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ABSTRACT

Television is ubiquitous--it is seemingly everywhere at once. With its presence felt in nearly every United States household, how it may impact family interaction is worthy of scholarly study. This literature review spans nearly a half-century of television and family communication. The research suggests that television has negative, positive, and neutral effects on family communication, but no particular effect seems to dominate. (Contains 39 references.) (Author/RS)

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Television and its Impact on Family Communication: A Literature Review for the Family Communication Educator

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Abstract

Television is ubiquitous—it is seemingly everywhere at once. With its presence felt in nearly every U.S. household, how it may impact family interaction is worthy of scholarly study. This literature review spans nearly a half-century of television and family communication. The research suggests that television has negative, positive, and neutral effects on family communication, but no particular effect seems to dominate.

Television and its Impact on Family Communication

The presence of television in American households is undeniable. Families immediately embraced the medium since its introduction in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Numbers tell part of the story. In 1955, there were as many TV sets in households as telephones, and each household spent about five hours a day watching limited program offerings (Coffin, 1955).

Nearly 50 years later, household consumption of television's myriad program choices jumped to more than seven hours daily. By 2000, 98% of all homes were equipped with at least one TV set and nearly 70% of households subscribed to cable. How much do we rely on television? Where Americans find information is one measure; for better or worse 69% of Americans chose television as their first source of news (Broadcasting & Cable, 2001).

Critics charge that television is an "irresistible narcotic technology" (Tichi, 1991, p. 90). While it may not be the addictive drug detractors fear, Kubey (1990) confirms, not surprisingly, that children and their parents spend considerable time in front of TV sets. Married couples with children were more likely to watch television than single adults and childless adults.

According to Lawrence and Wozniak (1989), children watch an average of 2 1/2 hours of television everyday; much of their viewing does not take place with parents. As a measure of how television has crept into the family social fabric, Bryce (1987) found that several parents, when asked to describe a typical day, focused on problems associated with television without prompting from the interviewer.

The implications of copious hours spent with television prompted the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to study behavior associated with television viewing. In the early 1980s, the NIMH claimed that families spent about half their waking hours glued to TV sets. The government report (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982) cautions that "television has influenced family behavior, even if only bringing members together in front of the set" (p. 69). This may have a positive or negative effect.

Clearly, as DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) conclude, the mass media carry a weighty role within the family having "penetrated our society to its institutional core" (p. 124). And if Katz and Foulkes (1962) are correct—the media may affect the home social environment—further examination of television, a powerful mass medium, and family interaction is in order.

This review will examine television and household social relations: specifically, television's impact on family communication. We provide an overview of literature and suggestions for future research. We define family as two or more people related by marriage, birth, or adoption and who reside in the same household; thus, this review does not examine literature related to the influence of television and single or same sex couples. The first section examines the limited findings uncovered in television's earliest years. Next, we focus on parent-child communication and television in later studies. Finally, the potential impact of TV and communication found in familial couples.

Literature Review—Early Findings

Scholars have examined TV and family communication for more than 50 years (Alexander, 2001; Austin, 1993; Austin, Roberts & Nass, 1990; Brody, Stoneman &

Sanders, 1980; Bryce, 1987; Christopher, Fabes, & Wilson, 1989; Coffin, 1955; Friedson, 1953; Gantz, 2001; Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Kubey, 1990; Lawrence & Wozniak, 1989; Lin & Atkin, 1989; Maccoby, 1951; McDonald, 1986; McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, & Fallis, 1982; Riley, Cantwell & Ruttiger, 1949; Rosenblatt & Cunningham, 1976; St. Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright & Eakins, 1991). McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, and Fallis (1982), who reviewed three decades of media research, argued that family studies were largely confined to the group level (i.e., the entire family). By the early 1980s, few studies bothered to examine television's effect on family life from an interpersonal angle (i.e., dyads). They suggested that further study draw on television's impact of between parent-child and sibling to sibling.

Early research produced mixed findings, and generally ignores the type of conversation television may or may not trigger. Rather, television is cast merely as a limited or meaningful social agent in family settings. Rutgers University teamed with the CBS television network to examine TV's social effects. Riley et al. (1949) concluded, perhaps to no one's surprise, that television brought the family together creating "a bridge between adults and children . . ." (p. 232). The findings did not describe the type or degree of social interaction. Maccoby (1951) conducted some of the earliest qualitative social research in her interviews with more than 200 mothers of school age children. Television brought families together for a shared experience, she concluded; however, TV stifled interaction among parents and children.

Friedson (1953) interviewed dozens of elementary school students for their impressions of media and social contact. Television, as opposed to a solo medium such

as print, spurred social (i.e., physical) contact in families. More than half of family contacts occurred through the experience of watching television. Study limitations failed to reveal whether television initiated or stifled conversation. A review of literature in the mid-1950s revealed much of the same: television was indeed a social catalyst in the home; however, it had more of a passive socializing impact in that it resulted in limited family interaction (Coffin, 1955). In general, early research was inconclusive as to the impact of television and family communication. The literature lacks a clear focus as to what was communicated among family members regardless of whether the communication was positive (e.g., "why do did the police officer arrest that man?") or negative (e.g., "turn off the television and be quiet!"). Theoretical underpinnings are absent from the literature, too.

Television and Communication—Parents and Children

Moving into the home to study familial interaction presents unique challenges to communication research. McLeod, Fitzpatrick, Glynn, and Fallis (1982) note the difficulties encountered when research enters the privacy of the home. Controlled conditions normally found in laboratory settings (e.g., television shows viewed by participants in a "lab," who complete questionnaires) may be lacking in homes. And cooperation among parents is difficult to achieve when researchers move into the home environment.

Among the more ambitious projects taken into the home, Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers (1972) used cameras to record the body language and utterances of families parked

in front of television sets—in their homes.* The cameras observed families acting out nearly 40 behaviors, which were divided into six categories: (a) participation (e.g., talking to the set or others regarding television content); (b) passively watching (i.e., no other activity); (c) simultaneous activity (e.g., eating); (d) positioned to watch but instead engaged in other activities (e.g., talking to other family members); (e) in the viewing area but not directly looking at the TV; (f) not in the room. The most consistent behaviors were talking and eating. The same year, Robinson (1972) observed that television has mixed social benefits. While television seemed to discourage family conversation, television nevertheless fulfilled the social function of bringing parents and children together.

Fiske (1987) says television must work harder to keep viewer attention focused on the screen. Television competes with viewers who talk, eat, and read all the while purporting they "watch" television. Alexander (2001) says gratifications, the basis of uses and gratifications theory, are met during television viewing as families engage in numerous activities. Children and adults create "interactive sequences" (Alexander, 2001, p. 276) in which families discuss television content or engage in other conversation.

As television had become a greater part of life, families began investing in more than one set. Of 55 households surveyed in the late 1980s, the number of TV sets ranged from 1 to 7, with a median of 2 sets per home. At least a quarter of the homes had three

* Twenty families from the greater Kansas City area participated. Half of the respondents in a questionnaire reported camera presence influenced them in some manner.

or more sets (Christopher et al., 1989). Parents who allowed one TV set in the home exercised greater control over their children's viewing preferences compared to parents in homes with multiple sets. Families with multiple sets (two or more) "spent significantly more time watching television and had spouses who also spent significantly more time watching television" (Christopher, et al., 1989, p. 213). This suggests greater interaction among families to determine household viewing patterns.

In his generational study of television viewing in the home, McDonald (1986) contends television is not usually a solo activity, but rather it is likely to be carried out among individuals who are like-minded. Peer coviewing (e.g., child-child) is the most common household television social setting. If so, such viewing would seem to lead to fewer opportunities for interaction among parents and children. The results suggest families have communicated strong rituals regarding television use:

> This indicates households may have rules or at least habits affecting who watches what on which set, and that these rules may change at different times of day with different age compositions of the household audience. (McDonald, 1986, p. 84)

Besides multiple sets in households, increasing numbers of cable channels meant more choices for family members in the 1980s. Such variety did not lead to an increase in multiple sets. Sparkes (1983) argued that viewing remained largely a family activity. Isolation of family members, with fewer chances to communicate, may be overstated in other earlier studies that examined socialization and homes with multiple sets. In addition, Kubey (1990) disagrees with the conclusion of the National Association of Mental Health (NIMH): families remain isolated when viewing television. Kubey finds

that talking coincided with 21% of all primary and secondary television viewing occasions occurring with the family. He further suggests that "television viewing harmonizes well with family life" (Kubey, 1990, p. 320). Television coviewing produced a heightened social experience as opposed to solo television viewing.

In a 1982 report the NIMH conceded that television did produce pro-social effects. For example, children and adults use television to build positive social behavior through "helpfulness, cooperation, friendliness, and imaginative play especially if adults help them [children] grasp the material or reinforce the program content" (National Association of Mental Health, 1982, p. 90).

Interviews with mothers in the late 1980s found that family viewing hovers near 20 minutes a day. Most coviewing by children occurred with other children (i.e., 40 minutes) rather than parents. Lawrence and Wozniak (1989) assert that the family as a whole rarely watches television together. When watching with a parent the father was most likely to engage in coviewing with a child. Lawrence and Wozniak (1989) suggest "additional research is needed to continue documenting the verbal interactions that occur among family members while viewing television . . ." (p. 399). Conversation patterns between offspring and fathers who watch television together may be significant. Stoneman and Brody (1981) found that fathers were less inclined to make utterances in triadic family situations, but more inclined to speak in dyadic family groupings.

Program type and age may influence coviewing opportunities. St. Peters et al. (1991) suggest coviewing among parents and children reaches its lowest levels in children who are 3 to 7 years old; parents are present only a quarter of the time when

children watch television targeted to kids. When young children watch general programs parent-child coviewing rises slightly. The findings suggest opportunities for parent-child interaction is limited. The type of television program may create greater parent-child interaction.

The highly acclaimed "Sesame Street," aimed at small children, fostered greater communication among children up to 30 months old and their parents. "Television was an opportunity for viewers to practice newly acquired words and to interact with parents" (Lemish, 1987, p. 42). But television may create conflicts between parents and children. Bryce (1987) contends that television that brings one family together may test a mother's "willingness to engage in conflict with her children" (p. 137).

Parent and child viewing implications make up much of the research on family communication and television. Christopher et al. (1989) assert that one important social force in contemporary family life is television" (p. 210). Their study focused on the impact of family discussions about television and examined their interrelationships to see how families use television. For example, parents who organize their children's television viewing feel that their families spend more time discussing what they had watched. In addition, Collins, Sobol, and Westby (1981) claim that communication between parent and child during television usage is important for clear child understanding of programming. Children who watched programming without parental influence were likely to misunderstand motives and consequences leading to potentially aggressive modeling. Finally, family communication seems to enhance real world perceptions of television programs. Austin, Roberts, and Nass (1990) studied 627

children and 486 of their parents. Family communication about television was found to be fundamental in helping children grasp what they watch on television.

Parental gender seems to play a role in family communication and television. Brody et al. (1980) found that mothers had very little behavioral difference between television viewing and family play. On the other hand, fathers oriented toward their children and spouses less, talked less and made fewer positive facial expressions during television viewing than family play. These experiments were conducted in a living room setting with ten minutes of television viewing and ten minutes of family play. While the amount of talking during television viewing decreased, the amount of touching, a non-verbal activity, increased. Further research on non-verbal forms of family interaction during television coviewing might uncover interesting results.

Some research argues that families need to talk more about the media (e.g., television). Austin (1993) cautions parents that "a lack of emphasis on challenging ideas dampens discussion" (p. 152). Empirical data supports theorists' views that parental mediation is an effective way to positively influence children's interpretations of television. Austin, Bolls, Fujioka, and Engelbertson (1999) find that coviewing can exist without concurrent discussion. In fact, it is more likely to create positive mediation that reinforces television content.

Mediation has emerged as a hot topic among communication researchers who study television's impact on family conversation. Corder-Bolz and O'Bryant (1978) support the idea of parent mediated viewing for children to increase the learning capabilities of youngsters. They found that learning was enhanced when mother and

child watched "Sesame Street" together and discussed its contents. Interpretive comments by parents toward children (while watching television) were found to increase retention of information within the programming. They also found a correlation between parental intervention and the number of positive attitudes formed by the child. This strongly suggests a positive relationship between family communication and TV viewing.

Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam and Colimore (1985) studied the extent to which family communication mediated children's comprehension of television. They attempted to determine the link between family communication and processes of comprehension beyond a child's verbal intelligence. For example, does family communication between parent and child during the act of coviewing increase youngsters' knowledge? The results suggested comprehension was linked with parental mediation styles (i.e., communication) regarding television. The researchers found that " positive communication between mother and child, and a pattern of explanation of television content by parents are associated with children who gain knowledge from a television plot" Desmond et al. (1985, p. 476). Despite this claim there is a note of caution: positive communication does not automatically enhance the learning process. Demographics and socio-patterns play an enormous role in how individual families engage in discourse.

Direct adult intervention through communication with children who watch television seems to yield positive communication results. Collins, Sobol, and Westby (1981) used second graders to identify the effects of facilitating commentary between children and adults watching television. They found that children that heard facilitating commentary from an adult while watching television scored significantly better than

those children that simply heard neutral comments. This further spurs the notion of positive family communication while watching television: children had better understanding and learned from television program content. Christopher et al. (1989) concurs. Regulation of television viewing and family discussion create an atmosphere in which both are "positively related to family expression" (p. 212).

The literature on parent-child communication and television suggests that solo television viewing is rare in families. Coviewing is the norm creating more opportunities for family interaction, but the communication does not appear to spread evenly through families. Most television coviewing is confined to peer groups: children watch with children and parents view TV with parents. Children who watch TV with parents and talk about television appear to have a better grasp of the program material.

Television and Family Communication—Couples and the Socio Groups Concept

A few studies have focused on the communication gulf that divides some husbands and wives in their television viewing. Hobson (1980) formulated masculine (e.g., news; documentaries) and feminine (e.g., soap operas) categories of television viewing. For example, wives reported leaving the room when news programming was broadcast.

Gantz (2001) used qualitative interviews and focus groups, which provided a rich understanding of marital conflicts and resolutions associated with home television viewing. While couples tended to accommodate (i.e., "give in" to the other) the other's preferences (e.g., observing silence; watching the other's program choice) while coviewing, television did not serve as a particular enhancement to positive family

communication. Couples occasionally used television to distance themselves from disagreements, and on nearly two instances each week, one spouse stifled the conversation attempts of other spouse during television coviewing; thus, television itself occasionally served as the locus of interaction between wives and husbands:

> (Wife): I think he watches too much television. He says he doesn't but to me it's a psychological crutch for him to function through the house. . . . But, a lot of times the argument is really that he's watching TV and not really doing something I want him to do. (Gantz, 2001, p. 294)

Another wife complained that family communication ceased when the husband watched television:

> My husband wouldn't even allow the kids to walk in front of the TV when they had to go to the bathroom. Its "You go over there and sit down and don't walk in front of the TV again." It really dominated our life once he got in and turned the TV on. We lived differently before he got home. (Gantz, 2001, p. 300)

Kubey (1990) supports this claim in that "many people feel that they have to compete with television shows and television celebrities for the attention of other members of their family" (p. 321).

Families may use television to purposely limit unwelcome communication. According to Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976), television is often used to prevent tense interaction among family members; however, the results suggested tension increased with higher amounts of TV viewing. One suggested reason for increased tension was the noise television creates in the house; thus, competing with other non-

television related activities (e.g. doing homework, sleeping, writing letters). The best independent variable used to measure tension was simply the total amount of time television sets were on in the home. This is a significant tie in with cultivation theory, which focuses on time spent viewing. The notion of tension based on television usage is significant in that tension caused by television seems to discourage positive family communication.

Windahl, Hojerback, and Hedinsson (1986) studied the 1980 Swedish television strike and media deprivation. The findings suggested that no additional time was spent in family communication despite the lack of television. In fact, respondents simply immersed themselves in other forms of media and activities such as listening to tapes and records, going out with friends, and listening to the radio.

Lull (1980) studied socio-oriented families (e.g. parents strongly encouraged their children to get along well with other family members) and concept-oriented families (e.g. parents who stimulate their children to express ideas and challenge beliefs). These two groups interacted with television differently. Socio-oriented families watched more television, and used the programming as a social interaction tool. The socio families admitted that "television is useful to them for interpersonal objectives which range from structuring their activities and talk patterns to uses of the medium for more complex relational purposes" (Lull, 1980, p. 329-330). On the other hand, television in concept-oriented homes had very little influence on social interaction.

Literature on couples and communication, much of it void of theoretical underpinnings, suggests that television might hinder conversation. In addition, lack of

television during a lengthy period in which TV programming was limited did not seem to spur conversation, which suggests TV might not hinder family communication as much as critics would like to believe. Finally, socio-oriented groups used TV to spur conversation while parents who promote greater independent thought in children did not find TV as a useful conversation starter.

Discussion

For nearly fifty years research has tracked the potential impact of television and family co communication. From decades of studies, three patterns emerged: (a) lack of communication theory underpinnings; (b) inconsistent findings; (c) content vs. context. In addition to discussing these patterns, we will suggest future research opportunities.

Theory is noticeably in short supply in nearly all the studies examined here. Theory provides a significant research tool. Lindlof, (1995) claims theory serves as the foundation of explanation for social situations under study. Out of dozens of journal articles and scholarly books that examine family communication and television, only one study by Alexander (2001) linked theory to findings.

Perhaps one answer to this equation is the lack of research by communication scholars. Other disciplines—sociology, psychology, and family development—seem to account for much research. We suggest two communication theories that would fuel family interaction and television research within a communication perspective: cultivation and uses and gratifications.

Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1970) measures the amounts of time people spend watching television. Television consumers are categorized into light, medium, and heavy

viewers. According to cultivation theory, the result of watching a "heavy" amount of television will result in what Gerbner called the mean world syndrome in which people have false perceptions of the world around them. In addition, cultivation supporters believe that television has taken the place of "storyteller" in the home.

These two concepts (i.e., mean world syndrome and storyteller) can be used to study family communication and television. Austin (1993) suggests that watching and talking about television as a family increases so-called communication warmth, which would seem to positively or negatively impact the mean world syndrome. Christopher et al. (1989) noted the impact of multiple televisions in the home; therefore, television's impact as a storyteller increases and time spent communicating as a family presumably decreases.

Uses and gratifications theory seems useful in family communication and television research, as well. Applied to the electronic media, such as television, uses and gratifications attempts to understand how audiences (i.e., families, in this case) seek out and use media (i.e., television) to satisfy personal wants and needs (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Uses and gratifications is a potential starting gate for the study of TV's impact on family interaction. For example, is television used to gratify a personal need of immersion or is TV used to satisfy a social gratification (i.e., conversation). Previous uses and gratifications studies (Herzog, 1944) provide fertile ground for guidance in today's research. In the early 1960s, Katz and Foulkes (1962) hinted at uses and gratification when they suggested media research should focus on what "people do with

the media" (p. 379). Taking it further, positive communication (i.e., a gratification) may be a byproduct as families interact with the media (i.e., what people do with television).

In addition to a dearth of grounded communication theory in the literature, the findings, over time, were rather inconsistent. A majority of the literature takes a negative or neutral view of television's potential impact on family communication; positive effects of families interacting through television are limited. For example, Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976) claim that greater consumption of TV translates to heightened tension in the home; however, Kubey (1990) suggests that watching television together produces harmony in the family. Similar inconsistent threads were noted throughout the literature. Several researchers pointed to ambiguous findings. Christopher et al. (1989) conclude "one important social force in contemporary family life is television" (p. 210), but go no further.

Many researchers focused on the context of family communication in their respective studies, but did a less than adequate job of examining the communication content. Many studies used the term mediation as a substitute for content. For example, Corder-Bolz and O'Bryant (1978) showed that learning in children increased when mother and child watched and discussed a television program. To gain a greater understanding of TV's potential impact on families we suggest further research into three specific areas: (a) what television shows families watch; (b) when families watch television, (c) what families say (i.e., specific communication content) to one another. Specifically, we suggest that the content of family communication—the heart of further inquiry—is understudied. It is important for the communication discipline to formulate

research and theory equal and greater to that of other disciplines interested in family communication and television. Grantz (2001) used a qualitative approach to examine family communication and television. A rich understanding of family perceptions emerged. We suggest that further qualitative inquiry would uncover similar research rewards.

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