

Audience Behavior in the New Media Environment

by James G. Webster

“Two of the principal features of the new video media—the correlation of content with channels and the differential availability of those channels—produce a degree of audience polarization unprecedented in our experience with traditional forms of television.”

The audience's enormous appetite for programming is the foundation of television's economic success and an essential element in most theories of the medium's social impact. It is also the driving force behind the rapid growth of what we have come to call “new” video media. High-capacity cable systems, home video recorders, and a host of less prevalent technologies are claiming their share of viewers' attention and producing potentially important changes in patterns of audience behavior.

At the same time, however, many popular and influential theories of the media's impact on society are insensitive to the implications of the new video technologies. A basic tenet of these theories is that television presents a uniform system of messages available to, and viewed by, all members of society. While an assumption of simple and unvaried patterns of exposure may have been adequate to describe the audience's

James G. Webster is Associate Professor in the Department of Radio/Television/Film, and a Fellow of the Institute for Modern Communications, Northwestern University. The author thanks Arbitron Company for making the necessary data available.



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experience with “old” video media, it seems increasingly untenable in the face of new technologies.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of how new video media affect patterns of exposure to television and to explore how these changing patterns of consumption may be related to larger issues of the medium’s social impact. To accomplish these ends, the discussion begins by identifying the characteristics of “old” and “new” video media that, conceptually, distinguish the two audience environments. These characteristics are deliberately cast in extreme opposition along three dimensions so as to make plain the factors affecting audience behavior and their relevance to social theory. For purposes of definition, new media include all those video technologies that have the net effect of opening the distribution system to potentially unlimited channel capacities. As a practical matter, these are video recorders, cable television, and other high-capacity distribution networks. Conversely, old media are traditional broadcast television systems that use a relatively small number of channels to deliver content on a fixed timetable.

The programming of traditional broadcast television is widely characterized as uniform, uncorrelated with channels, and universally available.

One of the most prevalent characterizations of television is that its content is, for all intents and purposes, homogeneous. Programming, it has been argued, displays an excessive sameness that caters to socially

prevalent values and paints a uniform, if distorted, picture of social reality. Such representations of television are not only consistent with arguments made by critics who view the medium as an instrument of social control and class domination, but they are also commonplace in the work of many theorists inclined toward a more "liberal-pluralist" view of mass media.

Television's homogeneous quality is usually attributed to the fact that programming is conceived, produced, and broadcast in an effort to attract as many viewers as possible. Given this overriding concern with maximizing audiences, programmers are loath to present anything that might offend or alienate even a modest portion of the audience. Rather, they resort to formulas and themes that can be easily accepted by the broadest possible audience.

This characterization of U.S. media is hardly new. Klapper (19) noted that the argument was popular as early as the late 1940s and concluded that, despite occasional exceptions, "the economic character of commercial media in a free enterprise society is such that they appear destined forever to play to, and thus reinforce, socially prevalent attitudes" (p. 42). Nor has this line of reasoning lost much of its appeal in the intervening years. In fact, a number of contemporary analysts have used much the same logic to portray commercial television as a medium inexorably committed to the production of standardized, homogeneous programming (e.g., 3, 7, 23, 26).

If all television programmers are compelled to cater to the same mass audience, it is impossible, or at least imprudent, for one channel to offer content of a type that is systematically different from the channels with which it competes. In the U.S. context, this has meant that there is no significant difference in what a viewer can see on ABC, CBS, or NBC. Indeed, this condition is predicted by formal models of network behavior. Owen, Beebe, and Manning (28) have noted that such duplication of program content

occurs because there is a tendency for a decentralized system of broadcasting, with limited channel capacity, to produce rivalry for large blocks of the audience with programs that are, if not identical, at least close substitutes. There is a tendency, in our case, for the three networks to produce the same kind of programming (p. 101).

Making this assumption about the distribution of programming has allowed theorists to treat television as a single, undifferentiated medium. Nowhere is this strategy more evident than in the work of Gerbner and his colleagues, who have argued that "the 'world' of television is an organic system of stories and images" (7, p. 180). Even among researchers who may not adopt cultivation analysis as their theoretical framework, television, as a cause of social or psychological effects, is often "considered globally" (6, p. 164).

If television programming does not vary across channels, then, in principle, to own a set capable of receiving a signal is to have access to all the medium can offer. Throughout the United States and much of the industrialized world, television, by this definition, "penetrates every home in the land" (7, p. 175).

Represented as such a uniform, inescapable presence, the only relevant feature of audience behavior is how much of the medium is actually consumed. Descriptions of television's omnipresent quality, therefore, are quite often accompanied by statistical summaries of the enormous amount of time people spend watching (e.g., 9, 26). Once it is documented that exposure occurs in "massive doses," many social theorists are inclined to view other questions of audience behavior as trivial or irrelevant.

Rightly or wrongly, such characterizations of the medium and its audience allow television to be readily identified as the source of many significant social effects. Among these have been the medium's ability to promote social integration and cultural uniformity (26), cultivate political moderation (8) and distorted perceptions of social reality (7), facilitate a "spiral of silence" in the formation of public opinion (27; cf. 18), and, more generally, maintain a scheme of class stratification (23). Indeed, the assertion that television presents a homogeneous system of messages, so pervasive as to override mechanisms of selectivity, is at the heart of the arguments of powerful media effects.

The characteristics of television programming in the new media environment are that it is diverse and is correlated with channels, and that these channels are differentially available.

One of the most hotly contested attributes of new media is their ability to promote diversity. An important source of heat in that debate is that "diversity" means different things to different people (e.g., 10, 12, 17, 20, 37). To some, diversity means little more than increasing the number of choices a viewer has at any point in time. Certainly to the extent that technologies such as cable and video recorders increase people's access to the vast libraries of programming that already exist, there is a practical increase in the diversity of their options. What is less clear is whether changes in the structural features of the industry will contribute to the creation of newer and more diverse forms of expression.

Despite the arguments reviewed earlier, a good case can be made that the competitive character of television does not lead inevitably to the production of uniform program content (16). To be sure, the owners of media seek to maximize long-run profits, but the strategies for achieving that end may change as the competitive environment changes. In the case of advertiser-supported television, it has been a limitation in

the number of channels that has predetermined the strategy of audience maximization outlined above. Economic models of audience behavior, however, make it clear that this is not a necessary result if the number of channels, and hence competitors, is unconstrained (e.g., 28).

Virtually all new video media contribute in some way to an increase in the channel capacity of the delivery system. In the United States, the most important of these has been cable television. As recently as 1972, 69 percent of all households received eight or fewer television signals. In 1985, with the inclusion of cable, 84 percent of all homes received nine or more channels (25). With cable subscribers now constituting nearly half of all households and with the widespread adoption of video recorders imminent, the capacity of the delivery system is undergoing rapid and dramatic change. Nor is this structural change unique to U.S. media (22).

The availability of increased channel capacity does not, of course, guarantee that truly diverse programming will be produced in limitless quantities. Nevertheless, materials relatively differentiated from previous fare have already begun to appear on the new video media. Perhaps the most significant of these is programming that caters to ethnic and racial minorities. Wilson and Gutierrez (38) have gone so far as to argue that the growth of minority media foretells the end of "mass communication." Additionally, there is increased variety in news and information, sports, children's programming, religious programming, and, of course, entertainment. None of this differentiation would have been feasible under the old delivery system. How far it goes will depend on a complex interplay of factors including the attractiveness of audience subsets to advertisers (28), the range and intensity of viewer preferences (4, 28), the ability of viewers to pay directly for programming (29, 37), the cost of producing various program forms (4, 16), and structural and regulatory reforms (37).

As programming becomes more varied, new questions arise about how that content will be organized and delivered. One of the principal assumptions of both economic models of audience choice and "uses and gratifications" theory is that viewers have relatively consistent differential preferences for program types (34). Similarly, one of the principal strategies of television programmers is to retain audiences within a channel by scheduling a succession of programs with similar appeal (33). Both the theory and practice of managing audience flow, then, suggest organizing content by types into channels. This, in combination with institutional factors that make it more efficient for an organization to specialize in the acquisition and production of one type of programming (e.g., news, sports), should foster a correlation between channels and content.

A brief survey of how the new video media have begun to organize and market themselves confirms this expectation. The National Cable

Television Association has reported that there are 45 video services or networks being distributed to cable systems via satellite (24). These include services specializing in the arts, news, sports, movies, weather, public affairs, financial and business information, health information, Spanish-language programming, country music, rock music, Christian entertainment, black entertainment, family entertainment, children's entertainment, and "adult" entertainment.

Not all cable networks, of course, are designed to offer content of one specific type. Some channels, most notably the so-called "superstations," have opted for a strategy that mimics the broadcast networks. Further, even the more specialized services must introduce a degree of variation in their programming if they hope to retain audiences (33). Nevertheless, the tendency for most new channels to specialize in a type of content seems well established.

If the video recorder is conceptualized as a "channel" that is programmed by its owner, then its use is consistent with this characterization of new media. Levy and Fink (21), for example, have reported that video recorder users tend to specialize in a type of content. Assuming the user has access to a relatively diverse program library, the content of that channel will be of a type defined by the viewer's preference. In fact, such "viewer-defined" typologies are, theoretically, a very appealing way to establish program types (12, 28, 34).

The differential availability of the new video media's channels, which will make increasingly hollow the assumption of TV's universal availability, occurs as a result of technological, economic, and regulatory factors.

Consider the case of cable television. The economics of cabling are such that it is unprofitable to wire areas that are sparsely populated. Even if the potential subscribers could pay the going rate for service, there are too few of them to enable the cable company to recover the costs of constructing the distribution system. Barring direct government subsidies or a kind of utility regulation that allows cross-subsidization, people in these areas will have to resort to extraordinary means to gain access to the channels available to cable subscribers.

Even in areas that are cabled, the differential availability of channels is, at least in the short term, a fact of life. Cable systems have varying channel capacities and may therefore be unable to carry all the cable networks that viewers desire. Systems with no practical limit in capacity often "bundle" channels into levels or tiers, making classes of channels available only for a premium (37). Finally, of course, households that are passed by a cable may, for reasons of cost or preference, simply decline to subscribe.

While alternative delivery systems, like satellite reception dishes, multipoint distribution systems, and home video recorders, do not

exhibit the same limiting factors as cable, they carry their own technical limitations and impose their own sets of costs. It appears, then, that the net effect of all these technologies will be to make channels, and the kinds of content they carry, differentially available to the public.

Far from producing the homogeneous, inescapable environment that characterized broadcast television, the new video media seem capable of recreating what we think of as television in a different form. It is reasonable to expect that increasingly diverse programming will be offered via the television set, that much of this material will be organized into channels specializing in relatively narrow forms of content, and that each channel will be available to some but not all members of the public. Further, this evolution does not assume changes in the motivations of media owners or their audiences. Quite the contrary, change occurs because profit makers still want profits, and viewers still want to satisfy a seemingly insatiable appetite for programming.

The most widely anticipated (and now well-documented) change in audience behavior as a response to the new media environment is that the mass audience has become increasingly fragmented.

It is well established that local stations and the major broadcast networks have generally lower audience shares in households that subscribe to cable services (e.g., 1, 32). In the aggregate, those lost shares appear to spread themselves widely across the various options available on cable systems. While less information on the impact of video recorders is available, they too almost certainly will contribute to the fragmentation of the TV audience.

What is less clear is how intensively the audience, or some subset of the audience, will use each of the channels that becomes available. If, for example, a cable service achieves a five percent share of the total audience, does that mean that all viewers spend about five percent of their time watching the service or, alternatively, that some small minority devotes a larger portion of its time in attendance to the channel while others never watch?

Barwise and Ehrenberg (4) have reported that, with the exception of religious and minority-language broadcasters, over-the-air stations with small shares have relatively few viewers who watch relatively little of the station's programming. Indeed, marketing researchers have developed various "laws" of audience behavior that document only modest levels of channel loyalty to traditional broadcast services (e.g., 4, 11, 14).

Heeter and Greenberg (15), on the other hand, have reported that cable subscribers typically develop a "repertoire" of channels in which only a small portion of the available services is used. This finding, widely confirmed by the ratings services, suggests that in a multichannel

environment viewers may systematically avoid large numbers of channels and by default become relatively heavy users of those in their repertoires. In the aggregate, then, new media audiences could move to the extremes of use and non-use, or polarize.

Two characteristics of new video media would seem to facilitate this particular feature of audience behavior. The first is the tendency of channels to specialize in a type of content. The very reason for such a scheme of organization is to attract and hold fans of a particular genre. In that sense, doing what is necessary to cultivate a degree of channel loyalty is the very purpose of the programmers. The second factor is the differential availability of channels across the audience. For reasons cited earlier, substantial segments of the audience will simply not have access to, and will therefore not use, certain channels. This may have little to do with their program preferences but would nonetheless produce a kind of *de facto* polarization. Even modest levels of audience polarization could, in turn, have substantial implications for arguments that television has powerful effects. Given that these arguments assume universal and nonselective exposure, television use might vary in amount but not in kind. The characteristics of new video media raise the possibility that exposure may now vary in kind as well.

This analysis begins an examination of how the new video media may or may not contribute to the polarization of the television audience. More precisely stated, it asks to what extent are the audiences of old and new video media channels polarized? Further, once the differential availability of channels is taken into account, do channels with relatively specialized types of content, in fact, attract audience subsets who use them more intensively than the general public?

The research reported here is based on a secondary analysis of television diary data from one market area in the southwestern United States.

These data were collected in February of 1982 by the Arbitron Company which, as part of its syndicated ratings research service, placed diaries in a probability sample of market area households. Diary keepers were instructed to record the television program choices of every member of the household, two and older, for a period of one week. Additionally, diary keepers were asked to report what, if any, cable system they subscribed to. Diaries from four samples collected in four consecutive weeks were combined to produce the local market ratings report. In this ratings period, Arbitron received usable diaries from 50.1 percent of the households that were identified in the original sample. The viewing behaviors of a total of 1,765 persons were contained in those diaries (see 2).

This particular market, or Area of Dominant Influence (ADI), was selected for three reasons. First, it had a typical complement of local

broadcast stations: three network affiliates, one public station, and one independent. Second, the independent was a Spanish-language station. Such stations and their audiences have been the subject of special scholarly interest (4, 13). This also afforded an opportunity to examine patterns of use for an important kind of specialist programming that was, in this case, broadcast to the entire market population. Third, this market had a very large cable system serving the area. Unlike many analyses where audience subsets labeled "cable subscribers" or "broadcast viewers" have access to an unknown variety and number of channels here it was possible to identify a reasonably large subsample of individuals, all of whom subscribed to a single 40-channel system. It was therefore possible to know with an unusual degree of precision what channels were available to these individuals.

The results are presented as weekly summaries of channel usage across three audience groups. The first audience group included the entire market sample ($n = 1,765$). Channel use across the whole sample represented a typical distribution of aggregated viewing behavior where the differential availability of channels had its full effect. The second group was subscribers to the 40-channel cable system ($n = 364$). Among this subset, specific channels were known to be available, though they were not necessarily used. The third group was, for each channel, all individuals who actually viewed the channel for at least 15 minutes in the course of a week. For each channel the sample size varied and could contain any individual, including subscribers to other cable systems, who used (and therefore had access to) the channel.

Channel use was expressed either as audience shares or as the ratio of audience shares between two audience groups. For each channel within each group, audience shares were determined by dividing the total number of audience hours spent watching the channel by the total number of hours spent watching all television. As is standard practice in the industry, these numbers were expressed as percentages. Share ratios compared each channel's share among those who used the channel, first to all viewers, then to the cable system viewers. These ratios were intended to serve as a rough index of how each channel's audience departed from the norm, when differential channel availability was present and controlled for, respectively. The larger the ratio, the greater the indication that the channel's audience was polarized.

It should be noted at the outset that these data almost certainly underestimate the current state of cable channel usage. First, these data were collected in early 1982. Many cable services had just begun operation (the oldest being HBO, which began satellite distribution in December of 1975). Second, diary keepers are known to underreport the amount of time they spend watching cable services (5, 35). However, to the extent that biases existed, they operated in a conservative direction, diminishing the likelihood that significant patterns of cable channel

usage would be found. Until data that are more timely and sensitive to the individual's use of cable channels become available to academic researchers, such diary reports of viewing are the best means of examining patterns of channel usage.

Table 1 presents the results of the analysis. To facilitate interpretation of the findings, channels were placed in one of two categories. They were judged to be either relatively uncorrelated with content (e.g., CBS, ABC, NBC, etc.) or relatively correlated with content (e.g., news channel, sports channel, etc.). The business of segregating channels in this way is admittedly imprecise. Generally, the channels identified as offering a broad range of content were the broadcast networks or the imported superstations. The channels identified as offering a narrow range of content were generally cable networks or, as in the case of the Spanish-language station, services that in many areas would be available only on cable. Certainly, there is room to debate the category in which a cable movie channel or public television belongs.

The first column reports the audience share of each channel across the entire sample. This included 1,025 people (58 percent) who did not subscribe to cable and 740 (42 percent) who did, a breakdown that closely approximates the current national level of cable penetration. The second column reports the distribution of channel shares among the 364 subscribers to the 40-channel cable system. As would be expected, the audience shares of local stations are somewhat lower among the cable subscribers. For example, the CBS affiliate achieved a 29.5 share across all viewers but only a 21.8 share among cable subscribers.

The third column reports the share that each channel achieved among those who used it. The CBS affiliate was actually viewed by 86 percent ($n = 1,513$) of the sample. Among those viewers, the station achieved a 31.6 share, only modestly greater than its total market share. For the Spanish-language station, however, the pattern of use was quite different. It was used by just 15 percent ($n = 266$) of all viewers, but among those who did view, it commanded 37.6 percent of all the time they spent watching television. That exceeds, by roughly six times, its share of 6.3 across all viewers. In other words, its overall market share masked the fact that the audience of the Spanish-language station comprised a small group of relatively heavy users. This is precisely the kind of polarization we might expect.

Such comparisons of a channel's share among users to its share among all viewers are made systematically in the fifth column. For the major broadcast networks, audience shares among users are virtually the same as total market shares. Such ratios range from 1.07 to 1.13. Among broadcast stations with more specialized content (Spanish-language and public stations), ratios are higher, 5.97 and 4.56, respectively. Among the cable services, ratios ranged from 4.10 to 47.00, meaning that the actual

Table 1: Comparison of channel shares among audience groups

Channel	Channel shares			Share ratios	
	Among all viewers (n = 1765) %	Among viewers with access ^b (n = 364) %	Among channel users only % . n	Channel users to all viewers	Channel users to those with access
<u>Channels relatively uncorrelated with content</u>					
CBS affiliate ^a	29.5	21.8	31.6 1513	1.07	1.45
ABC affiliate ^a	27.2	25.9	29.6 1485	1.09	1.14
NBC affiliate ^a	19.3	12.4	21.9 1403	1.13	1.77
Superstation 1	3.0	4.4	12.3 334	4.10	2.80
Superstation 2	2.0	6.3	11.0 257	5.50	1.75
Superstation 3	.9	2.2	5.8 138	6.44	2.64
Movie channel	3.5	9.8	18.8 303	5.37	1.92
<u>Channels relatively correlated with content</u>					
Spanish station ^a	6.3	4.3	37.6 266	5.97	8.74
Public station ^a	1.6	1.1	7.3 344	4.56	6.64
Sports channel	.4	.6	8.0 50	20.00	13.33
News channel	.3	.5	7.6 34	25.33	15.20
Music video channel	.3	1.2	14.1 40	47.00	11.75
Christian channel	.2	—	8.5 21	42.50	—

Note: Columns do not total 100 percent because of unidentified viewing and the use of channels whose audiences were too small to report.

^a These channels were broadcast in the market.

^b All viewers in this subset subscribed to a single 40-channel cable system that afforded them access to all the above channels except the Christian channel.

audiences of these services devoted a far greater share of their time viewing than did the audience generally.

In the case of cable services, however, high ratios might be attributable to the fact that nonsubscribers were simply unable to receive those channels, that whatever polarization was evident was simply *de facto* in nature. The question is, how would these channel audiences look when compared across a sample of viewers who were known to have access to the channels?

The far right-hand column makes such comparisons. The ratios of all broadcast stations were slightly higher here, owing to the fact that cable subscribers spent a smaller share of their time watching over-the-air television than did viewers generally. The distinction between the broadcast networks and the more specialized stations, however, still held up.

More interesting was the pattern that emerged for cable services. When the impact of differentially available channels was controlled, channels that were relatively uncorrelated with content were seen to have ratios that were much the same as those of the broadcast networks. There was a modest tendency for the audiences of all these channels to use them more intensively than the general public but probably no more so than would be predicted under an ordinary expectation of channel loyalty (11). Channels that had specialized programming, however, continued to exhibit ratios consistent with an expectation of audience polarization attributable to content. The users of music video, sports, and news channels devoted from 12 to 15 times more attention to those services than did the larger cable audience.

Although their overall market shares were small, channels offering more specialized programming content seemed to be a substantial item in the television diets of those who viewed them.

The patterns of audience behavior reported for the major broadcast networks are much the same as those found by Barwise and Ehrenberg (4). These stations reached most viewers in the market, and there was little indication that they attracted only a devoted subset of the mass audience. Such results are consistent with the networks' universal availability and their practice of offering a broad menu of program content. When the effects of differential availability were controlled, the superstations, too, showed only a slightly greater tendency to attract an audience of loyal viewers. It would appear that, as long as channel availability is taken into account, these more traditional program services fall nicely within the models of audience behavior previously developed by marketing researchers (e.g., 4, 11, 30).

Channels that offered more specialized program content, however, exhibited quite different patterns of audience use. The most striking

example was Spanish-language programming, but other services such as music video, news, and sports achieved appreciable shares among their audiences. In fact, other studies suggest that music video services, in particular, consume even more of their viewers' time than is suggested by the present data (e.g., 31).

Two of the principal features of the new video media—the correlation of content with channels and the differential availability of those channels—produce a degree of audience polarization unprecedented in our experience with traditional forms of television. To be sure, the broadcast networks still command the lion's share of the mass audience and will undoubtedly do so for a very long time to come. Nor is it likely that any one channel will attract an "addicted" minority that watches it and nothing else. Even viewers of the Spanish-language station spent the majority of their time with English-language programming. Nevertheless, the audience's experience with television is changing.

The larger question, of course, is whether these changes should cause us to re-examine our thinking about the role of television in society. I believe they should. As the proponents of cultivation analysis have themselves noted, "A range of 3% to 15% margins . . . in a large and otherwise stable field often signals a landslide, a market takeover, or an epidemic, and it certainly tips the scale of any closely balanced choice or decision" (9). The televised images consumed across our pluralistic society are becoming increasingly disparate. We need not witness specialization in television programming comparable to that of other media before expanding our models of media influence to accommodate changed circumstances.

As a modest beginning, theorists should recognize that viewers are, as never before, in a position to construct media environments that may be quite different from those of their neighbors. What determines these differences should be the subject of considerably more scholarly attention than is currently the case. Nor will the range of explanatory variables typical of selective exposure and gratifications research be sufficient. Structural factors in choice making are an increasingly powerful determinant of exposure, with which these research traditions have little experience (cf. 15, 22, 34, 36). Understanding the new video media and its audience will require the insights of a great many disciplines.

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