensitivity may be transferable.
4. To provide youngsters with concepts that will enable them to use television news with understanding of its limitations, to understand that television news can not offer the referability, the depth, or the scope of print news. The young viewer will see considerable violence and conflict in television news; the peaceful, harmonious aspects of the news do not offer the action, excitement, and entertainment that popular television news seems to demand.
5. To provide youngsters with the opportunity to learn about their own personal uses of television; what they like and dislike, how much they watch, when they watch, why they watch. Television self-awareness with youngsters aged ten and above is an attainable goal.
6. To prepare young viewers to identify the value conflicts that are imbedded in much entertainment program content, and to provide experiences in value clarification and the consideration of reasonable alternatives to the problem solutions presented in television programs.

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<sup>2</sup>Ohio University's Broadcast Research Center and Cooperative Center for Social Studies and school systems in Eugene, Oregon; Syracuse, New York; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Jacksonville, Florida.

The developed curricular elements have been combined into an integrated multidimensional approach which is aimed at skills relevant to the critical understanding of the televised message. Clearly, those skills are analogous to, but not necessarily limited to, the skills identified in the areas of critical thinking, critical reading, and aural and visual literacy. A distillation of the literature combination with our own research (See, for example, Anderson and Ploghoft, 1974, 1975a, 1975b; Ennis, 1962; Follman, Brown, and Burg, 1970; Orr and Graham, 1968; Guba and Wolf, 1964) led to the identification of five major skill areas and their subdivisions:

I. Comprehending the Message<sup>3</sup>

- Grasping the meaning of the message
- Comprehending language discriminately
- Comprehending images discriminately
- Interpreting "hidden" meanings
- Specifying the working element of the message
- Understanding to whom the message is directed
- Interpreting the intent of the message

II. Perceiving the Elements of the Message

- Noting details of the message
- Noting sequence of the elements
- Perceiving relationship of elements
- Identifying character traits
- Noting integration of aural and visual elements

III. Evaluating the Message

- Assignment of credibility to statements
- Identifying fact, opinion, imaginative writing and images
- Identify affective appeals
- Evaluating logic, reasoning, and "montaged" relationships

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<sup>3</sup>"Message" is used to describe any content

IV. Reacting to the Message Personally

Recognizing intended affective reactions and motives  
Relegating personal value (utility) to the message  
Identifying emotional satisfactions and their sources  
Relating other experiences to message  
Drawing conclusions, inferences, or predictions

V. Comprehending the Impact of Medium

Understanding the role of television in one's life and  
impact of this role on message  
Understanding impact of television qua institution on  
message

To accommodate development within these skill areas, six curricular modules have been created.

Module 1: The Textbook

Television and You examines the institution of television through seven chapters. The chapter titles are: How Does Television Work? Where Do Programs Come From? Why Do We Have Commercials? What's The News All About? What Can Television Do To Me? What Can I Do To Television? What Is Cable Television?

Module 2: The Personal Diary Study

In this module, titled You and Your Television Set, each student completes a nine-day diary of television viewing and makes concomitant entries on motivations for watching. Students are then directed to individually prepare case study narratives on their personal uses of, and gratifications from, television.

Module 3: Entertainment Programs and Values

This module presents analytical schema for identifying value statements contained in plot-based (as opposed to variety) entertainment programs and determining the consequences of these values.

#### Module 4: Commercials

Two commercials each have been professionally prepared for three common product types. One commercial in each set is more "rational" in appeal; the other more affective. Students are directed through exercises which illuminate the persuasive elements and their potential effects.

#### Module 5: News and Information

This module investigates the role of news and documentary programming in American society. It examines sources of bias and provides comparisons between news presented in different media.

#### Module 6: Creative Expression Through Television

Television production is another means of creative expression. This module provides guidance in the use of available production facilities to first imitate the commercially available programs, and then to explore new expressions.

These modules are interlocking, and yet sufficiently independent to provide for flexible implementation to respond to varying time schedules, support facilities, grade levels<sup>4</sup>, and teachers skills.

Early experience with the television viewer skills instructional modules has indicated that there is strong interest in this subject area, and that children ages 10 - 14 possess the capability to deal with the concepts and skills of the program. In Eugene, Oregon, the modules have been integrated into the regular social studies curriculum where communication, consumerism, and citizenship education interface with the content.

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<sup>4</sup>The curriculum has been used in varying forms from 5th grade through undergraduate college.

of the television viewer skills program. In East Syracuse, New York, integration has been with the language arts/communication skills program.

As one reflects upon the current furor over television violence and its impact upon children, it seems that the people have overlooked the fact that there are many other kinds of program content with which the young (and old) viewer must deal. It seems that we may not have recognized that television has displaced print as the major mass medium, and that we must now prepare our children to use television skillfully as a conveyor of information that many of us will use to make consumer decisions, political choices, and as a basis of positions that we will take on many current issues. As Professor Peddiwell would most likely observe, if he were with us, "It is time to stop hunting the extinct saber tooth tiger, and get on with the new and lively challenges that confront education today."<sup>5</sup>

We, of course, would argue strongly for a general adoption of a curriculum incorporating these skills and objectives. The teaching of critical, receivership skills in a contribution our school systems can make to the good progress of society. Television is a significant element in the lives of most Americans. We need to be sophisticated about its biases and its insights.

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<sup>5</sup>Harold Benjamin's Saber Tooth Curriculum has been a source of inspiration on the many occasions in the past 8 years when we were almost persuaded that the curriculum would never accept television viewer skills as something that children should develop.

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