
Reminiscences

The "reminiscences" that follow are the results of a request directed to some of the conference participants to reflect on the issues discussed in the small group meetings. These comments were provided over a two-month period following the conference and have been edited only for matters of consistency. The reminiscences, therefore, are filtered through the memory screens of the participants and may reflect the issues that are salient in the participant's own research. However, that is precisely what this section of the report is designed to communicate—the first person singular, up close, and personal view of the issues in the conflicted field of children and television.

On Form and Content

Aletha C. Huston

Formal features describe the "medium" of television, just as water colors or oils are the media of a work of art. Although form and content are both integral parts of the "whole" of a television production, it is valuable and even necessary to separate them in order to understand their independent effects. Experimental or artificial separation is particularly important when variables are correlated in the real world. For example, violent content and high action are highly correlated in children's programs. Only by making them orthogonal to each other can the independent and interactive effects of each on attention or behavior be assessed. Ultimately, form and content must be reunited in order to understand television as it is experienced by the viewer, but such understanding will be informed by analyses of small pieces of the form and content pie.

Television form has several functions. First, the data from several laboratories are fairly consistent in showing that certain formal features attract

or maintain children's attention. The reasons why are less certain. Immediate perceptual salience sometimes produces a simple orienting response, but salience alone probably does not play a major long-term role in children's attention and interest in television programs. Yet, children attend to cartoons at least partly because of the forms. My best guess about why is that they have learned to associate cartoon forms with humor, especially visual sight gags, and with content designed for children. While this may sound like an argument for the primacy of content, it is not. This appears to be one instance in which the whole package composed of form and content must be considered.

Second, formal features are the syntax of television. As the medium has evolved, it has gradually developed a grammatical structure in which various forms convey structural messages. Cuts from one scene to another typically signify a minor shift; dissolves signify more major changes in time or place. An instant replay is a form that is familiar to most adult viewers, but Mabel Rice's work demonstrates that it takes several years of a child's life before that form is understood.

In specific programs or genres, the experienced viewer learns that particular forms signal certain characters or content themes. In the programs produced by Children's Television Workshop (CTW), "recurrent formats" are used intentionally to build and elicit sets, expectancies, or schemas. For example, the Count always counts; the "Which Thing Is Not Like the Other" song always signals classification and sorting problems. Because television is a medium in which most viewing, particularly for children, involves program series that are repeated and familiar, this accumulation of schemas based on form cues is an important part of the literate viewer's repertoire. One of the most neglected facts about children's television experience is the repetition and redundancy of the programs and program series viewed.

Third, formal features convey connotative meaning. Quite often, forms are used to enhance content or to add meaning. Our work on sex-typed forms is one example. Children's knowledge about the connotations of forms is for the most part implicit rather than explicit. It can be elicited with carefully designed techniques, but child viewers (and adults for that matter) probably do not consciously think about the fact that soft music is a form with feminine connotations. They probably do use such knowledge, however, to make judgments about the type of content they are viewing. We are now investigating their implicit knowledge of the forms connoting fictional vs. real content.

Forms may be particularly important for conveying affective connotations. I originally became interested in formal features partly as a result of my investigations of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. This distinctive ambience of that program created by the forms is probably one major reason for its effects on helping, task persistence, and other prosocial behaviors. However, the evidence for behavioral effects of form is weak. I do not subscribe to the view that Mister Rogers-type forms are the only ones that can be used for beneficial

purposes for young children. The more lively production techniques used in *Sesame Street* and other CTW production have demonstrated utility for teaching children.

Fourth, formal features can be used to supplant or model cognitive skills such as visual analysis, perspective taking, and conservation, as demonstrated in Salomon's work and in our laboratory. Children recall central content better when it is presented with high action than with low action levels, perhaps because visually portrayed action is a model which children can encode readily.

In summary, the cognitive and social impact of television for children is a function of both form and content. Recent attention to the forms of television has corrected some of the imbalance created by the almost exclusive focus on content that characterized earlier research. Form does not exist in isolation, but it is nevertheless worthwhile to examine its effects independently from content. The goal of such research should not be to settle arguments about whether form or content is more important, but with understanding how they work in concert with one another.

Laurene Krasny Brown

The discussion of "form and content" we had at the conference provokes me to offer the following observations:

First, the grammar of verbal language may change more slowly than producers are changing the grammar of television. To the extent that this is so, it argues for a level of formal analysis of television grammar one step more generic than transient production techniques. For example, while discontinuity in program time and space implies editing, and may qualify at the more generic level, the specific means used to create this discontinuity continue to vary.

Also, we use a grammar (e.g., for verbal and written language) before we know that we know it. This is a real problem for measurement. For example, we have found children using sound effects, tone of voice, and music as cues for meaning—such as when hearing wind and waves informs kids about a story's setting—but without being aware that they have this knowledge (unless they are probed about it).

Testing for positive knowledge and application of formal features to comprehension of TV messages needs careful handling; otherwise we may too quickly assume lack of knowledge which is actually operating implicitly.

Next, on the business of whether or not to separate form and content: My own feeling about this is to live with them apart for research purposes. For example, it seems very useful to compare alternative formal features used to deliver comparable content (e.g., which kind of voice-over, camera angle, special visual effect, number of cuts, etc.) and examine what children attend to, remember, or whatever.

participants. Few were prepared themselves to deal with the conceptual complexities of cognitive processing. Perhaps that is why the discussion degenerated into a consideration of video games, with the rationale that "social information" includes everything that can be presented via a video screen.

I suspect that a more basic problem is that social information processing is too "psychological" (their characterization, not mine) an issue to be of interest to many television researchers. I became more convinced than ever at this meeting that the most influential social-science antecedents of media research are sociological in nature. Thus, the media as institutions and the social context of their use remain salient issues in the thinking of most television researchers. While these are important, the unfortunate outcome seems to be that psychological processes, studied at the level of the individual, are viewed as less important. Indeed, in one of my conversations during the meeting, I was told that studies of psychological processing in viewing, especially those that pursue the details of psychological responses, are relatively unimportant to communication research, because additional increments of knowledge at that level are rarely applicable to production or to the study of social impact.

It seems to me that this view of what can appropriately be accomplished within communication research not only limits the potential for advances in our field, but also makes less likely a true intellectual exchange among scholars interested in a diversity of perspectives on the complex phenomena associated with television and children. In effect, it leaves the research area dominated by television, to the exclusion of children.

In my own view, nothing less than a joint consideration of television and children, with equal attention to both parts, is likely to be interesting and informative. Nevertheless, this identity crisis, which is classic in the history of social sciences, presents a major problem at present. I wish the level of discourse at the conference could have dealt more with this general issue.

Aletha C. Huston

We spent a fair amount of time talking about how children come to understand reality and various forms of unreality. It was generally agreed that elementary-school-age children begin to define reality on TV by what they know of the physical impossibilities in the world. That is, something is real if it is physically possible and unreal if not. So people who fly, who have superhuman strength, etc., are not real. A little later (the exact age range seems to depend on the method of inquiry) children evaluate the reality of TV portrayals according to their plausibility or similarity to people in real life. They consider TV programs or characters as "real" if they are like people in real life. By this time (late elementary or early adolescence) children are well aware that fictional dramas and the like are not literally events that are happening in the real world.

Some of the discussion centered around what dimensions of "reality" might be important to a young viewer. Someone suggested, for instance, that the relevance of the similarity of the TV character or situation to that of the viewer might be more important than the literal reality of the portrayal. For example, a child might know that a documentary about Saudi Arabia is real, but the lives shown would be less relevant to the viewer than a fictional drama about American teenagers such as *One Day at a Time*. It seems clear that such fictional portrayals are important sources of social knowledge for many early and late adolescents as well as for younger children.

We asked whether social information is processed any differently than other kinds of information. I'm not sure whether we reached any conclusions, but I have given it some thought since then, and I think it is different. One reason is that social information is often affectively tinged. Affective involvement probably influences comprehension and learning in rather important ways. Second, social information is probably usually encoded in schematic rather than categorical forms (a la Mandler). Kids have a whole variety of schemas about the actions and characteristics of other people that surely influence heavily their perceptions of social information on TV. We discussed, for example, the influence of sex stereotypes on children's comprehension and recall of TV portrayals of sex-stereotypic and nonstereotypic behavior. Several studies were discussed, including some by Andy Collins, which showed that stereotypic actions were more readily recalled than nonstereotypic actions, and that this tendency is greater for children with strong sex stereotypes than for those with weaker stereotypes.

Other individual differences were discussed briefly. One person suggested that the child's degree of identification with a character was an important determinant of learning. She cited a study by Fernie showing that kids perceived more internal traits for characters that they either liked or disliked than for those they felt neutral about (related to the point about affect above). Another individual difference variable suggested was the child's imaginativeness. But, again, our main interest was on the ways children come to understand reality and the various forms of unreality in processing social information from television.