

# Television and American Culture: The Mass Medium and the Pluralist Audience

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TELEVISION has emerged as the truly dominant mass medium in American society. The numbers are staggering. Ninety-eight percent of American homes have sets and those sets are turned on for an average of about seven hours a day. The average adult takes in an incredible four hours of television a day, which over the average lifetime adds up to the equivalent of eight straight years (at 24 hours a day) of television viewing. Viewing has been rising steadily and significantly among all age, educational, and ethnic categories over the last decade (Comstock et al., 1978).

Moreover, advertisers invested some 12 billion dollars in 1980 in order to present their commercial messages before these teeming multitudes. These large-scale economics themselves become a factor in the character of the medium as competition among the networks becomes increasingly intense for a larger share of that considerable pie. Programs are designed to have the broadest possible appeal because if even a small segment of the viewing audience is unamused (not to mention potentially offended) a resulting loss of even a single

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**Abstract** The study explores the potential influence of television on trends toward cultural homogenization in American society. Depth interviews focused on two variables: the analytic response—viewers' thoughts about the program itself, including, for example, comments on how plot elements relate to the program as a whole or the character of the script or acting, and the interpretive response—viewers' thoughts about the program's relevance to their own lives or broader issues of society and culture. The data support the hypothesis of cultural homogenization revealing similar indices of analytic and interpretive response across educational levels.

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ratings point for one program over the course of a year amounts to a potential 15-million-dollar loss in revenues for the network.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the television phenomenon from a sociological point of view is its universality. Television is socially defined as the culture of the masses. And although professors, professionals, and the educated elite in general may claim to have time only for occasional news, sports, and a play or concert on the public channel, the recurrent implication of systematic research is that they watch the same situation comedies and action adventure programs just about as often as their neighbors in blue collars and hard hats (Wilensky, 1965). As Hirsch has put it, television has come to provide a "centrally produced, standardized and homogenous culture" (1978, 400). Social scientists, however, have devoted surprisingly little attention to the long-term impact of this core of shared experience in our society.

To what extent has television become a major force of social integration and cultural uniformity? Are individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds really responding in the same ways to these common cultural forms? We find that better educated viewers watch slightly less television than the less well educated—about three minutes less per day for each additional year of formal education—but the types of programs viewed are virtually identical.<sup>1</sup> Are better educated viewers more attentive and do they draw on extensive exposure to literature, theater, and cinema in responding to the television they see?

In an attempt to explore whether people from diverse backgrounds who *watch* the same program actually *see* the same program, we designed a depth interview technique based on a series of increasingly structured questions about which elements in a program stand out in viewers' minds and how they evaluate what they have seen. Transcripts of these interviews were systematically coded to derive quantitative measures of the attentiveness as well as the level of analytic and interpretive thinking among various social groups in response to a random sample of prime-time television programming. The analysis focuses on four questions: (1) Is television thought-provoking? (2) Is the response to television differentiated by educational level? (3) Does the level of response vary across program types, or was McLuhan right after all, that the medium pretty much determines the

<sup>1</sup> The three-minutes-per-day figure is derived from Bower (1973), Table 6-2, p. 132. Some studies have suggested that longer working hours and more out-of-house social activities rather than cultural tastes explain the small negative relationship between education and television exposure (Samuelson, et al., 1963).

message? (4) To what extent do the expectations and attitudes of the viewer (the "social definition of television") influence the medium's impact?

### Research Design

No single study could possibly determine to what extent television programming is perceived as homogeneous or differentiated. Various research designs, emphasizing one or another dimension of response, or different types of programming, might plausibly reach divergent conclusions. Our strategy was simply to plunge ahead and derive some initial comparisons based on a measure of the extent to which programming is thought-provoking.

A total of 30 programs representative of commercial and public offerings during prime time, ranging from a half-hour to three hours in length, were randomly sampled during April 1979. Twenty programs were sampled from the three commercial networks, representing roughly a 29 percent sample of the 70 programs they provide each week in prime time. Ten programs were sampled from PBS, representing roughly 36 percent of the weekly prime-time offerings.

Three groups of television viewers were interviewed by telephone shortly after watching one of the sampled programs. The first group was a random sample of southern Connecticut residents drawn from the city directories for New Haven County—urban, suburban, and suburban fringe areas characteristic of the industrial Northeast. The region is ethnically diverse, with large Italian and black communities. Census data indicate that both the mean and standard deviation for level of education in this area are equivalent to those of the country as a whole. Respondents were initially contacted by letter. Interviewers then phoned to solicit participation, asking respondents to watch a particular program the following evening. Seventy percent of the mass sample agreed to be interviewed, which, given the complexity of the procedure and length of the interview, seemed to be an acceptable level.<sup>2</sup>

The second group was obtained by the following procedure. Interviewers called households at random until they located an adult who had just seen one of the television programs used in the study. The advantage of this procedure is that the respondents had no knowledge

<sup>2</sup> Determining the response rate for the ad hoc viewer group would require a different set of calculations. Most of the households called did not contain viewers of the specific program in question and were simply passed over. Estimating the appropriate response rate would require local television ratings data, which are not available for this time period.

that they would be interviewed about a program until after they had seen it under normal home-viewing conditions. Such a sample, of course, generalizes to television viewers rather than community residents.

A third sample was drawn from the humanities faculty at four area liberal arts colleges. This special professorial "control" group allows us to explore the importance of advanced training in the humanities for interpretive skills with this medium. Fifty-five depth interviews were completed with the mass sample, 24 with the special ad hoc television viewer group, and 34 with the humanities scholars. The response rate for the scholars, who were recruited in the same way as the mass sample, was 80 percent (surprisingly, only two of the professors we called did not have television sets).

The interview itself, immediately following the program, was conducted by phone and tape recorded (with the permission of the respondent) to allow for further analysis and coding at a later time. The interview took from 20 to 40 minutes to complete and involved 31 question-probes. In the first section of the questionnaire the four questions were as broad and nondirective as possible, asking what thoughts and emotions the program brought to the respondent's mind, and what elements of the program were liked and disliked. A second section of the interview included six recall questions focusing on prominent characters, the plot, and the script. A third section involved 21 dimensions of program evaluation, including thoughts about the plot; pace, genre, and technical aspects of the program; as well as speculation on the scriptwriters' intentions, the program's relevance to the viewer's personal life, and potential social and political implications of the program.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, viewers may be daydreaming or simply thinking of matters entirely unrelated to program content, so we narrowed our inquiry to two types of cognitive response—thinking about the program itself, or relating the content of the program to one's own life or broader issues for the community or society. We identify the former as *analytic thought*—taking the program apart in one's mind, examining how the pieces relate to each other and to the program as a whole, and evaluating the plot, pace, script, acting, or technical elements of the production. We identify the latter as *interpretive thought*—the consideration of what social, cultural, or organizational factors might have influenced the writers and producers of the pro-

<sup>3</sup> The full interview protocol and a description of coding procedures are available from the author.

gram, and in turn how the program might influence the thinking of a typical viewer, as well as the respondent's own sense of the broader meaning, if any, of the program's themes or their relevance to his or her personal situation.

After the interviewing was completed, a separate staff of six carefully trained coders combed through these interview tapes, counting each analytic or interpretive comment made by the respondents. Comments might have been made in response to a general query about what was liked or disliked in the program or in response to a more specific question about the script or acting. Many respondents tended to repeat themselves in the course of the interview; in such cases each unique analytic or interpretive comment was coded only once. Vague evaluative statements such as "I liked it," or "It was crummy," which did not relate the program or some specific element within it to a more clearly defined evaluative dimension, were not coded. In each case interviewers probed respondents to explain why they liked it or what they meant by "crummy." Thus, such statements as: "the plot was contrived," "they did a good job of developing that woman's character," or "the dialogue in the romantic scenes at the end was rather wooden" would be coded as an analytic observation. Such comments as "that program is aimed at a younger audience," "the networks just pay attention to ratings," "that's a weird portrayal of justice, police departments just don't work like that," or "it makes you think about the level of violence in our society" would be coded as interpretive comments. Coding decisions about the presence of analytic or interpretive comments turned out to be fairly straightforward. Each of the coders was assigned to code an identical subset of interviews independently. The intercoder reliability was calculated at .79 (Pearson).

The basic strategy, then, was simply to give respondents an extended opportunity to describe how they reacted to a cultural work, in this case a randomly selected television program. We computed indices of which programs were better liked, but rather than make an evaluation per se we concentrated on which elements of the various programs were most salient for respondents of different educational levels. A less articulate respondent, of course, would tend to score lower on these measures. Perhaps some individuals did have a sophisticated and thoughtful response to a program but because they are unaccustomed to dealing with such matters, were less able to articulate their ideas in the course of the interview. But the technique of coding open-ended interviews rather than using the more traditional precoded survey items, and the fact that respondents were

given ample time and encouragement to simply express whatever thoughts came to mind, would indicate a sensitivity and flexibility in the data gathering appropriate to the hypotheses under study.

### Is Television Thought-Provoking?

A thoughtless, passive state did seem to characterize some viewers. Twenty-five percent of our respondents, for example, had no substantive response at all to the first section of the interview. They could recall no thoughts which had come to mind while viewing. They could recall no emotional reactions. And they could not identify any element of the program which they either liked or disliked.

Some respondents were well aware of their passivity and revealed no particular embarrassment about it. One government worker, asked what thoughts had come to mind, responded, "Nothing, really . . . my mind was quite blank." A mechanic in response to the same question mentioned, "A show like this gives me a chance to rest my mind and think about other things." A department store sales clerk: "What thoughts, nothing, nothing really, I was just waiting, you know, waiting for the comedy to happen." But it would be a mistake to interpret this as evidence that their minds were in fact blank or entirely inattentive to events on the television screen. Perhaps a more appropriate conclusion would be that the ephemeral character and low salience of their thinking makes it hard to recall. Also some respondents, especially at the outset of the interview, may simply have felt that despite our insistent questioning, their random thoughts were not worth mentioning. It is important to emphasize, however, that a great deal of variation in viewer response was evident, depending both on the character of the program and the orientation of the viewer. For example, one viewer, a 50-year old assembly-line worker, in response to the first four questions, reeled off eight issues he had been mulling over in his mind while watching a made-for-TV movie. Among other issues, he commented spontaneously on its impact on the viewing audience, how it reflected changes in moral standards, and the quality of the acting and the script. In response to these first four queries, the average respondent made 2.2 comments.

The most frequently mentioned aspect of the sampled programs in this section of the interview was the quality of the acting and the relevance of the program for the personal life of the viewers (each noted by 26 percent of the respondents), followed by comments on the plot, 24 percent, the realism (or lack thereof) of the program, 22

percent, comparisons and contrasts with other television programs, 18 percent, and social problems raised by the program, 13 percent. A variety of other comments were made but in each case by less than 10 percent of the respondents. Positive or approving comments outnumbered negative ones two to one. These percentages, however, are averaged from the 30 programs we sampled and could change significantly as programming trends evolve in the television industry. Typically, a comment would be both brief and straightforward, noting, for example, that the plot dragged a bit in the middle, or that a supporting actor seemed particularly talented, or that a daughter-in-law had a problem similar to that of the heroine. Such observations seldom delved very deeply into the nature of drama or comedy.

The initial four open-ended queries have the advantage of being nondirective and provide an idea of which dimensions were most salient for these respondents. But they have the disadvantage of generating a very incomplete measure of the nature and variety of responses in the audience (Schuman and Presser, 1979). Thus, because people may not easily remember details of their initial reaction to the program, we pursued two further levels of stimulated recall in the interview. First, interviewers mentioned two randomly selected characters, two plot elements, and two segments of dialogue, and asked in each case how the viewer responded to this element in the program. Next, interviewers ran down a list of 21 questions probing for analytic and interpretive responses to the program as a whole.

In response to the total of 31 queries about each program, the average viewer made 7.8 unique and nonoverlapping comments.<sup>4</sup> Almost all of the probes generated a meaningful response from a substantial number of viewers. The probes most often responded to involved plot organization and the intent of the authors, each of which stimulated comments in 55 percent of the interviews. The probes with the least response involved political ramifications of programs (16 percent), and comments on symbolic elements (8 percent).

As already noted, there is evidence of considerable variation on these measures, across both programs and people. The coders found as few as 3 and as many as 20 analytic or interpretive comments among mass sample viewers in responding to the same program. Some programs stimulated an *average* of nine times as many responses among randomly assigned viewers as the least thought-provoking programs.<sup>5</sup> We turn next to an attempt to partition this

<sup>4</sup> Of this total, 4.4 were categorized as analytic and 3.4 as interpretive comments.

<sup>5</sup> Samples for individual programs ranging from three to six interviews are much too small to justify a detailed analysis.

variance and explore to what extent a thoughtful response is due to the character of the viewer rather than to the quality of the program.

### Is the Response to Television Differentiated by Education?

In this section we will examine three related hypotheses about whether class-linked differences of perception might work for or against the potentially homogenizing influences of television on American culture.

The Cultural Experience Hypothesis predicts that education will have a positive correlation with indices of analytic and interpretive thinking. Although the better educated may claim that they do not particularly enjoy watching television, when they do watch it is probably with moderate attentiveness. Perhaps they cannot help noticing techniques of plot development or comedic devices or visual symbols as they would with a motion picture or play. From their more extensive experience with "serious" art, the better educated have developed skills in interpreting themes and in speculating on the relevance of narratives for their personal life and for society as a whole.

This hypothesis suggests further that television may occupy a somewhat different role for those who did not finish high school or go to college. Because of limited exposure to either traditional aesthetic values or more technical issues of the various forms of literary analysis, these viewers may be neither inclined nor able to treat television as anything more than diverting entertainment, a pleasant escape from the burdens of the day.

The Cultural Polarization Hypothesis predicts just the opposite pattern—a negative correlation between analytic/interpretive indices and educational level. The idea in this case is simply that television is itself the prime cultural enterprise of the masses. Presumably, television functions for the less educated as plays, books, and the serious arts do for the better educated. Perhaps the less educated viewer watches more attentively, searching for broader meanings and lessons for his or her personal life, while better educated viewers, by defining television as strictly entertainment, ignore interpretive questions and treat TV as pure escapism.

Finally, the Homogenization Hypothesis suggests yet another possibility. It may be that television functions as a common cultural form and is appraised in very similar ways by different educational groups. The prediction here would be no significant differences in analytic and interpretive scores across educational levels. Both the assembly-line

worker and investment counselor, it is suggested, come home in the evening weary from the day's labors and seek relaxation and light entertainment. Neither approaches television with the intent of being informed or having their cultural horizons broadened, but both inevitably find themselves to some extent evaluating and thinking about the programs they watch, contrasting ideas found there with their own lives and other cultural experiences.

If the Cultural Experience Hypothesis is supported by the data, one's attention is drawn away from the character of television per se and toward what it is in the educational process which makes audience members attentive and thoughtful. In contrast, support for the Cultural Polarization Hypothesis would draw attention toward the character of television programming. If one stratum of society is relying on television while another relies on print media for information, a reinforcement of values, and a sense of their place in the world, then the unique characteristics and emphases of television news and drama could potentially lead to a class-linked polarization of world views.<sup>6</sup> The third hypothesis is most like the second in drawing attention to how television may be influencing attitudes. In this case, however, all educational levels would be equally subject to the allure and accumulative powers of gentle persuasion in television's definition of reality.

Table 1 contains data for the critical test—an analysis of variance in analytic and interpretive scores by education. Of course, given this small sample of television viewers, we can take only a first step toward identifying which of the three hypotheses is more nearly correct. But as is often the case in empirical work of this sort, the data raise several further issues and suggest a reconsideration of the original assumptions. The original three hypotheses anticipated either a positive or negative linear relationship or no relationship at all. Table 1 apparently demonstrates a nonlinear pattern—very little difference in response to television among different educational levels in the mass sample but a distinctly higher level of response among the scholars. One might have expected the humanities professors to be particularly hostile toward television and, as a result, disinclined in principle to respond analytically or interpretively. But the data reveal that the professors were rather open to using their skills and experience in evaluating the television programming they saw. Perhaps humanities training emphasizes analytic rather than interpretive skills,

<sup>6</sup> The ramifications of this polarization scenario have been reviewed by Tichenor and his colleagues, 1970.

**Table 1. Education and the Response to Television: Average Number of Comments per Depth Interview**

	Education					F/Sig.	
	Less than H.S.	H.S.	Some Coll.	Coll.	Scholars	4-way	5-way
Analytic response	(15)	(39)	(18)	(17)	(34)	(89)	(123)
General form (plot organization, pace, character development)	1.42	1.13	1.11	1.75	3.54	.7 n.s.	10.1 <.01
Generic form (comparison with other television programs in same series or genre, or comparison with other media— <i>theater, film, books,</i> <i>etc.</i> )	1.07	1.13	.64	1.43	2.38	1.4 n.s.	6.4 <.01
Technical form ( <i>script, formula, symbols,</i> <i>acting, production, editing,</i> <i>etc.</i> )	.84	2.43	1.96	1.86	6.53	3.7 <.01	18.4 <.01
Total analytic	3.31	4.68	3.70	5.03	12.44	.9 n.s.	14.7 <.01
Interpretive response							
Intent ( <i>ideas or feelings authors</i> <i>intended to arouse in</i> <i>audience, motivations of</i> <i>producers, television</i> <i>executives</i> )	.92	1.11	.76	1.43	1.86	1.6 n.s.	5.4 <.01
Impact ( <i>impact of program on own</i> <i>thinking or emotions,</i> <i>speculations on impact on</i> <i>average viewer</i> )	.71	1.30	.69	1.37	1.50	1.9 n.s.	1.7 n.s.
Implications ( <i>broader meanings or</i> <i>implications for society,</i> <i>current social problems, or</i> <i>political, moral or religious</i> <i>ramifications</i> )	1.27	.96	.98	1.92	2.38	2.0 n.s.	4.4 <.01
Total interpretive	2.90	3.37	2.43	4.72	5.74	2.3 n.s.	3.6 <.01

since their score on the former is dramatically higher than the mass audience and on the latter it is less so. Yet both are statistically significant. Nonetheless, whatever it is that the scholars learned in graduate school and their professional careers has apparently not been successfully passed on to their students. The number of analytic

and interpretive comments among the college-educated in the mass sample is just slightly higher (and on one dimension, technical form, slightly lower) than among those with less education.

One possible interpretation of these findings is that education may be weakly related to a more analytic and interpretive response to ideas communicated via television—a gently sloping positive relationship for a mass population the precise parameters of which could be estimated with a much larger sample size. But because the scholars represent an extreme educational elite, the differences are conspicuously evident even with small samples and considerable measurement error. Given such an interpretation, the evidence provides support for both the Cultural Experience and the Homogenization Hypotheses, because although educational exposure makes a difference, it is so small across the range of natural variation in the mass population that television in practical terms serves as a cultural leveler. This leads one to question whether educational differences in response to books, periodicals, and newspapers might be much greater. Is the lack of class-linked difference in response to television perhaps the result of television's overwhelming emphasis on mass appeal entertainment? We turn to that issue next.

### The Commercial Networks Versus Public Broadcasting

Since 1967 the public broadcasting system in the U.S. has made available a fairly complete schedule of programming focusing on public affairs, drama, and the performing arts traditionally associated with high culture and for the most part previously available only in live performance or the print media. Of course, it was recognized that those already predisposed toward classical music, science, and Elizabethan drama would be the first to tune in and that, to some extent, public broadcasting would be providing specialized cultural programming for a rather small special-interest group.

In this case, two alternative hypotheses guide the analysis. First, the Elite Culture Hypothesis follows the traditional definition of educational and public television and predicts that the public programming on the average will provoke a more analytic and interpretive response than commercial television and that this will be true for both the mass sample and the scholarly sample. The better educated might find the content of public television a bit more familiar and more enjoyable and would, perhaps, respond with a special articulateness and enthusiasm. But the Elite Culture Hypothesis emphasizes that the primary source of variation in analytic and interpretive response is the character of the program rather than the background and orientation

of the audience member. Accordingly, even those not broadly read in the classics are expected to find Shakespeare more thought-provoking than the typical commercial situation comedy.

Second, the Taste Culture Hypothesis predicts that scholars will find public television more thought-provoking and those with less education may be either anxious and confused, or simply bored, and will have relatively little to say about the characters, themes, and information presented on the public channel. Herbert Gans (1974) has developed a notion of educationally linked taste cultures, which emphasizes that the familiarity with higher cultural forms which comes naturally from the educational process is a critical element. Tastes have to be cultivated over time and although a diversity of widely available and inexpensive cultural forms is desirable, it is naive to expect that availability alone will lead those unfamiliar with the arts to take to them quickly. Since we know that the scholars in the sample watch little television and are relatively unfamiliar with normal commercial fare, the Taste Culture Hypothesis predicts that scholars will exhibit higher scores on the analytic and interpretive indices for public television, and the mass sample will respond with higher scores for the commercial programming.

First, we contrasted the average scores for both the mass sample and the scholar sample for all programs. Next, because situation comedies and action-adventures represent genres seldom if ever present in the public television schedule, we recomputed the comparison including only dramatic and public affairs programs on commercial and public television.

In both cases, the data tend to support the Taste Culture Hypothesis. The depth interviews reveal roughly twice as many analytic comments from the mass sample in response to the commercial programs. The scholars, in contrast, found public television more analytically provocative. On the interpretive dimension, we find a less dramatic difference, but again the mass public is more responsive to commercial fare while the scholars are more responsive to public programming. Surprisingly, these patterns are even stronger when the comparison is limited to public affairs and dramatic programs.

This is not evidence of a complete cultural polarization. Mass audiences are not entirely unresponsive to the types of dramatic and public affairs programming public television provides. In fact, we asked respondents to rate on a scale from zero to 10 how much they enjoyed viewing the assigned programs, and averages for the commercial and public programs were indistinguishable for the mass sample (the scholars said they enjoyed the public programs more).<sup>7</sup> Also,

<sup>7</sup> On this scale, zero indicated the least favorable and 10 the most favorable evaluation

Table 2. Responses to Alternative Programming: Average Number of Comments per Depth Interview

	<i>Analytic Comments</i>				<i>Interpretive Comments</i>			
	<i>Comm. TV</i>	<i>Public TV</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig. Level</i>	<i>Comm. TV</i>	<i>Public TV</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>Sig. Level</i>
All programs								
Mass sample (89)	5.51	2.89	10.3	<.01	3.76	3.21	0.7	n.s.
Scholar sample (34)	11.77	14.22	1.3	n.s.	5.23	7.11	1.9	n.s.
Public affairs and drama programs only								
Mass sample (41)	6.13	2.89	13.8	<.01	4.72	3.21	3.9	<.05
Scholar sample (19)	10.50	14.22	1.9	n.s.	6.10	7.11	0.3	n.s.

some of the difference may be a result not of an unthoughtful response from the mass sample but of a reluctance to comment for fear of giving the "wrong" answer.<sup>8</sup> Further research into the types of comments made and into the variation in mass response to several types of public programming and to print media will help to clarify the nature of this polarization. The available evidence, however, demonstrates that there is more to the message than just the medium, that the type of programming does indeed make a difference. But, contrary to the usual assumptions about the thought-provoking character of the serious arts, we find that the American mass audience finds commercial television distinctly more thought-provoking. This raises some interesting questions about the appropriateness of current strategies and the ultimate goals of public broadcasting, and whether the lack of resonance with the mass audience is due primarily to a general skepticism about the importance of elite culture, or to an incompatibility of those cultural forms with the small electronic screen.

### The Social Definition of Television

Many people, when they are in the mood to watch a little television, simply turn on the set, find the least objectionable program, and then sit back to watch. Others carefully review the program guides

tion of a specific program. The mass sample rated both commercial and public programs an average of 6 on the scale. The scholars rated commercial programs at about 4 and public programs at about 7 on this scale.

<sup>8</sup> The actual interview transcripts, however, reveal little evidence that respondents were concerned about giving "wrong" answers or that they were hesitant to express evaluations which might have differed from interviewers' opinions.

and television critics, discuss programs with friends, watch more selectively, and generally define the medium differently. Exploring such differences in attitude and context of viewing may help to fill in the gaps in our understanding of variation in audience response.

We developed an index of orientation toward television comprised of three intercorrelated variables: (1) evaluation of television as a potentially rewarding leisure activity, (2) the extent to which specific programs are discussed with friends and colleagues, and (3) the extent to which viewing is scheduled through the use of program listings. The index was designed to separate the casual, low salience, least-objectionable-program viewer from those who are more active and selective. If such attitudes make a difference, we would expect the index of a positive and active viewing orientation to be associated with higher analytic and interpretive scores.

A related issue is the context of viewing. The orientation index attempts to measure the general predisposition of the viewer toward the medium. But it is likely that moods and motivations may vary over time for a given individual—who may sometimes actively seek out a program of interest and other times may turn on a late-night movie as an aid in getting to sleep. Two variables in our field experimental design provided some leverage for exploring the immediate context of viewing. First, part of the mass sample had been contacted in advance and asked to watch a specific program. Those in the second mass sample group were interviewed if they happened to have seen a program under normal home viewing conditions. The second group, of course, had no foreknowledge of the interview. If indeed the immediate context and expectations of the viewer make a difference, it should be evident in a comparison of the average scores for the scheduled and ad hoc mass samples.

A second context variable arises because we completed two interviews on two separate programs with most of the scheduled viewers. Since respondents were familiar with the questions and probes in the second interview, we expected to find significantly greater numbers of analytic and interpretive comments.

The results of analyses involving these three variables are shown in Tables 3 and 4. As can be seen from Table 3, the orientation of viewers does make a difference, but the correlation is in the opposite direction. Those who were oriented toward selective viewing turned out to be the least responsive to the programs they saw.

There were further surprises on the context variables. Table 4 indicates that prearranged interviews did generate somewhat higher scores, but the differences were not very great. Perhaps most surprising was the lack of a sensitization effect on the results from the

**Table 3. The Social Definition of Television: Average Number of Comments per Depth Interview**

<i>Positive Orientation Toward Television [Mass Sample Only]</i>	<i>Analytic Comments</i>	<i>Interpretative Comments</i>
Low (21)	5.09	4.86
Medium (37)	4.27	3.16
High (27)	4.03	2.67
	<i>F</i> = 0.7/n.s.	<i>F</i> = 5.7/<.01

second interview. Program assignments were randomized, so both first and second interviews dealt with equivalent program types. The numbers of analytic and interpretive comments were not significantly different in the second interview and the averages were actually slightly lower than the first. Since interviews were scheduled a week apart, it is unlikely that a test fatigue phenomenon of the usual sort was in evidence here. We concluded simply that sensitization was not a major factor and that considering the small difference due to prearrangement, the depth-interview procedure is robust and generates data which are not significantly distorted by context cues.

A substantive conclusion which might be drawn from the context data parallels the earlier finding of minimal educational differences in the mass sample. We refer to the apparent ceiling effect in the number of comments television programs tend to stimulate among viewers. Whether or not an interview was prearranged, whether or not a previous interview had been conducted, and whether or not the respondent has a college education, the level of response is very close to that of the sample as a whole. The single exception was the special scholar sample, whose self-selection, extensive training, and professional experience characterize it as a truly unusual and atypical subgroup of viewers.

As with the earlier finding of minimal educational differences, these patterns run contrary to the traditional research literature concerning communication effects, which documents significant influences of

**Table 4. The Context of Viewing: Average Number of Comments per Depth Interview**

	<i>Analytic Comments</i>	<i>Interpretive Comments</i>
Prearranged interview (65)	4.71	3.59
Ad hoc interview (24)	3.57	2.96
	<i>T</i> = 2.2/n.s.	<i>T</i> = 1.1/n.s.
First interview (34)	8.32	4.29
Second interview (34)	6.82	4.18
	<i>T</i> = 1.3/n.s.	<i>T</i> = 0.1/n.s.

both education (Weiss, 1969) and communication context variables (McGuire, 1969). Since the great majority of studies of learning and persuasion involved either print media or lecture-presentation experiments, one possibility is that the established wisdom about which variables influence communicative effectiveness does not apply to communication through television. Perhaps until either the print orientation of the educational system or the social definition of television changes, the effect of this medium will be unique.

### Directions for Further Research

A central concern of this analysis was the prospect of cultural homogenization through television. We have focused here primarily on education as the stratification measure, and find relatively small differences among the different strata in responses to the ideas and information presented on commercial and public television. Since for many years survey research has revealed very distinct differences in attitude and information level across educational groups (Hyman et al., 1975), we take the lack of differentiated response in this case as possible evidence of a cultural leveling phenomenon.

These results raise interesting questions about the effect of formal education on patterns of information seeking and cognitive styles in processing information and cultural materials. Because high school students are repeatedly challenged to appraise, evaluate, and contrast ideas and information in examinations and paper assignments, there was a strong presumption that this experience would lead to a much more articulate and thoughtful response among the more educated television viewers. Apparently, the heavy reliance in education on traditional print resources has resulted in an educated public lacking either the disposition or skills (or perhaps both) to evaluate television programming critically. Given these findings, special care should perhaps be taken by those in public broadcasting to anticipate how mass audiences will respond to both classical and modern dramatic presentations. Adapting cultural works for television may prove to be as difficult as translating poetry from one language and culture to another, perhaps more so.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Some cynical observers might argue that even a generous supply of well-produced, serious programming would not provoke much in the way of a thoughtful response from the typical member of the American mass audience. This observation harks back to the intriguing question of whether the thoughtfulness of response is due to the sophistication of the viewer or the sophistication of the programming itself. Because two separate interviews on different programs were conducted with most of the scheduled sample, we were able to derive a rough answer to that question. The two interviews were correlated with each other at .46. This could be interpreted as a test-retest correlation

These findings emphasize that although our initial assumptions about which types of programs would be most thought-provoking in the mass audience were incorrect, the character of programming does indeed make a great deal of difference. The character of information being presented, the technology of communications, and the predispositions and cognitive styles of the audience interact in subtle ways. We are just beginning to understand the nature of these interactions.

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indicating that 21 percent of the variance is explained by the sophistication of the viewer and the remaining 79 percent is explained by thought-provoking character of program and measurement error. These are rough estimates, of course. A much better estimate would be derived from a broader sampling of materials and the inclusion of careful estimates of measurement error.