EFFECTS OF TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE ON VIEWERS' PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS PERSPECTIVE

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Few would argue that television is not a powerful medium. Its power resides in its ability to capture both our attention and our imagination. Empirical evidence of this power is demonstrated not only by the sheer frequency with which Americans view television (over four hours per day for individuals, over seven hours for households),[1] but also by its centrality in American life. In fact, some have suggested that television is now our principal means of storytelling[2] and has changed our culture in very fundamental ways.[3]

Although certain types of television programming may provide useful and veridical information (e.g., news, documentaries), the vast amount of television programming serves the purpose of entertainment. That is, most viewers do not knowingly tune in to soap operas, situation comedies, or dramas for the purposes of gathering information on the lives of other people. Yet, the primary premise of this article is that, whether they know it or not, this is precisely what they are doing. Moreover, this oftentimes subtle but frequent accumulation of consistent and formulaic information that is conveyed through television portrayals may perhaps be the most powerful aspect of television.

In this article, I provide an overview of the types of information that television provides, particularly with respect to the portrayal of crime, violence, and law enforcement on entertainment television. I examine the general representations contained in television portrayals and the values they reflect. I briefly explore the research findings that link the viewing of television content to particular effects on individuals. Finally, I present a general model that explains how television may affect

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[1] A. C. Nielsen, NIELSEN REPORT ON TELEVISION (1995).

[2] Roger Silverstone, "Television, Rhetoric, and the Return of the Unconscious in Secondary Oral Culture," in Bruce E. Gronbeck et al., (eds.), MEDIA, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND CULTURE 147-159 (1991).

[3] Marshall McLuhan, UNDERSTANDING MEDIA: THE EXTENSIONS OF MAN (1964).

cognitive processes and discuss the implications of the model for public policy.

The World of Television

The primary purpose of television programs is to persuade as many viewers as possible to watch them. To appeal to mass audiences, the programs take on a number of consistent features. For example, in an effort to entertain and stimulate, they emphasize drama and suspense. One result is the frequent portrayal of crime and violence. Content analyses of television programs indicate that overt acts of crime or violence occur about five times in an average television hour and about 75% of prime time programs contain some form of violence. These figures have remained relatively stable over the last 25 years.[4] Moreover, these portrayals of crime and violence are not all that representative of reality. The rate of portrayal of crime and violence on television programs is roughly ten times greater than its real world incidence.[5]

To capture and entertain an audience, television programs must tell stories quickly and efficiently: Television time is very expensive and viewers' attention spans are often short. One way of telling a story quickly is through the use of stereotypes. A stereotype is, in its simplest form, a convenient data reduction technique. As long as viewers are sufficiently acquainted with the stereotype, an abundance of information about a character or situation can be conveyed without resorting to lengthy dialogue. But as with most stereotypes, characterizations are seldom neutral. Some are positive (hero), some are negative (criminal). Moreover, the attributes or characteristics of the stereotypes are not random. Problems arise when the pairing of particular stereotypes (e.g., criminal, hero, successful, powerless) and particular attributes (e.g., race, gender, class, age) becomes systematic. In fact, content analysis of television programs suggests that this is precisely what happens. For example, with respect to differences in race portrayals, Hispanic and African-American television characters are about half as likely as white

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[4] W. James Potter, *Considering Policies to Protect Children from TV Violence*, 46 J. Comm. 116 (1996); Nancy Signorielli, "Television's Mean and Dangerous World: A Continuation of the Cultural Indicators Perspective," in Nancy Signorielli & Michael Morgan (eds.), CULTIVATION ANALYSIS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH 85-106 (1990).

[5] George G. Gerbner *et al.*, "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in Jennings Bryant & Dolf Zillmann (eds.), PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA EFFECTS 17-48 (1986).

characters to have graduated high school and Hispanic characters are about half as likely as white characters to hold upper status occupations.[6] Hispanic characters are portrayed as criminals twice as often as whites. Gender differences are also evident in television programs. Men are portrayed as more powerful and successful than women; women's occupations are less central than those of men. Almost 40% of female characters, as opposed to 18% of males, do not have discernable occupations. Women on television are more likely than men to be victims of crime and they are also typically younger and more attractive than men.[7]

A recent innovation in television programming is "reality based programs" or *video verite*.[8] These very popular programs combine actual video footage of crimes in progress with reenactments of crimes; the reenactments are also interspersed with interviews and narration. The purpose is to simulate as closely as possible the feel and experience of reality. However, even though particular incidents may have a basis in reality—note that it is unclear what liberties are taken with reality in the construction of the reenactments—reality may be distorted through selectivity of portrayals. In particular, viewers may conclude that what is seen in these programs is typical and what is not seen is atypical. Content analyses of these reality-based police programs indicate that, just as with all programming, systematic biases are apparent. For example, whites are more likely to be portrayed as police officers and African-American and Hispanic characters are more likely to be portrayed as criminals. Ironically, police are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors than are criminals. However, as Judith Grant has pointed out, such aggression is almost always justified as a necessary means of dealing with the criminal element in today's society. Moreover, the program narration is always from the perspective of the police, with no criticism of their actions, thus encouraging the viewer to reach the conclusion that the police are virtually omniscient.[9]

Another feature of television programs is they tend to end on a reasonably positive note. This does not mean that all programs are intended to leave people happy and upbeat; the incidence of crime and

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[6] S. Robert Lichter *et al.*, *Prime-time Prejudice: TV's Images of Blacks and Hispanics*, Pub. Opinion 13 (July/August 1987).

[7] Nancy Signorielli, *Television and Conceptions about Sex Roles: Maintaining Conventionality and the Status Quo*, 21 Sex Roles 341 (1989).

[8] Judith Grant, *Prime Time Crime: Television Portrayals of Law Enforcement*, 15 J. Am. Culture 57 (1995); Mary Beth Oliver, *Portrayals of Crime, Race, and Aggression in "Reality-Based" Police Shows: A Content Analysis*, 38 J. Broadcasting & Electronic Media 179 (1994).

[9] Grant, *id.*, note 8.

violence on television suggests otherwise. However, there are general techniques that television writers and producers use to stay with a positive theme, for example, the good guy (not girl) always wins and criminals are generally punished eventually, reinforcing viewers' desire for a belief in a just world.[10] A content analysis of the most popular police dramas from 1982-1992 found that the programs consistently portrayed a spiteful and malicious world, and that the best response to such a world was to encourage unilateral action on the part of police officers that paid lip service to the legal rights of suspects and police codes of conduct.[11]

    In spite of the evidence just presented that television provides a distortion of reality, it seems fair to question the significance of these discrepancies between real life and the way life is portrayed on television. Can't viewers distinguish between fact (e.g., news, documentaries) and fiction (e.g., soap operas, situation comedies, even cartoons) and take these differences into account when making everyday judgments? In fact, an abundance of evidence suggests that they either can not or do not make these distinctions.

Television Effects Research

    Although important research on the effects of television and film violence on aggressive behavior has been conducted,[12] more recent research on television effects has taken a cognitive approach. Instead of focusing on direct links between television viewing and behavior, this research has investigated how the systematic biases in television portrayals may influence the social perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of viewers. The logic invoked here is that such cognitions are intermediary steps between the stimulus (i.e., television content) and the behavior and thus are more likely to show relationships with television viewing. Moreover, the reasoning is consistent with the notion that real-world television effects (as opposed to laboratory effects) may not necessarily manifest themselves in dramatic and direct links between viewing and behavior but instead may work in a more subtle fashion through a slow, yet persistent, influence on what people think.

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    [10] Dolf Zillmann, "Entertainment as Media Effect," in Jennings Bryant & Dolf Zillmann (eds.), MEDIA EFFECTS: ADVANCES IN THEORY AND RESEARCH 437-462 (1994).
    [11] Ivy Glennon, "Mavericks, Sociopaths and Helpless Victims: A Generic Analysis of Popular U. S. TV Police Drama" (paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Sydney Australia, 1994).
    [12] For a review, see Wendy Wood *et al., Effects of Media Violence on Viewers' Aggression in Unconstrained Social Interaction,* 109 Psychol. Bull. 371 (1991).

Seminal work in the cognitive area has been conducted by George Gerbner and his colleagues. These researchers have offered a theory of television effects that they term *cultivation theory*. Cultivation theory posits that long term viewing of the systematic distortion of reality provided by television programs will have a predictable effect on viewers. Specifically, the more people watch television, the more they will "cultivate" the television message and thus be more likely to believe that the real world resembles the world of television.[13]

Other research provides support for cultivation theory. For example, heavy television viewers tend to give higher estimates of the prevalence of crime and violence in the U.S.[14] and higher estimates of the incidence of prostitution, alcoholism, and drug abuse than do light viewer.[15] Heavy viewers have also indicated a greater fear of walking alone at night, more anomie, greater perceived danger, greater use of personal safety protection devices, and more interpersonal mistrust than light viewers. They have also been shown to overestimate to a greater degree than light viewers, how often police find it necessary to use force, draw their guns on an average day, and shoot fleeing suspects.[16]

Although the results supporting cultivation theory's central hypotheses have been numerous, cultivation theory and research have been heavily criticized.[17] The criticisms center primarily on two interrelated issues: 1) the studies have mostly been based on correlational data, and thus inferences regarding causality are problematic, and 2) cultivation theory has provided little or no insight into how the process works at the individual level. However, recent research has begun to address the latter criticism by exploring the psychological processes that may underlie the effects of television viewing on social judgment. This research suggests that the effects of television can be explained in terms of how information from television is stored in memory, what factors enhance the recall of such

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[13] For a review, see George G. Gerbner *et al.*, "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in Jennings Bryant & Dolf Zillmann (eds.), PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA EFFECTS 17-48 (1986).

[14] George Gerbner *et al.*, *Aging with Television: Images on Television Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality*, 30 J. Comm. 37 (1980); L. J. Shrum, "Processing Strategy Moderates the Cultivation Effect: Implications for Heuristic Processing and Source Discounting" (manuscript submitted for publication, 1997).

[15] L. J. Shrum & Thomas C. O'Guinn, *Processes and Effects in the Construction of Social Reality: Construct Accessibility as an Explanatory Variable*, 20 Comm. Res. 436 (1993).

[16] George Gerbner *et al.*, *The Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile No. 10*, 27 J. Comm. 177 (1979).

[17] William J. McGuire, "The Myth of Massive Media Impact: Savagings and Salvagings," in George Comstock (ed.), PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOR 173-257 (1986).

information, and why this information may be used in judgment and decision making even though its television basis may make its veridicality suspect.

A Cognitive Process Model of Television Effects

The cognitive process model that I am proposing for explaining the effects of television viewing on social judgments may be generally referred to as a *heuristic processing model*.[18] Heuristic processing refers to a limited mode of processing that is relatively effortless and expends few cognitive resources.[19] That is, instead of making an exhaustive search of memory for information pertaining to a particular decision, people who process heuristically tend to use simple decision rules or "rules of thumb" (e.g., "experts can be trusted," "attractive people are sociable," "consensus implies correctness," etc.).[20] Because heuristics are easy to apply, they tend to be adopted when either the ability or motivation to process information is low. However, when the ability and/or motivation to process information is high, people may engage in systematic rather than heuristic processing. In systematic processing, people scrutinize a great deal of information in an effort to form a judgment.[21]

One particular cognitive heuristic that may be applied when making judgments about the prevalence of crime and violence is the availability heuristic.[22] In applying this decision rule, people infer the prevalence of something from the ease with which an example can be recalled. That is, they infer that because something is easy to remember, it must have occurred frequently. Indeed, things that occur frequently are likely to be easy to recall. The problem with this heuristic as a basis for judgment is that there are things other than frequency of occurrence that affect the ease with which examples can be brought to mind (psychologists refer to such ease as "accessibility").

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[18] L. J. Shrum, *Assessing the Social Influence of Television: A Social Cognition Perspective on Cultivation Effects*, 22 Comm. Res. 402 (1995).

[19] Shelly Chaiken, *Heuristic Versus Systematic Information Processing and the Use of Source Versus Message Cues in Persuasion*, 39 J. Personality and Soc. Psychol. 752 (1980).

[20] Alice H. Eagly & Shelly Chaiken, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTITUDES (1993).

[21] Shelly Chaiken *et al.*, "Heuristic and Systematic Processing Within and Beyond the Persuasion Context, in James S. Uleman & John A. Bargh (eds.), UNINTENDED THOUGHT 212-252 (1987).

[22] Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman, *Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability*, 5 Cognitive Psychol. 207 (1973).

The role that level of television viewing may play in this process is that it may make particular information very accessible from memory. Research has shown that a number of factors may increase the accessibility of particular information. Those most relevant to television viewing include both the frequency and recency of information storage, as well as the vividness and distinctiveness of the information.[23] Because television systematically over represents particular constructs relative to their real world representation (e.g., crime and violence), heavy television viewers should store these constructs in memory more frequently and recently than light viewers. Moreover, because of the dramatic nature of television, the television information should be vivid and distinctive, further contributing to its enhanced accessibility for heavy viewers.

The notion that television viewing can increase the accessibility of information from memory and that this enhanced accessibility results in higher estimates of such things as crime and violence has received empirical support. For example, one study operationalized accessibility as the speed with which judgments about the prevalence of crime and violence could be constructed, reasoning that the faster information (i.e., examples) could be accessed, the faster judgments would be made. The results showed that not only did heavy viewers give higher estimates than light viewers of the prevalence of crime and violence, they also made these judgments faster than light viewers. Moreover, when the effects of speed of response were statistically partialled out, the effect of level of television viewing on the prevalence estimates was eliminated.[24] These findings suggest that the accessibility of information did in fact account for the relation between television viewing level and the magnitude of the estimates of the prevalence of crime and violence. These results have been empirically replicated and extended to studies which varied the types of prevalence estimates that were made (e.g., prevalence of particular occupations such as doctors, lawyers, and police officers; prevalence of marital discord) and the types of programs viewed (e.g., soap operas), suggesting that these effects are reliable.[25]

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[23] E. Tory Higgins & Gillian King, "Accessibility of Social Constructs: Information Processing Consequences of Individual and Contextual Variability," in Nancy Cantor & John F. Kihlstrom (eds.), PERSONALITY, COGNITION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION 69-121 (1981).

[24] L. J. Shrum, *Psychological Processes Underlying Cultivation Effects: Further Tests of Construct Accessibility*, 22 Hum. Comm. Res. 482 (1996).

[25] L. J. Shrum & Thomas C. O'Guinn, *Processes and Effects in the Construction of Social Reality: Construct Accessibility as an Explanatory Variable*, 20 Comm. Res. 436 (1993); L. J. Shrum *et al.*, "Processes and Effects in the Construction of Normative Consumer Beliefs: The Role of Television," in Rebecca H. Holman & Michael R. Solomon (eds.), ADVANCES IN

One criticism of the heuristic processing model is that seeing crime on television (crime made accessible by television viewing) does not necessarily mean that viewers will use television programs as a basis for inferring the prevalence of crime or violence in the real world. Research indicates, however, that people are often unaware of the source of the information they retrieve from memory because they are unable or unwilling to put forth the effort to determine the source of their memories.[26] Recall that people tend to rely on heuristics when motivation to process information is low. Informed source-discounting is a function of motivation. On the other hand, research also shows that certain conditions may impair our ability to effectively source discount, such as heavy time pressure for making the judgments or impaired ability at discriminating between fact and fiction (e.g., in the case of young children or the elderly).

The inability to discriminate between sources may also be a function of television itself. One of the most popular new forms of television entertainment is reality-based programs. The blurring of distinctions between real and fictional, as well as what is directly experienced and what is media based, may contribute to an inability to accurately determine source characteristics of information retrieved from memory.

The proposition that television examples are used because they are not discounted and that this lack of discounting can account for the effect of television viewing on prevalence estimates of crime and violence has also received empirical support. In two separate experiments, some people received instructions that "primed" source characteristics (source-priming group) prior to providing prevalence estimates of crime and violence. That is, the instructions served to call attention to television as a source of information. Another group of people received no such instructions (the control group). The results were conclusive. When people did not receive a source prime, they exhibited the typical positive relation between level of television viewing and their estimates of the prevalence of crime and violence. However, the group of people who first received the source prime prior to making their prevalence judgments did not exhibit this effect. Thus, the priming of source characteristics eliminated the effect of television viewing on their judgments.[27]

CONSUMER RESEARCH 755-763 (1991); Thomas C. O'Guinn & L. J. Shrum, *The Role of Television in the Construction of Consumer Reality*, 24 J. Consumer Res. 278 (1997).

[26] Marcia K. Johnson *et al.*, *Source Monitoring*, 114 Psychol. Bull. 3 (1993).

[27] L. J. Shrum *et al.*, *The Effects of Television Consumption on Social Perceptions: The Use of Priming Procedures to Investigate Psychological Processes*, 24 J. Consumer Res. 447 (1998).

The basic premise of the heuristic processing model is that people often do not give a lot of thought to their judgments. Instead of thinking long and hard about a question, people may instead give a quick, "top of the head" answer. In particular, people may do this when judgments are difficult (devising judgments about the prevalence of societal crime or violence is one example). Also, some people may not be particularly worried about the accuracy of their answers, as there is no penalty or sanction for giving a poor answer (particularly under anonymous survey conditions). Both of these conditions have been shown to increase the likelihood of heuristic processing.[28]

Based on the heuristic model, people who *do* give a lot of thought to their answers (i.e., process systematically) should make judgments that are relatively unaffected by television viewing. There is empirical support for this proposition.[29] In an experiment that manipulated processing strategy, some people were induced to process heuristically by giving them instructions to answer spontaneously and "off the top of their head" (heuristic group) while a second group was encouraged to process systematically by telling them their answers would be graded, their score compared to the average person's score, and they would be expected to justify their answers to the experimenter after the study (systematic group). A third group received no manipulation (control group).

In this study, no differences were found between the heuristic and control groups. Both exhibited the typical positive relation between level of television viewing and the prevalence estimates. This suggests that under normal (control) conditions, people process heuristically, and this way of processing information can account for the effect of television viewing on judgments. Also, the effect of the systematic processing manipulation was to eliminate the influence of television viewing on the prevalence estimates. Thus, when people think more carefully about their judgments, the effect of television viewing is eliminated (in these controlled studies). This is a function of two aspects of systematic processing. First, when processing systematically, we retrieve *more* information, and are less swayed by the first examples that come to mind. Second, we also tend to more closely scrutinize the recalled information when processing systematically. This close scrutiny

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[28] Steven J. Sherman & Eric Corty, "Cognitive Heuristics," in Robert S. Wyer & Thomas K. Srull (eds.), HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL COGNITION 189 (1984).

[29] L. J. Shrum, "Processing Strategy Moderates the Cultivation Effect: Implications for Heuristic Processing and Source Discounting" (manuscript submitted for publication, 1997).

increases the likelihood that television information will be discounted and not used as a basis for judgment.[30]

Implications

The findings I have just discussed have important implications. First, they provide further evidence that television viewing does in fact affect social judgment. The development of an empirically validated psychological process model provides a much needed explanation for how the effects of television occur at the individual level. Second, understanding how television affects judgments suggests methods to diminish or eliminate the effect. One way is to get people to give more thought to their judgments, which should allow for the use of more veridical information, rather than using the (television) information that is the easiest to recall. Of course, this may almost always be desirable and is likely easier said than done. However, if people can be induced to give thought to the *types* of judgments that may logically be affected by television viewing, they may be able to discount television information and thus overcome the effects of television on their judgments.

This is in fact one of the purposes of media literacy programs. Students in media literacy programs learn the mechanics of media as well as the outputs. That is, they learn about the institutional requirements of media systems, how the systems operate, and what they hope to accomplish. They also learn about the inherent biases of the media, what information is over represented and what information is under represented. This education is intended to assist people in navigating through all of the information that media provide and making informed decisions about how to use this information. Such an education, at the very least, should serve the purpose of increasing the likelihood that television becomes a salient construct when particular judgments are required and thus increase the likelihood that nonveridical information obtained through the media can be discounted.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to explain the biases that exist in television portrayals, how such biases affect people's perceptions and judgments, and the cognitive psychology of these television effects on judgment. The results of the studies I have discussed and the model I

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[30] L. J. Shrum, *The Role of Source Confusion in Cultivation Effects May Depend on Processing Strategy: A Comment on Mares (1996)*, 24 Hum. Comm. Res. 349 (1997).

have developed from these results, suggest that the biases are the result
of what are actually very simple and common psychological processes.

Yet, even though the processes are simple, the consequences of these
processes are not trivial and can have important ramifications in
everyday interactions. For example, most people do not have much
direct experience with criminal trials, drug busts, or emergency surgery.
Consequently, their perceptions of what the lawyer, police officer, or
doctor does in the course of an average day is likely formed from media
portrayals. Thus, when lawyers, police officers, or doctors interact with
the public, these media-induced stereotypes may be apparent. Clients
may be puzzled that their lawyer is not as articulate or well-dressed as
those on *L. A. Law*, juries surprised that closing arguments last hours
or days rather than the two minute duration of those they have
witnessed on television, victims dismayed to find out that their cases go
unsolved, and patients alarmed to find that doctors do not have
solutions to their medical problems or that experimental treatments are
not readily available.

The influence of television is not, of course, confined to the
uninformed, and being affected by television is not necessarily a sign of
gullibility. I suspect that law professors notice the effects of television
portrayals of lawyers in their interactions with new students, practicing
lawyers notice these effects in newly graduated lawyers, and judges
notice such effects in practicing lawyers. Gerbner and Gross, in their
seminal article on the effects of television violence, illustrate this with
an anecdote involving an exchange between a judge and a lawyer in a
California courtroom. During an overly heated cross-examination of a
witness, the defense counsel jumped to his feet, shouting his objection,
"Your Honor, Prosecution is badgering the witness!!" The judge calmly
replied that he also had in fact seen that objection raised often on *Perry
Mason*, but unfortunately, such an objection was not included in the
California code.[31]

Television is our culture's most pervasive form of communication
and virtually no one escapes it. Television can be particularly
entertaining when we suspend disbelief, become engrossed in a plot, and
imagine ourselves in some adventure or drama. But this constant
stimulation and entertainment has its price. As we accumulate more
and more "experience" from television, we may begin to lose our ability
to distinguish real experiences from those we encounter with disbelief
suspended. When we fail to distinguish between fact and fiction, our

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[31] George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, 26 J.
Comm. 178 (1976).

judgment is impaired. It is only through a knowledge of television's effects on our cognitive reasoning and a concerted mental effort to combat them that our reality will be shaped by our own direct experiences and not the fantasies of Hollywood.