Selective Exposure to Communication

Edited by
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SELECTIVE EXPOSURE
TO COMMUNICATION
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Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant

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BEVILLE • Audience Ratings: Radio, Television, and Cable
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SELECTIVE EXPOSURE TO COMMUNICATION

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Research into what is usually referred to as "mass communication" has concentrated on the societal impact of the media. The ways in which these media influence people and affect their behavior have been at issue. For the most part, undesirable effects were pondered and documented. Only a few desirable effects received similar attention and scrutiny. The research preoccupation with impact has been so pronounced that, comparatively speaking, next to no attention has been paid to questions such as why people enjoy whatever they elect to watch or hear, and more fundamentally, why they elect to watch or hear it, in the first place, whatever it is that they elect to watch or hear.

The commercial media institutions have in all probability collected a considerable amount of data in grappling with these "money questions." But the findings are, for the most part, not available to the academic community, and it is doubtful whether they would appreciably contribute to a general understanding of the principles that govern exposure behavior. Basic research on these questions seems to have been hampered by a number of factors, but mainly by academic prejudice. First and foremost, empirical-minded investigators have been most reluctant to tackle an issue as "frivolous" as entertainment. The news and persuasion of any kind were bona fide research topics. Research on the appeal of drama, sitcoms, soaps, and sporting events apparently lacked a sufficient degree of dignity. The fact that those in the humanities who generated proposals pertaining to the enjoyment of entertainment often failed to articulate them in such a way that they could be subjected to empirical verification—whereas specific, testable hypotheses were advanced in persuasion research—did not help matters. Additionally, techniques to study impact and even selective exposure to informative messages were fully developed, but procedures to deal
with selective-exposure behavior in the realm of entertainment were not. Whatever it may have been in particular that hampered progress in research, eventually it became clear that the so-called mass media are primarily entertainment media (despite much wishful thinking to the contrary) and that it is dignified and important, if not imperative, to explore and comprehend the "hows" and "whys" of the consumption of mass media entertainment.

Research on the selection of informative and entertaining messages for consumption has been done eclectically by various investigators at various institutions. Although considerable progress has been achieved by different parties, these parties had little, if any, contact with one another, and their efforts have never been integrated. To our knowledge, there has never been a symposium on research into selective exposure to informative and entertaining messages. Nor has there ever been a publication that brought together the recent research in this area. This volume was put together in an effort to end this dilemma and to put selective-exposure research on the map as a significant research venture.

We have been most fortunate in attaining the collaboration of investigators who have made notable contributions to the study of selective-exposure phenomena. Their work spans a great variety of manifestations of selective-exposure behavior and approaches to studying it. The fact that the contributors are about evenly divided between psychology and communication departments, and that some have dual affiliations, attests to the interdisciplinary character of theory and research in this emerging domain of inquiry. The various contributions are introduced at the end of chapter 1. This opening chapter serves as a general introduction to selective-exposure research for the noninitiated reader.

We are most grateful to all contributors for making this volume possible. We are grateful, too, to our graduate students who helped in one capacity or another in putting things together. Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to our spouses and children for granting all that time for unmitigated selective exposure to the tasks at hand.

Dolf Zillmann
Jennings Bryant
At any moment, an enormity of stimuli impinges on the living organism. The organism neither is equipped to handle this stimulus onslaught, nor would it be meaningful in terms of self- and species-preservation to accomplish such a task. Survival, it seems, is well served by the neglect of most potential information. Or to put it more positively, survival is well served by a selective reduction of information, that is, a reduction to behaviorally significant cues to which the organism can respond in an adaptive fashion.

The selection of information is controlled, first of all, by the build of the organism—specifically, the build of the sensory organs. Potential information (i.e., any physical process) that fails to stimulate these organs is obviously immaterial to the behavior of the organism. However, the "physical" reception of information by no means guarantees that the information is of any behavioral consequence. The organism focuses its perceptual efforts in unique ways, and it tends to utilize its limited capacity for processing received information in particular ways also. Focusing attention implies, of course, that not all available information can be given equal attention and that some information might not receive any attention. Focusing, then, implies selection. And as not all perceived information can be processed (i.e., behaviorally utilized or stored for later retrieval and behavioral utilization), processing also entails selection. But whereas sensory selection is fixed with the build of the organism, perceptual focus and selective processing are behavioral processes that are characterized by considerable plasticity. Although many of these selective processes are automatic and mechanical, many others are under volitional control and deliberate.

The various processes under consideration are perhaps best illustrated by considering early humans. Cave dwellers, for instance, were probably often
surrounded by signals from numerous animals. They were ill equipped for visual perception in dim light and in the dark, and they missed out on much of the barely audible and inaudible vocalizations of creatures such as bats. They were equipped, however, to respond quickly to sudden noises produced in their immediate vicinity and to vivid peripherally received visual events. The automatic reaction was one of spatial adjustment for the purpose of attaining superior perceptual control of the sources of information. This reaction is known as the orienting response, and its obvious survival value lies in the creation of a readiness for fight and flight. The reflexive adjustment was likely to be followed by selective attention, such as to a threatening animal’s teeth and claws rather than its tail and fur condition. The processing of an encounter of this sort was then equally “idiosyncratic.” Generally speaking, whatever made the biggest impression (e.g., the pain from a bite and all the cues associated with that experience) was likely to be focused on in rehearsal and memory. This, of course, is just another way of saying that some happenings received disproportionate, selective attention in rehearsal and memory. The selective commission of perceived events to memory—at the expense of many other simultaneously occurring events of less significance—ultimately gave impetus to paying attention deliberately: An animal that was recognized as dangerous, for instance, had to be tracked perceptually in preparation for fight or flight. The survival value of such attentional behavior is again quite obvious. Needless to say, perceptual tracking is not specific to fight-flight reactions. It applies to all essentials in life, such as the attainment of food, shelter, and mate.

What, in this illustration, could and should be considered selective exposure? Not the sensory constitution of the organism with its implications for selective access to the physical world. Not the transitory checking out of an event as a result of orienting and defensive responses. Not the reflexively controlled focusing on certain events in the sensory field that characterizes selective attention. And not the screening for salient elements in the processing of the percepts that is usually referred to as rehearsal or selective rehearsal, nor the implications thereof for selective recall. Selective exposure, instead, designates behavior that is deliberately performed to attain and sustain perceptual control of particular stimulus events.

According to this definition, selective exposure subsumes anything from closely watching a poisonous snake in the grass, following the flight of a bumblebee, listening to a birdcall, watching the road and other cars as we travel down the highway, reading the newspaper, listening to records in solitude or while keeping an eye on the children, and watching television intently or while doing the dishes.

Selective exposure can be accomplished with little effort, or it may require great energy expenditure. Reading a book, for instance, is comparatively non-strenuous physically. Watching a car race from the pits, in contrast, demands rapid head and body adjustments that can be strenuous. Differences in energy
1. SELECTIVE-EXPOSURE PHENOMENA

expenditure in the service of the act of perception per se might be considered
tivial, however, when compared with expenditures engendered in the attainment
and maintenance of perceptual control that relies on locomotor pursuit. Watching
one’s children play baseball in the backyard, for instance, is selective exposure
that might require stepping out of the house. Going to Shea Stadium to see the
Mets play calls for a somewhat greater effort. Visiting Europe is more effortful
yet, despite the fact that most of the movement necessary is accomplished while
sitting in a cushioned seat. However, such energy expenditure reduces to insigni-
ficance when one compares it to self-powered locomotion to places and events
to which exposure is sought. Hunting deer in the mountains, for instance, entails
selective exposure that is highly energy consuming.

These rather obvious considerations of energy expenditure associated with the
attainment and maintenance of selective exposure prepare us for a look at the
cultural evolution of such exposure. Like other animals, humans were at first
limited to selective exposure by self-powered locomotion. Irrespective of
motives for exposure, persons could elect to pursue perceptually what was hap-
pening ‘here and now.’ To the extent that this was possible, they could walk,
swim, ride, or paddle to places where events occurred to which they sought
exposure. They could also forgo direct exposure and content themselves with
verbal accounts of these events or with poor iconic representations (e.g., draw-
ings of athletic events). Only rather recently has it become technically and
economically feasible for large numbers of people to ship their bodies with
reasonable speed to the places to which they seek exposure. Almost all Ameri-
cans now can see the Grand Canyon in person, and uncounted Japanese can
enjoy direct exposure to Salzburg and Mozart’s home. In principle, people move
themselves and are being moved to locales of interest, so that they can see, hear,
touch, smell, and taste the events to which they seek unmitigated perceptual
access; and technology has greatly facilitated this process. At the same time,
however, technology has accomplished the reverse as well: It has found ways to
move events of interest to the people. Specifically, technology has provided
means to represent physical events visually and auditorily (or audio-visually)
with great fidelity, to store these representations, and to revive them at any later
time. And whereas little progress has been made in the iconic conservation and
manipulation over time of tactile and olfactory stimuli, audio-visual representa-
tion often exhibits ‘hyperfidelity’ by furnishing visual and auditory access to
events that goes beyond the capabilities of the unarmed eye and ear. Through
screen and speaker, then, the world at large can be audio-visually accessed.
Selective exposure to potentially all existing audio-visual environments can be
accomplished with the flick of a dial or the push of a button.

Selective exposure to an ever increasing number of environments has become
low-energy armchair behavior. By pushing hand-held remote controls, any
number of events can be accessed; and access can just as readily be abandoned in
favor of exposure to other events. Television viewers can effortlessly jump from
exposure to news events in China to a soccer match in Italy, and from a nature film about Norwegian reindeer to a domestic comedy show or dramatic street violence. Whatever tickles their fancy, for whatever reason, may be consumed—and abandoned upon a moment's dissatisfaction. The selection of particular programs may be thought out and planned. But it may also be spontaneous and rather mindless, even mechanically determined. And as viewers might go back and forth between programs in efforts to catch most of the significant events in two or more, so can they alternate exposure to representations on the screen and their immediate environment. Selective exposure, then, need not be construed as a continual, uninterrupted effort at sustaining perceptual control. Especially if a particular set of events is information-poor such that perceptual control can be maintained with intermittent attention, exposure is likely to be divided between two or more environmental settings. Someone cooking a meal, for instance, might well be able to keep an eye on pots and pans while peeking in on the news. And a child may watch Mister Rogers and, in a dull moment, continue to play with her toys—only to look back at the set when the trolley bell rings for the trip to the Land of Make Believe. It seems that visual attention to the screen is often unnecessary for exposure to occur, as continued auditory attention suffices for message comprehension and also cues the necessary return of visual attention.

Notwithstanding these complications, the choice situations for selective exposure to television are quite clear. The elementary choice is between no exposure and exposure. The characteristic choice presupposes this elementary decision and is among a finite number of available offerings (i.e., broadcasts and programs off cable, disk, tape, etc.). Although it is assumed that these choices are made for the purpose of attaining and sustaining perceptual control of the selected programs, exposure cannot be expected to be complete. Visual and auditory attention are likely to be drawn away from the represented events. This nonattention, usually the result of happenings in the immediate environment, can be visual, auditory, or both; and it can be momentary or extensive. A mother, for instance, might be inclined to watch her favorite soap, but be forced to attend to her child for much of the time. Her selective exposure obviously will have alternated between show and child. She exposed herself to both sets of events. This may have been in succession. But it is also conceivable that her auditory attention, unlike her visual attention, was never critically disrupted. The answer to questions such as "Was she selectively exposed to the entire program?" can only be arbitrary. Selective exposure in mixed or multiple media consumption leads to similarly indefinite assessments. How is exposure that fluctuates between a simultaneously consumed radio concert and a sitcom on television or between various athletic contests on different monitors to be apportioned? The simplest empirical approach appears to lie in determining the time periods during which behavioral efforts at attaining and sustaining perceptual control of particular representations were immediately evident to an observer.
However, for all practical purposes, the discussed difficulties in deciding on what was and what was not selective exposure to a particular program or program segment can be circumvented by determining whether or not exposure to the program or the segment was intended and/or was the primary perceptual activity during the time course of the program or segment. Such conceptualization accommodates esoteric practices of mixed and multiple media consumption. But more important, it handles the characteristic exposure condition: one set, with one person in charge of selecting programs, one at a time—granted distractions and social influences on the choice.

The fact that the new communication technology allows the manipulation of audio-visual environments with enormous ease and provides an abundance of program choices at all times undoubtedly will have significant behavioral and social effects. Some effects are obtrusive. The sheer amount of television viewing in whatever form (i.e., broadcasts, off cable, disk, tape, etc.) attests that exposure to the environments presented on the monitor is more engaging and presumably more enjoyable than many alternative, immediate environments. There are few social circumstances and emotional conditions that are consistently preferred over the environments on the screen. The television environment outshines and outglamours the common home, and the actions it entails outdo the daily dread by a wide margin. At a most basal level, once the monitor runs and fills the home with flashes of color and brightness, with rapid motion, and with drastic sound-level changes, it is difficult to resist paying attention to it. The active television screen is, so to speak, the last thing in the house to which its inhabitant will perceptually habituate.

The stimulus wealth of television, sometimes referred to as rapid-fire exposition, has been met with some concern. However, the great issues of social concern have been content related. The ubiquity of violent crime in drama, in particular, has been thought to promote crime and violence in society as well as a fear of becoming a victim of crime or violence. In so-called effects research, an enormous number of investigations have probed this issue and its ramifications. The determination of ill effects of exposure to whatever is abundantly present in media fare has altogether dominated mass communication research. Why people enjoy whatever they enjoy and why they seek exposure to whatever they seek exposure to are questions that have been met with surprising indifference. This is not to say that enjoyment of entertaining television fare has received no attention at all. Nor is it to deny that meticulous counts of exactly who consumes what how often and so forth have been compiled routinely, along with the answers to some questions as to why viewers liked this and not that. It is to say, however, that compared to effects research the study of why people elect to consume some messages and not others has been greatly neglected. Selective-exposure research has been scarce, sporadic, and eclectic. It is this volume's mission to correct this situation by bringing together the widely dispersed, conceptually and meth-
odologically diverse approaches to the phenomenon of selective exposure, and it is hoped that such integration and focusing will highlight the phenomenon and its significance and stimulate exploratory interest.

The issues for selective-exposure research are manifold. What stable selective tendencies, or message-consumption preferences, or tastes as traits exist in what kind of person? How and why were they formed? What is their fate, and how can they be altered? What consequence have moods and emotions for message selection? What about states of general excitedness and states of boredom and fatigue? What are the implications for message selection of holding particular beliefs and convictions? Why do some people take a strong interest in public-affairs information, whereas others resort to fiction? Why do some people turn to comedy, others to serious drama? Why to comedy or drama under particular circumstances? What attracts some to tragedy? Why do some yearn for horror movies and others, or the same people at different times, for musicals? What is it about sports that draws people to the screen? And what is it that makes people go fishing and turn their backs to the screen, at least temporarily?

The common element in all these questions is the following dependent variable: the effect on message selection for consumption. Not the effect of the consumption of selected messages; nor, as in conventional media-effects research, the effect of the consumption of messages that, for the most part, were selected by a party other than the consumer.

Such conceptual focus is not only epistemologically warranted in that it promotes the exploration of choice behavior regarding message consumption, but it also leads to and, in fact, demands reinterpretations and qualifications of much media-effects research. In experimental research, as a rule, exposure to messages is forced. Subjects are randomly assigned to consumption conditions, and the effect of specific assignments is ascertained relative to that of others. This procedure is appropriate as long as it can be assumed that all messages whose effects on a variable of interest are being compared are at least once in a while, by choice and under similar circumstances, consumed by the respondents. Such an assumption is often untenable, however; and if so, qualifications need be placed on any findings. Let us assume, for instance, that it has been demonstrated that exposure to situation comedy reduces the anger and aggressive behavior of angry people. Can it be concluded from this that, given the preponderance of such programs on television, situation comedy helps to curb anger and aggression in society? Not with confidence, as it is conceivable that in acute anger most persons would refrain from exposing themselves to laughter and merriment. Comedy might be consumed mainly in states other than anger, and consumers thus would not attain a potential benefit of exposure to comedy. Consequently, it could be contended that comedy alleviates much anger only if it had been demonstrated that: (a) angry persons' exposure to these materials has an anger-reducing impact and (b) angry persons seek or, at least, do not avoid
exposure to comedy. Similarly, if it had been demonstrated that exposure to erotica alleviates feelings of depression, it would still have to be shown that depressed persons are drawn to consuming erotica before it could be contended that erotica curb depression under conditions in which consumption is left to the consumers (i.e., they are free, in their particular state, to consume whatever they feel like consuming).

It should be clear that the argument here is not that exposure effects tend to be determined on subjects who, when free to do as they please, would never elect to expose themselves to the materials in question. Studying the effects on enjoyment of replay frequency in boxing telecasts, for instance, with subjects who are professedly opposed to boxing and would definitely not watch such programs obviously has little ecological validity, and the generalization of any effects to avid boxing fans is inadvisable and reckless. It is not such missampling of subjects and the resulting unwarranted conclusions about exposure effects on a population of interest that is at issue, but the possibility that exposure to communication is situation- and disposition-specific. It is this possibility that compromises the generalization of many exposure effects. This volume presents a considerable amount of evidence showing that the possibility is more than just that: It is a fact for selective-exposure behavior generally, and future effects research will have to face up to these complicating circumstances.

The selective-exposure conceptualization not only complicates the interpretation of numerous experimental findings, but also troubles much correlational work that seeks to support directional hypotheses. Although such efforts confront insurmountable methodological problems, they are commonly made—perhaps in hopes that they will supplement and complement approaches that are technically more compelling and thus help generate a consistent and coherent effects pattern. The directional or “effects” hypothesis that is often deemed supported by correlational data is, of course, the proposal that exposure to particular messages has specific effects on behavior. Irrespective of the possibility that a relationship between exposure and behavior might be the result of extrinsic factors, the directional hypothesis usually can be reversed: Instead of exposure causing behavior, behavioral conditions might cause selective exposure. Selective exposure, then, frequently offers an alternative to the effects hypothesis.

To illustrate this, let us assume that a positive correlation had been observed between the amount of crime-drama consumption and fear of victimization. The effects hypothesis projects that exposure fosters fear, and the findings would be consistent with this projection. But the correlation is equally consistent with the selective-exposure hypothesis projecting the opposite: namely, that fear, for some specifiable reason, makes crime drama attractive and fosters exposure. Similarly, a positive relationship between horror-movie attendance and morbid interests does not secure that the movies created such interests. It is equally possible that these interests lead to attendance. There is no assurance, however,
that either the effects hypothesis or the selective-exposure hypothesis provides a better account of the relationship than other factors, which might also have an influence on the related ones.

The selective-exposure approach is thus likely to modify and complement much of the impact research as well as promote more careful and specific interpretations of research findings. But this is only part of the story. The explanation of selective-exposure phenomena is, as stated earlier, important in its own right; and the new communication technology, as it affords an abundance of choices to the message consumer, is bound to produce significant social issues.

On the positive side, consumers will be able to pick from a wealth of informative and entertaining programs. They will be able to satisfy their curiosities about uncounted topics. And they will be able to select materials that best entertain them and therefore best serve to restore their energies for productive action. On the negative side, one might fear overexposure to trivia and an "addiction" to entertainment as "instant gratification." Concerns have been voiced already, and legitimately so. For instance, televised educational efforts seem to require more and more embellishments in order to hold the attention of viewers. This is especially true of programs for children, many of which have become bang-bang presentations that carry far more material to entertain and amuse than to teach. The justification for such programming style is that, were the fireworks and jokes absent, the children would turn to competing (i.e., simultaneously available) programs and then not be exposed to educational information at all. The fact that, before too long, children will be able to skip over undesirable parts of a program in a fast-preview fashion (as with tape and disk) would further complicate matters and is a nightmare for many educators.

The outlook seems equally bleak for informational efforts concerning adults. What, for instance, will happen when news programs compete against abundant entertainment options such as comedy, drama, and sports? Is it unreasonable to expect that large segments of the population will turn to these gratifications rather than resist them for good citizenship? Those who many years ago projected political apathy to grow from massive entertainment consumption get a second chance for being right when the forthcoming abundance of choice will manifest itself. If three national networks and public television plus an independent station or two could not produce sufficient "narcotizing dysfunction," the new communication technology just might manage to drive political apathy to a breaking point for democratic society. But concerns such as these perhaps will prove exaggerated and groundless, and the abundance of choice will amount to an abundance of fireworks turned drab—that is, to a flood of similarly unattractive choices.

Issues like these need not be matters of grand speculation, however. Selective-exposure research has developed techniques to explore all conceivable choice situations and thus is capable of projecting what is likely to happen when particular choices are or become available. The clarification of the big and not-
so-big issues is now in the researchers’ hands and depends, for the most part, on their ingenuity and persistence.

Turning from what is to be done to what has been done already, this volume comprises a first comprehensive review of past and present theory and research in selective exposure. This chapter was written to introduce the reader who is unfamiliar with selective-exposure research to the phenomenon as such and to its significance. In chapter 2, John L. Cotton discusses the theory of cognitive dissonance and its application to selective exposure. He reviews the considerable body of research that this theory has generated. Until recently, this pioneering research constituted about all the research that was conducted on selective-exposure phenomena. James G. Webster and Jacob Wakshlag, in chapter 3, detail and critically analyze the old and the new, the simplistic and the sophisticated techniques that have been and are being used to measure exposure and selective exposure, especially to television. Chapter 4, by Charles K. Atkin, reviews the research that has been conducted to explore the motives for the consumption of entertaining messages in the perception of the consumers. In contrast to the earlier, narrow focus on persuasion and dissonance reduction as a benefit of exposure, this research projects a multitude of reasons for exposure to a variety of messages. The concentration on more inclusive motivational concepts such as informational utility and gratification led the way in opening up the study of selective exposure to the main course of the mass media—namely, entertainment. In chapter 5, Barrie Gunter further explores consumption choices. His analysis is more strongly focussed on behavior, however. Instead of probing the consumers’ perceptions of their own motives, he seeks to infer these motives, especially persisting ones, from assessments of their actual choices. It is undoubtedly useful and important to ascertain people’s accounting of why they do what they do. Inferences from the assessment of actual consumption behavior that varies as a function of known message variables are generally considered more compelling, however, as they bypass the distortions that are commonly associated with self-perception and self-reports. Allan Fenigstein and Ronald G. Heyduk continue the behavioral analysis of media exposure in chapter 6. They highlight experimental technique in the study of selective exposure in determining the implications of specific cognitive and behavioral states for the consumption of entertaining messages that feature violent action. Dolf Zillmann and Jacob Wakshlag, in chapter 7, report on similar experimental investigations. However, these investigations address the controversial relationship between exposure to the preponderance of crime in television drama and fear of criminal victimization. The research that is reported seeks to establish that this relationship, in part, is a selective-exposure phenomenon. In chapter 8, Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant deal with the implications of mood states for message choice. Mainly on the basis of experimental investigations, a case is made for the “emotional utility” of the consumption of particular entertaining messages. Jacob Wakshlag examines exposure to educational television in chap-
ter 9. He reports the scarce experimental research in this field of inquiry. In chapter 10, Carrie Heeter and Bradley Greenberg take a look at program selections in cable television, which offers an abundance of choice. They concentrate on the emergence of choice patterns under these conditions and relate these patterns to choice models capable of coping with this new wealth in program access. Finally, in chapter 11, Percy H. Tannenbaum tackles what is easily the most neglected phenomenon in selective exposure: repeated exposure to the same offerings. Repeated exposure is obvious for all purely auditory media. For the visual and audio-visual media, in contrast, it has gone virtually unnoticed, and neither theoretical nor empirical minds have paid much attention to it.

The chapters, taken together, hopefully will remedy the neglect of selective-exposure phenomena and accomplish an awakening of theoretical curiosity about and research interest into the seeking of exposure to novel, informative, and/or entertaining messages from any kind of communication medium.
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"PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM": REPEATED EXPOSURE TO TELEVISION PROGRAMS


Determinants of Television Viewing Preferences

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This chapter examines survey and experimental evidence for selective exposure to and preferences for television programming. This evidence is both behavioral and attitudinal, and it relates viewing behaviors and program preferences to a variety of psychological characteristics of viewers including personality factors, values, and beliefs. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section examines behavioral evidence for selectivity of viewing based on television diaries and meter measures of what people watch. This research has been conducted with large representative national and regional samples in the United Kingdom, and it ties in with recent American work on selective exposure to television, which has also used behavioral measures of viewing (Gensch & Raganathan, 1980; Headen, Klompmaker, & Rust, 1979; Wakshlag, Agostino, Terry, Driscoll, & Ramsey, 1983). The second section reports survey evidence from the United Kingdom in which respondents' beliefs and personality characteristics have been related to diary measures of television viewing. This work has attempted to uncover links between the psychological makeup of individuals and what they choose to watch on television. The third section reports findings collected from smaller groups of people in experimental settings in which they have provided evaluative judgments about different kinds of program materials shown to them during the study. Measures of personality, values, and beliefs were related to program evaluations and preferences to indicate relationships between program appreciation or nonappreciation and psychological traits of individuals.
Although overshadowed for a long time by concern over the medium’s effects on public attitudes, values, and behavior, the question of how people use television has been of interest to broadcasters and advertisers for many years. With the recent unprecedented expansion of television channels and the fragmentation of the mass audience consequent upon the rapid growth in quantity and variety of available programming, more emphasis has been placed on the need to understand the nature and antecedents of television viewing patterns and program preferences. A fundamental question concerning viewing patterns is whether people watch television selectively, and if so, which criteria are the major determinants of the way they watch.

Some researchers, concerned with identifying patterns of television viewing behavior, have reported strong support for the belief that television programs form clusters or patterns of viewership (Banks, 1967; Kirsch & Banks, 1967; Swanson, 1967; Wells, 1969). Typically, program categories have been generated empirically via factor analyses of viewers' evaluative ratings of programs. However, some writers have argued that these typologies may be neither universal (but unique to the sample from which program judgments were obtained) nor stable over time with the same population (Gandy, 1982). As viewers’ interests and the content of network schedules change over time, so one could expect the factor structures of tastes and program types to vary as well.

Pioneering explorations of viewing behavior patterns by Goodhardt and Ehrenberg have indicated that program type is largely unrelated to the way audiences flow over television schedules (Goodhardt, Ehrenberg, & Collins, 1975). Based on observation of audience overlaps for each of thousands of pairs of programs, Goodhardt et al. (1975) proposed a “duplication of viewing law.” According to this law, the major influence on the level of audience overlap between two programs is usually the rating level or audience size for each program. The law states: “The proportion of the audience of any TV programme who watch another programme on another day of the same week is directly proportional to the rating of the latter programme (i.e., equal to it times a certain constant)” (p. 11).

Although a program’s type is undoubtedly related to the size of the audience it attracts, it does not have much influence on the degree to which its viewers watch any other program. Goodhardt, Ehrenberg, Collins (1975) claim that audience overlap for two or more programs can be effectively predicted by the duplication of viewing law and that such predictions are not dependent on information about the particular program or type of program an audience is watching.

More important determinants of viewing patterns than program type are “inheritance” and “channel loyalty.” Consecutive or near consecutive programs on the same evening share their audience to an above average extent, but this audience inheritance does not extend to programs further apart. Furthermore,
overlap scores for pairs of programs on the same channel tend to be somewhat larger than for those on different channels. However, there are no special duplication patterns for programs of any particular type, such as action-adventure, soap opera, comedy, sports, or news. According to the audience-flow analyses of Goodhardt and Ehrenberg, different programs of the same type do not appeal especially to the same viewers. One serious problem that this model of viewing behavior poses for broadcasters is that weekly episodes of a television series do not appear to attract a substantial core of loyal viewers who follow the series through.

The Goodhardt–Ehrenberg thesis has not gone unchallenged, however, and other researchers using both similar and alternative measures of viewing behavior have reported findings indicative of selective viewing by programs or program types. Headen et al. (1979), for example, found important differences in audience flow between the United States and the United Kingdom, including an apparent preference in the U.S. for specific program types. United States audiences showed considerable variation in duplication for programs of the same type across different program categories. Average duplication levels varied from 34% for comedy shows to 61% for serial dramas. Even more recently, the Goodhardt–Ehrenberg group has begun to modify its original position to interpret differential levels of duplication across different programs as weak evidence for program loyalty, following another study of viewing patterns among United States audiences. Although only about half the people viewing a program one day were found to view it again on another day, this was largely because they were not viewing television at all on the second occasion, rather than because they were watching a different program. Once a decision to watch had been reached, viewers were highly likely to view the same program they watched last time (Barwise, Ehrenberg, & Goodhardt, 1982).

Published evidence of selective TV viewing by program or program type has emerged mostly from the United States. But research has also emerged recently that indicates a certain degree of viewing loyalty to programs even among audiences in the United Kingdom. Wober (1981) assessed the uptake by United Kingdom viewers of different a priori program types relative to their availability across 1 year. He found that certain categories of programs, such as information and general interest programs (e.g., documentaries, magazine and feature shows), were underviewed compared with their availability, whereas films, action-adventure series, and situation comedies were overviewed. More recent analyses of viewing patterns among United Kingdom audiences have produced further evidence of loyalty to programs and program types.

Gunter (1984a) found evidence of program-type loyalty as well as of channel loyalty following an analysis of network television news viewing data among two regional samples in London and the Midlands regions of England. About 1,000 viewing diaries were distributed, by mail or by interviewer, in each region during 2 separate weeks in May 1983, of which over 700 were returned from the
London sample and over 600 returned from the Midlands. These diaries listed all programs broadcast by the four United Kingdom television networks during each week, and respondents indicated how much each program seen was enjoyed. Thus, completed diaries could be used to produce appreciation scores for programs and to indicate how many programs had been seen and of which types. The current analyses focused specifically on viewing patterns for the six main weekday network news broadcasts on BBC1 (at 12:30 p.m., 5:40 p.m., and 9:00 p.m.) and on ITV (at 1:00 p.m., 5:45 p.m., and 10:00 p.m.).

Table 5.1 shows correlations between viewing of one network newscast with viewing of another for each regional survey. Viewing patterns were largely replicated across regions, and the findings provided evidence for channel and program-type loyalty. Channel loyalty was demonstrated by significant correlations between watching midday and early evening news bulletins, and between early evening and late evening news bulletins on the same channel. There was no evidence of switching between channels across these pairs of bulletins, however. Channel loyalty was also indicated by the negative relationship between watching the early evening news on BBC1 or ITV. The latter news bulletins are transmitted at approximately the same time. This means that viewers can watch either one or the other on any evening, although they can switch around between these programs across evenings. However, there was no indication that any channel switching occurred over different evenings in either week. The tendency to watch two news bulletins on the same channel became weaker as the time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BBC1 12:30p.m.</th>
<th>ITV 1:00p.m.</th>
<th>BBC1 5:40p.m.</th>
<th>ITV 5:45p.m.</th>
<th>BBC1 9:00p.m.</th>
<th>ITV 10:00p.m.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBC1 London</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>29*</td>
<td>23*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>10**</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30p.m. Midlands</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>25*</td>
<td>27*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>15*</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV London</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>31*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00p.m. Midlands</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>31*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC1 London</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>-1.4*</td>
<td>20*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:40p.m. Midlands</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-1.10**</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV London</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>26*</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:45p.m. Midlands</td>
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<td>ns</td>
<td>27*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC1 London</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00p.m. Midlands</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>19*</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITV London</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00p.m. Midlands</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.001.

**p < 0.01.
interval between them in the schedule increased. Thus, though there were significant correlations between the viewing of midday and late evening news bulletins on the same channel, these relationships were weaker than those between midday and early evening news broadcasts or between bulletins in early and late evening.

Of more importance in the context of this discussion is the fact that, in addition to channel loyalty, reliable evidence emerged of channel switching to watch the news. This pattern of viewing was indicated by significant correlations between the viewing of midday news bulletins on BBC1 and ITV, and between the viewing of both channels' late news broadcasts across both survey weeks. Thus, at certain times of the day, there seem to be deliberate tendencies for the audience to flow straight from one news broadcast to another, even though this requires changing the channel.

Another study by the author has indicated that audiences may also exhibit loyalty to major drama series and return to one episode after another more often than they would have normally watched a particular television channel at the same times prior to the series. Wober and Gunter (1984) conducted a special analysis of audience sizes and audience flows for *The Winds of War*, produced by the United States television network ABC and promoted as the most expensive TV series ever made. The series was televised by the ITV network in the United Kingdom as eight episodes transmitted over 4 weeks at 7:45 p.m. on Sundays and at 8:00 p.m. on Mondays in the autumn of 1983. Audience research on the series was designed to examine how many people watched it, and how many episodes on average viewers saw. Audience sizes and viewing frequencies analyses were computed on data obtained by the agency Audits of Great Britain (AGB), which carries out audience size measurement work for the Broadcasters Audience Research Board (BARB), a company jointly owned by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Television Companies Association. Data are obtained from a panel of over 3,000 homes nationwide, representative of the viewing public in the United Kingdom. Television sets in each of these households have meters attached, which record when the set is switched on and to which channel it is tuned. A viewing diary is also kept to record the times, in clock quarter-hours, when each member of the household watched any television.

In the analysis of audience sizes, data were obtained for the first quarter-hour segment of *The Winds of War*, for equivalent periods on BBC1, and for similar times on both ITV and BBC1 over the four pairs of Sunday and Monday evenings prior to the first episode of the series. The frequency-of-viewing analyses were performed on the four sets of 8 o'clock quarter-hour spots to indicate in each set the percentages of viewers who saw one, two, three, continuing up to eight spots out of eight.

Based on the continuous viewing records of 6,084 individuals across the United Kingdom, analysis indicated that audiences for *The Winds of War* were much higher than for BBC1 programming shown opposite to the series, and also
were much higher than audiences for ITV at the same times over a 4-week period prior to the series. On the average, 23% of the viewers tuned into episodes of *The Winds of War*, compared with an average of 15% who watched ITV at the same times over a similar period before the series began. Audiences for BBC1 at these times exhibited no change, averaging 12% both before and during *The Winds of War*.

However, although the series attracted larger audiences than usual, this alone is not evidence of loyalty. To what extent did viewers of one episode of *The Winds of War* return to watch subsequent episodes? Did viewers return to ITV during the series more often than they normally did across several Sunday and Monday evenings prior to the series? Table 5.2 sheds light on these important questions concerning program loyalty. The table shows that out of eight episodes across four Sunday and Monday evenings, greater percentages of viewers watched any number of spots on ITV (i.e., *The Winds of War*) than on BBC1. However, a comparison of viewing frequencies for ITV and BBC1 over the 4 weeks before *The Winds of War* showed that this difference occurred anyway. Of more significance was the shift in viewing frequency for ITV during the network’s transmission of the miniseries.

Although there was no substantial change in the percentage of viewers who saw one episode out of eight, during *The Winds of War* markedly higher percentages of viewers saw two, three, four, five, and six episodes. Although only 20% of all viewers saw as many as half the episodes of the series, this was twice as many as had previously shown this degree of loyalty to ITV on Sunday and Monday evenings at around 8:00 p.m. Thus, not only did *The Winds of War*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Episodes Seen</th>
<th>Over 4 Weeks Prior to <em>The Winds of War</em></th>
<th>Over 4 Weeks during <em>The Winds of War</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ITV (%)</td>
<td>BBC1 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data from BARB/AGB. Base = 6,084.

*Winds of War* on this channel.
boost audiences for the ITV network, but also among those who were watching the channel, substantially larger percentages than usual were returning to it week after week.

To sum up, evidence from diary records of viewing behaviors among regional and national samples in the United Kingdom has indicated that viewers may exhibit selective viewing of a program type such as news and enhanced loyalties to television channels in the presence of certain major drama series. In the next section, research evidence is examined which shows that degrees of preferential viewing for certain programs or program types may vary according to the demographic and psychological characteristics of viewers.

**VIEWER CHARACTERISTICS AND SELECTIVE VIEWING**

Not all viewers like the same programs or watch television to the same extent. With the increased availability of TV channels, many of which now specialize in particular categories of programming, the audience has become fragmented. Television channels that provide all-news, all-weather, all-music, or all-film services appeal differently to different viewers, and some sections of the general audience may flow more than other sections toward one or another of these specialist channels. Similarly, on the networks, some viewers may be inclined to watch more action-adventure series, whereas others may prefer news or documentary output. To what extent can regular viewers of one category of programming be distinguished by their personal (demographic or psychological) characteristics? Does a certain type of person tend to be especially likely to watch soap operas, or action-drama series, or news broadcasts? Several recent studies done by the author have examined relationships between patterns of TV viewing behavior for particular program types and television series, and the demographic and psychological characteristics of viewers.

**Demographic Differences in Television Viewing Patterns**

In the study of United Kingdom audiences for *The Winds of War* discussed earlier, Wober and Gunter (1984) examined audience sizes and audience flow for the series not simply for the viewing population in general, but also for particular demographic segments of it. Table 5.3 shows the audience sizes for the eight episodes of *The Winds of War*, where each score represents the percentage of all viewers within a particular demographic group who watched the first quarter-hour of each episode. It can be seen that on the average, the series was watched by more women than men, by more middle-aged and older people than young
Table 5.3
Audience Sizes for The Winds of War among Different Demographic Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Sex (%)</th>
<th>Age (%)</th>
<th>Class (%)</th>
<th>ABC1</th>
<th>C2DE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>16-34</td>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>55+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun.</td>
<td>Sept. 11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>Sept. 12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>Sept. 19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun.</td>
<td>Sept. 25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>Sept. 26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun.</td>
<td>Oct. 2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon.</td>
<td>Oct. 3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,250</td>
<td>2,604</td>
<td>1,430</td>
<td>1,633</td>
<td>1,790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data from BARB/AGB.

The demographic pattern observed for audience sizes for The Winds of War was reflected in viewing frequencies for the series. Table 5.4 shows the percentages of viewers in each demographic category who saw one, two, or three, up to all eight episodes. This table indicates that markedly larger percentages of women than men, of older adults than younger adults, and of working-class than middle-class people saw between two and six out of eight episodes. Although an average of only about one-quarter of the United Kingdom viewers were likely to have seen at least half the episodes, variations in viewing frequencies across demographic groups were indicative of differential loyalty to the series among different segments of the audience.

Further evidence of varying loyalties to a television series across demographic groups emerged from a special study on United Kingdom audiences for another imported American program—The A-Team (Gunter, 1984b). The first series was televised in the United Kingdom by the ITV network between mid-July and mid-November, 1983. Following the first feature-length episode to open the series, the next seven hour-long episodes were scheduled at 9:00 p.m. on Friday evenings. Beginning with the next episode, however, the series was brought forward to 7:30 p.m., as the network wished to take advantage of the program’s strong appeal to younger members of the audience.

The author carried out special analyses of viewing frequencies for the series when it was televised at 9:00 p.m. and then again among its 7:30 p.m. audiences. These analyses were computed on behavioral viewing data obtained from the BARB/AGB national panel in the United Kingdom. Viewing frequencies were
examined for different sex, age, and social class groups among adults and among children.

Table 5.5 presents the viewing frequencies for different demographic groups within the United Kingdom television audience over the first six 9:00 p.m. and the first six 7:30 p.m. episodes of The A-Team. For control purposes, viewing frequencies were also computed for six 9:00 p.m. and six 7:30 p.m. Friday slots on ITV before the series began to run at these times. The data indicate that both the series and the time at which it was broadcast made a difference to viewing frequencies for the ITV channel. Among adults at 9:00 p.m., there was little change in viewing frequencies between the 6-week pre-A-Team period and over the first 6 weeks of the series. But as the table shows, when The A-Team was switched to 7:30 p.m., a substantial increase occurred in the percentages of viewers who watched ITV on one or three Fridays out of six at this time. Although viewing frequencies increased across all demographic groups, women, young people, and middle-class people established the greatest increases in their regularity of viewing on Friday evenings after The A-Team had been moved forward in the schedule.

Table 5.5 also presents the viewing frequencies for The A-Team among children (aged up to 15 years) in the United Kingdom. When the series was broadcast at 9:00 p.m., it made only a small difference to viewing frequencies among children for ITV on Friday evenings. It is generally true that fewer children watch after 9:00 p.m. than earlier in the evening, so any increase at all in the regularity of viewing, as did occur to some extent here, was a sign of the strong appeal the series had for young viewers.

Following the rescheduling of The A-Team, there was a substantial increase in viewing frequencies for ITV on Friday evenings at 7:30 p.m. compared with a similar period immediately prior to the series being shown at this earlier time.

---

**TABLE 5.4**

Viewing Frequencies for The Winds of War among Different Demographic Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Episodes Seen</th>
<th>Sex (%)</th>
<th>Age (%)</th>
<th>Class (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>16–34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data from BARB/AGB. Base sizes are as for Table 5.3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Episodes Seen</th>
<th>Sex (%)</th>
<th>Age (%)</th>
<th>Class (%)</th>
<th>Sex (%)</th>
<th>Age (%)</th>
<th>Class (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>16-34</td>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>55+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00p.m. pre-A-Team</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Team</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30p.m. pre-A-Team</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Team</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>56</td>
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</tr>
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TABLE 5.5
Viewing Frequencies for The A-Team among Different Demographic Sections of the Television Audience in the United Kingdom
The A-Team was particularly popular among boys, and the percentages who watched ITV at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays for 3 weeks out of 6 doubled compared with before the series. Among 4–9-year-olds, the same percentages more than doubled to indicate the series' especially strong appeal to the youngest viewers.

Psychological Characteristics and Television Viewing Patterns

The Independent Broadcasting Authority’s Audience Research Department runs a weekly survey designed to measure audience appreciation of programs. Each week a diary is placed with or mailed to representative samples of over 1,000 respondents in one of twelve ITV regions around the United Kingdom. Diaries list all the programs broadcast by the four television channels during one week and provide an indication not only of appreciation levels, but also how many and which kinds of programs have been seen. This facility is often used to carry out special public opinion surveys in which questionnaires are sent out with the diaries. At the analysis stage, questionnaire data can be treated as separate entities, or they may be related to the viewing information contained in completed diaries. Several studies of this kind have been employed to investigate relationships between television viewing patterns and measures of respondents' attitudes, beliefs, and personality characteristics.

In a series of papers published during the 1970s, Gerbner and his associates reported that heavy viewers of television in the United States tended to endorse different beliefs about the world in which they lived than did lighter viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). In particular, it was reported that heavy viewers who watched for more than 4 hours every day tended to indicate a greater fear of being victims of crime and violence, greater mistrust of authority, and less hope for the future than did lighter viewers who saw less than 2 hours of daily television on the average. Gerbner et al. argue that these findings indicated a cultivation effect of viewing, whereby television conditions a distorted view of the world among those who are heavy consumers of its content. Heavy viewing may cause misconceptions not only about levels of crime and violence, but also with regard to other aspects of the social environment, such as the appropriate roles for women (Morgan, 1982) and the characteristics of old people (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980).

Early attempts to replicate Gerbner's findings concerning TV viewing and perceptions of social danger in the United Kingdom failed to produce the same results (Piepe, Crouch, & Emerson, 1977; Wober 1978). Several reasons have been discussed to account for the discrepancies in the two sets of findings. It could be that there are significant cross-national differences in viewing habits and levels of exposure to television violence. Another important factor may be
the differences in the way television viewing has been measured. Gerbner, for example, relied on gross personal estimations of viewing in hours per day, whereas Wober’s sample filled in a viewing diary listing all programs broadcast over 1 week. Another possible explanation of the relationships reported by Gerbner and his colleagues between amount of television watched and social anxiety is a “third variable” hypothesis, which posits that both social beliefs and TV viewing may be effects of some additional factor not previously taken into account. Doob and MacDonald (1979) reported, for example, that fear of environmental crime among residents of Toronto, Canada, was related more closely to actual levels of such crime than to TV viewing. But in addition to making people more fearful, it could be argued that high local crime rates might encourage people to stay indoors and watch more television.

Developing this argument further, one might explain the relationship between viewing television and social fearfulness in terms of a reverse hypothesis, whereby those individuals who are more anxious to begin with also watch more television. It has been shown that mood states can affect the tendency not only to watch television per se, but can also influence the type of content a person prefers to watch. Boyanowsky, Newtson, and Walster (1974) found that threatened individuals showed a distinct preference for viewing potentially fear-inducing events under safe conditions. Girls who had shared a dormitory with a murder victim showed greater preference subsequent to the murder for a movie depicting a cold-blooded murder than for a nonviolent romantic film, whereas girls from another dormitory, who were presumably less directly affected by the murder, showed no such preference. In a subsequent contrived experiment, Boyanowsky (1977) was able to add further support to his initial findings. If transient mood states can influence short-term preferences for films, to what extent may longer term television viewing behaviors and program preferences be related to more lasting dispositions of individuals?

Wober and Gunter (1982) noted that many of the social beliefs measured by Gerbner and his colleagues exhibited a striking resemblance, at least on the surface, to those included by Rotter (1965, 1967) in an instrument developed to measure a personality characteristic known as locus of control. This dimension, which indicated the extent to which people believed events in their lives to be determined by fate or self-control, was conceptualized as a fundamental characteristic of the individual conditioned by a whole array of social and developmental factors and therefore, as something more than simply a reaction to television viewing. Wober and Gunter were interested in finding out whether locus of control was in any way related either to viewing television or to responses on the social anxiety and interpersonal mistrust items used by Gerbner.

Diary data on television viewing habits and completed questionnaires concerning personal fearfulness, mistrust, and locus of control were collected from over 300 individuals in the London ITV region during 1 week of routine audience-appreciation measurement. Results showed that although fear of being a
victim of crime correlated significantly with TV viewing initially, this relationship disappeared when the influence of locus of control was partialed out. Locus of control, however, was related to amount of TV viewing even in the presence of statistical controls for other social beliefs and demographic factors. This evidence suggested that whatever is measured by the Gerbner questions is less robustly related to viewing behavior than the dimension measured by locus of control items (at least for viewers in the United Kingdom). Furthermore, it could be that the relationships observed here do not demonstrate a conditional reaction to regular TV viewing, but indicate a psychological antecedent of volume of viewing.

A subsequent survey suggested even more clearly a link between psychological characteristics of viewers and how much television and what kinds of programs they choose to watch. Although Gerbner and his associates have emphasized the cultivation, via heavy TV viewing, of exaggerated fears about personal safety and of increased mistrust of others, some writers have suggested that another message may be transmitted by television drama which ought to condition a completely different kind of social perception.

**VIEWER CHARACTERISTICS AND PROGRAM EVALUATION**

The research discussed in the previous two sections indicated that degrees of loyalty to programs or program types can be identified via behavioral measures as prominent features of television viewing. Furthermore, selective viewing of programs is related to certain demographic and psychological characteristics of viewers. This behavioral evidence for program preferences has been corroborated by attitudinal research that has demonstrated relationships between the psychological characteristics of individuals and their appreciation of different kinds of programming. Although what people say about programs may not reflect how often those programs are actually viewed, attitudinal data can usefully supplement behavioral data on selectivity in viewing and give some idea of what viewers think or feel about programs.

Research discussed in the previous section indicated that relationships exist between certain psychological characteristics of viewers and the kinds of programs they watch. To a great extent, the latter research has utilized a priori or factor analytically defined program types. Some writers have expressed the concern, however, that these typologies, which offer relatively wholistic classifications of programs, may well miss out on other important program attributes that mediate the decision to watch (Gandy, 1982). Thus, Comisky and Bryant (1982) examined factors that were most important in generating feelings of suspense in the audience. Suspense is a stylistic attribute, which may mediate attraction to and appreciation of a program. It is not restricted to any particular
genre of programming, and according to Comisky and Bryant, suspense depends on two major components: uncertainty of story outcome and degree of liking for the protagonist.

One attribute of program content, long considered by network executives as an essential ingredient guaranteed to attract large audiences, is violence. Research evidence on the efficacy of violence in enhancing the entertainment value of television programs, however, has been equivocal (Gunter, 1979). Recent studies have shown no relationship between audience sizes for prime time programs on major TV networks in the United States and the amount of violence such programs contain (Diener & De Four, 1978; Sprafkin, Rubenstein, & Stone, 1977).

Although dramatic story lines in fictional television programming often feature violent conflict between criminal elements and the forces of law and order, thus giving the impression of a "violent world," by the end of nearly all such programs, this conflict is typically resolved with the triumph of good over evil and the eventual bringing to justice of lawbreakers. Therefore, if television teaches anything about the world at all, it is equally or more likely to be that the world is a just and secure place than that it is a dangerous one (Zillmann, 1980).

To test this, Gunter and Wober (1983) carried out a survey in which program-appreciation diaries with attached opinion questionnaires were sent to the IBA's London region panel from whom nearly 500 usable replies were returned. The questionnaire contained items on personal fearfulness, interpersonal mistrust, anomie, and beliefs in a just world. The latter scale was developed by Rubin and Peplau (1975) to measure the extent to which people believe the world is a just place. This dimension is regarded, much as locus of control has been, as an enduring characteristic that can reliably discriminate between individuals.

Respondents received scores on each of the foregoing social-belief dimensions, and viewing behavior was classified not simply in terms of general amount of TV viewing, but also by the viewing of different program categories such as action-adventure, soap operas, news and current affairs, and United States TV series. Results showed that in the presence of multiple statistical controls for sex, age, and social class, just two significant relationships survived between viewing behavior and social beliefs.

Respondents who had strong beliefs in a just world tended to be heavy viewers of action-adventure programs and United States TV series (which consisted mainly of action-adventure). These relationships suggest a cultivation effect of television, which opposes that proposed by Gerbner and his colleagues. The message assimilated by viewers from action-drama programs relates to the triumph of justice over the wrongdoer rather than to the harm that criminals are frequently shown to inflict on innocent others in these programs. However, it could also be said that these results do not reflect a cultivation effect of television at all, but instead indicate that people who believe that the world is a just place turn selectively to dramatic story lines to obtain reinforcement and clarification of their beliefs.
In one recent investigation, Diener and Woody (1981) found that violent television programs were actually enjoyed somewhat less than nonviolent programs among 62 families who viewed these shows at home. Among a sample of British viewers, Himmelweit, Swift, and Biberian (1980) found no relationship between judgments of how violent programs were perceived to be and how much they were enjoyed.

Although findings of a number of survey and experimental studies have offered little support for the belief that violence makes programs more attractive to viewers in general, there is research evidence to show that viewers may vary widely in their personal preferences for televised violence and that selection and appreciation of violent programs may be mediated by transient mood states and by more enduring personality dispositions.

Mood States and Enjoyment of Television Violence

Preferences for media violence have been shown to relate to transient mood states of individuals. People who have been put into an angry mood or aggressive frame of mind have been found to exhibit stronger preferences for violent over nonviolent media content when compared with nonangered people. Some researchers have found that aggressive fantasizing can induce preferences for violent films over nonviolent films, especially among men (Fenigstein, 1979; Goldstein, 1972). Actually, the insulting and angering of individuals, and the encouragement to display overt physically aggressive acts, may also influence preferences for violent film material (Fenigstein, 1979; Freedman & Newtson, 1975). Further effects of mood states on program preferences are discussed by Zillmann and Bryant in chapter 8 of this volume.

Personality and Enjoyment of Television

Much of the massive literature concerning television violence has focused on the impact of violent TV material on viewers' attitudes and behaviors. Much less attention has been paid to whether or not violent programs are viewed selectively, in particular by individuals whose personalities are already characterized by strong aggressive dispositions, and if so, whether and to what extent this may account for the relationships so frequently observed in correlational surveys between the viewing of violent programming and personal aggressiveness. For example, many correlational studies have used favorite program choices as a measure of exposure to TV violence.

Thus, Robinson and Bachman (1972) found that delinquent aggressiveness in late adolescence was associated with the amount of violence in favorite programs. Elsewhere, adolescent deviance and attitudes approving of violence were found to be related to preferences for violent programs (McIntyre & Teevan, 1972). However, although these studies have been cited as evidence for the effects of viewing televised violence, an alternative interpretation equally con-
sistent with their findings is that they indicate selectivity in viewing violence by aggressive individuals.

In comparing the television viewing preferences of aggressive and nonaggressive boys, Friedman and Johnson (1972) found that aggressive boys named more violent programs among their favorites than did nonaggressives. In addition, the former were only half as likely as the latter to name a violent program as one they would most like to take off the air. Although these correlational analyses cannot provide conclusive indicators of causality, Chaffee (1972) has argued that it may be more meaningful to think of programs identified as favorites as a dependent variable, which is influenced by personal dispositions of viewers, than as an independent variable, which produces those dispositions, because the small number of best liked programs would not provide a strong stimulus. However, this argument needs to be empirically verified because the most preferred programs may also be the most salient or vivid for the viewer, and therefore constitute a very potent stimulus indeed.

Evidence supporting the thesis that aggressive predisposition may underlie the enjoyment of violent television content has emerged from several recent studies in which viewing behavior and content preferences were clearly identified as dependent variables. Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, and McDermott (1979) used a time-order design to draw causal influences from correlational data. A two-wave panel study of young people across a 1-year lag was used to explore relationships between aggressive attitudes and television viewing behavior over time. Measures of attitudinal dispositions were used one year to predict viewing patterns a year later. Although general patterns of viewing changed little over the year, some evidence did emerge that individuals who exhibited aggressive attitudes at the beginning of the study expressed particularly strong preferences for violent programming after 1 year, even when other important variables such as sex, age, and initial viewing patterns had been statistically controlled. The reverse correlation between viewing television violence initially and the development of aggressive attitudes over time was much smaller.

Finally, further evidence indicating differences in preferences for different forms of televised violence among different personality types has emerged from work completed during the early 1980s by the author. A series of experiments was conducted in which a panel of viewers, from diverse age groups and social backgrounds, judged the content of sets of brief TV sequences that depicted different kinds of violent incidents. In these experiments, judgments included ratings of how violent, realistic, disturbing, and exciting viewers thought the scenes to be. These ratings were related to a range of personality measures obtained from panel members, including personal aggressiveness on four subscales of the Buss–Durkee (1957) Hostility Inventory, and Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975), and self-perceived masculinity and femininity on the Bem (1974) Sex Role Inventory.
In one study, which was designed principally to examine differences in viewers' reactions to television violence perpetrated by law enforcers or by criminals, viewers who exhibited strong self-reported tendencies toward physical and verbal aggressiveness rated TV series depicting law enforcers as perpetrators of violence more exciting than did viewers with only weak aggressive tendencies (Gunter, 1985). In another study, which looked at the effects of program context or setting on viewers' perceptions of television violence, self-proclaimed physically aggressive people were found to judge shootings and fist-fights from British produced crime-detective shows (though not from shows produced in America of the same genre) as more exciting than did less aggressive individuals (Gunter & Furnham, 1984).

Personal aggressiveness was not the only personality dimension found to be a potential mediator of viewers' preferences for different kinds of violence. Again, comparing perceptions of violent portrayals from different categories of programming, it was found that high scorers on Eysenck's neuroticism dimension perceived TV violence generally, but especially that from contemporary British drama, in more serious and less favorable terms than did less anxious individuals (Gunter & Furnham, 1983). Meanwhile the psychoticism dimension, an indicator of tough-mindedness and emotional coolness, was found to be related to differential preferences for harmful violence. Scenes that depicted physical injury and harm to a victim were perceived as more violent and disturbing by lower than by higher psychoticism scorers (Gunter, 1983). Reactions to TV violence also varied according to sex of the attacker and victim, but this particular feature of violent portrayals interacted with program type and viewers' self-perceived masculinity or femininity to mediate judgments. Results showed that male violence on a female victim (whether a shooting or a fight) was rated as more serious than female violence on a male in contemporary British crime-drama settings. However, in American crime or futuristic science fiction settings, the reverse was true. More important in the context of the current discussion though, was the finding that viewers (male or female) who perceived themselves strongly in masculine terms and weakly in feminine terms on the Bem (1974) Sex Role Inventory perceived male attacks on female victims as relatively more serious, compared with viewers who exhibited the opposite masculinity–femininity tendencies (Gunter, 1985). These findings imply a complex interrelationship between certain personality dispositions of individuals and their preferences for different types of violent content.

**SUMMARY**

From the evidence reviewed in this chapter, it is clear that differential loyalty to programs or program types is a prominent feature of television viewing behavior. It is also evident that selective patterns of viewing or preferential attitudinal
dispositions toward certain kinds of programming are not constant across all viewers. How people think or feel about programs or the extent to which the audience flows toward or across certain programs or program types varies between demographic divisions of the population. More significantly, however, are those findings that indicate differences in viewing patterns or attitudinal preferences for programs associated with enduring psychological characteristics of viewers. Although much more work still needs to be done to clarify and test the reliability of these findings, early indications are that this line of research is well worth pursuing. It could prove to be work of no small practical worth to broadcast institutions, who in the face of the ever more fragmenting audiences, need to understand better why audiences behave in the ways they do. Then, from both an academic and social policy standpoint, understanding why audiences flow toward programs in different ways could contribute significantly to a better understanding of the effects of television, research on which in the past has all too often ignored how people watch television. Unless we can be clear on this last point, we can never hope to demonstrate properly the extent to which television influences the way people think, feel, and behave.

REFERENCES

5. TELEVISION VIEWING PREFERENCES


