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THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ON CHILDREN: WHAT THE EXPERTS BELIEVE

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A national survey of mass media scholars was conducted to answer the question, "What impact do you *believe* television has on children?" The 486 scholars' beliefs are provacative, indicate a disparity exists between published empirical reports and the personal beliefs held by scholars and suggests a research agenda for future mass communication research. Perhaps most interestingly, a negative relationship was observed between academic publication and perceived negative consequences of television.

Concern over the impact of television on children has fueled an energetic outpouring of research. Academics called upon as impartial referees in the "effects debate" have decades of empirical studies as well as a growing number of literature reviews that attempt to provide state-of-the-art synthesis of "what we know about TV effects" (Roberts & Bachen, 1981; Liebert & Schwartzberg, 1977; Weiss, 1971; Tannenbaum & Greenberg, 1968). While such reviews provide insight into the question, "What do we know?", no published record has attempted to answer the question, "What do the experts believe about the effect of television?"

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The purpose of this study was to examine beliefs that a national sample of mass media scholars hold regarding television's consequences for children and to evaluate the shared nature of those beliefs. The findings shed a revealing light on perceptions with which mass media scholars approach television research. Moreover, they suggest that on come crucial topics — particularly the issue of TV violence — a disparity exists between published empirical reports and the personal beliefs that most scholars hold.

METHOD

Questionnaires were sent to members of the Theory and Methodology division of the Association for Education in Journalism and members of the Mass Communication division of the Speech Comunication Association — a total population of 784. After the first mailing, 388 questionnaires were completed and returned. A follow-up mailing

resulted in an additional 94 replies, for a total response rate of 62% (486/784).

Two sections of the questionnaire bore upon the issues raised. In the first, academics were asked specifically about their attitudes regarding television's effects on children. Eighteen statements were presented that attributed to children's television viewing variously commonly debated consequences — that it leads to a decrease in attention span, to an increase in knowledge about the world, etc. (Table 1). Respondents noted whether they felt television was "the cause" of each phenomenon, an "important contributory cause," a "somewhat important contributory cause," or "not at all an important contributory cause" (or whether they didn't know). The second section of the questionnaire eleicited standard demographic information from the scholars, including their age, their sex, and whether or not they were parents. In addition, questions concerning selected academic demographic variables were asked. These related to amount of publishing in academic, trade and popular journals or magazines; general research orientation (quantitative as opposed to qualitative); primary teaching orientation (theory versus skills); and occupational status working (academic or non-academic).

RESULTS

Nearly 79% of the academics who answered the questionnarie were men. The 486 respondents ranged in age from 21 to 80, the average being 41 and the median age being 39. Forty-one persent were parents with one or more children living at home. Nearly 70% had earned the Ph.D., and 30% held an M.A. or M.F.A. While 23% noted they blend "theory" and "skills" courses in their teaching, 31% indicated "theory as their primary orientation and 46% said their primary teaching load related to skills courses. At the same time, 39% of the respondents said they preferred a "quantitative" approach to research, another 35% preferred "qualitative" methods, and 26% said they could not make such a choice. There was a considerable range of publication activity depending on the type of journal. While 57% of the scholars had published at least one article in an academic journal over the last three years, only 24% had published in a popular magazine or newspaper. Thirty-five percent had published in a trade magazine or paper during the 3 years.

Scholar Beliefs. One point that stands out in this study is that mass media scholars recognize differences in televisions's ability to bring about certain consequences, and they recognize differences in their ability to even evaluate the role the medium plays in certain areas of life. The wide range of answers to the categories noted in Table 1 reflects this fairly sophisticated approach to the issue of television and children. By far the greatest consensus about the medium's power relates to TV's ability to increase children's knowledge about the world. Nearly 70% of the subjects felt television was an "important cause" in bringing about that consequence, and 9% even said TV was "the cause." The mean score for answers on that category was 2.8 out of a possible 4.0. In descending order, the next four effects scholars attribute strongly to television were: increasing buying behavior (2.60); increasing immediate gratification (2.42); reinforcing social values (2.35); and increasing sex stereotyping (2.35). The five effects scholars saw television contributing *least* to were: breaking down social values (1.68); increasing prosocial behaviors (1.80); increasing alienation (1.81); increasing interest in sex (1.92); and (tied for fifth place) increasing aggressive behavior and decreasing physical activity (1.99). Note the low position of increasing aggressive behavior. Despite the protracted national debate about TV's stimulation of youth violence — or perhaps because of the debate — 44% of the sample asserted that TV was only a "somewhat important cause" and 24% insisted that no relationship exists between TV and aggressive behavior.

Note too, that the ranking just presented is based on means calculated only for scholars expressing an opinion. On some catego-

ries of effects the number of scholars choosing the "don't know" choice reached as high as 22% of the sample. Examining the "don't know" column in Table 1 reveals an interesting added dimension to our exploration of scholars' beliefs. Confidence among the scholars, indicated by the absence of "don't knows," is highest for television's contribution in increasing world knowledge (6% don't know), decreasing reading ability (6.8%), increasing sex stereotyping (7.6%), decreasing physical activity (8.2%), and increasing excessive buying behavior (9.7%). Scholars are least confident about television's impact when it comes to discussing alienation (22.6% don't know), decreased attention span (21.6%), increases prosocial behavior (19.1%), breaking down social values (17.1%), and distorted perceptions of the political process (16.5%).

Turning the analysis around, a particularly strong indication of scholar beliefs in TV's impact is their willingness to label evision "the cause" of a particular phenomenon. As Table 1 shows, a consistently small — although by no means minuscule — percentage of respondents was willing to hold this absolutist position. Ten percent of the scholars said they believed the television was solely responsible for a decline in reading among children. Nine percent believed television was solely responsible for increasing children's knowledge and awareness of the world. Between six and eight percent believed television was the primary cause of children's increased desire for immediate gratification (7.8%) and decreasing creativity (6.4%). Only 4 of the 486 scholars were willing to charge television with being the sole cause of aggressive behavior.

TABLE 1

Scholars' Perceptions of the Effects of Television on Children: Mean Scores and Percentage Responses

Effect	Television's Contribution					
	Mean	The Cause	An Important Cause	A Somewhat Important Cause	No Relationship	Don't Know
(01) Increases Sex Role Stereotyping	2.34	1.2	40.1	39.3	11.1	7.6
(02) Increases Interest in Sex	1.92	1.9	19.3	37.2	30.0	11.5
(03) Decreases Reading Ability	2.31	10.1	36.8	32.5	13.8	6.8
(04) Increases Desire for Immediate Gratification	2.42	7.8	34.6	33.1	12.8	11.7
(05) Decreases Creativity	2.06	6.4	20.4	31.5	28.0	13.8
(06) Increases World Knowledge	2.80	9.1	60.7	21.6	2.7	6.0
(07) Increases Aggressive Behavior	1.99	0.8	21.2	43.8	23.9	10.5
(08) Increases Alienation	1.81	1.4	13.0	32.7	30.2	22.6
(09) Decreases Physical Activity	1.99	6.0	34.6	39.3	11.9	8.2
(10) Breaks Down Social Values	1.68	1.6	11.3	29.2	40.7	17.1
(11) Increases Verbal Ability	2.09	2.7	26.1	36.6	23.7	10.9
(12) Increases Excessive Buying Behavior	2.60	7.4	45.3	31.5	6.2	9.7
(13) Reinforces Existing Social Values	2.35	2.7	34.4	42.4	8.8	11.7
(14) Distorts Perceptions of Politics	2.04	3.5	22.2	32.3	25.5	16.5
(15) Increases Prosocial Behavior	1.80	0.6	10.7	40.7	28.8	19.1
(16) Increases Curiosity	2.17	2.5	27.4	39.9	17.7	12.6
(17) Decreases Attention Span	2.24	7.2	25.3	25.9	20.0	21.6

$N = 486$.

The context of beliefs. Semi-partial correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between scholars' beliefs and certain standard and academic demographic variables. Semi-partial correlations were choosen over other statistical techniques because the assumption of causal ordering could not be met. One other issue has implications of statistical procedure: how to handle "don't know" responses. Maintaining a distinction between those expressing some degree of certainty about their belief (as expressed by willingness to take a position) and those unsure of TV's effects, the analysis of the context of scholars' beliefs proceeded in two parts. A first calculation of semi-partials was conducted for each of the contextual variables on the degree of importance respondents attached to the impact of each of the 18 television effects. That is, the contextual variables were examined only for those holding beliefs. Afterwards, a semi-partial analysis was carried out employing a "know/don't know?" dichotomy as a dependent variable in order to find out if any background characterics could be related to the presence or absence of a stance on particular issues.

Table 2 presents the results of the first analysis. A number of patterns are evident among the correlations that are statistically significant. One clear finding is that virtually all the associations are moderate, ranging between .10 and .23. Another noteworthy finding is that most of the significant correlations on the degreee of importance scholars attach to TV's impact relate the perceptions of effects to standard demographic variables, not to the variables that reflect academic environment. Of the three standard demographic variables, scholar's sex seems to associate most consistently with perceptions of TV's effects. Being an older scholar related to a belief that TV breaks down social values, and not having children at home relates to a scholar's perception that TV increases alienation, verbal ability and creativity. But being female rather than male relates moderately to believing that TV contributes to a larger range of consequences — 9 of the 18, in fact. These include reduced reading ability, physical activity and creativity; distorted political values; and increased tendency toward immediate gratification, aggressiveness, alienation, ethnic stereotyping and sex stereotyping. Interestingly, the relationship between being a female scholar and believing that television contributes to sex stereotyping is the strongest correlation observed.

See Table 2 following article

Among the academic variables, the only one that relates with any consistency to the degree of importance scholars attach to TV's consequences is the number of academic articles or books published in the last three years. Somewhat surprisingly, scholars with more academic publications than other scholars are *less likely* than their lesser published colleagues to believe that television decreases children's attention span, or increases their knowledge of the world or desire for immediate gratification.

These findings were extended after the various dimensions of perceived effects were subjected to factor analysis. A principal components factor analysis of the 18 perceived effect variables resulted in two distinct factors which accounted for 45 percent of the total variance: an anti-social dimension containing all but four of the effect variables and a prosocial dimension composed of the remaining perceived effect variables (Bybee, Robinson & Turow, 1982). Semi-partial correlations for each of the nine demographic variables were computed for the two dimensions. In view of the earlier discussion of significant associations, it should not be surprising that scholar's sex and parenthood were significantly related to a perception that television has an anti-social impact on children. Women more than men and scholars withourt children more than those with children tended to hold this generally critical perspective on the medium. Academic attributes, by contrast, showed no significant association with this view. The two significant links

were, however, related to perceptions that television has pro-social consequences. Scholars with more academic publications than their colleagues tended to downplay television's importance as a pro-social force, while scholars with more popular publications than their colleagues tended to espouse the pro-social perspective. THe latter findings and the absence of any relationship of publication to perceived *anti*-social effects are consistent with the associations between academics and perceived effects that were presented earlier. They point to a more conservative outlook on TV's effects among the more published and prestigious group of scholars in the sample. This finding certainly warrants further investigation.

Recall that the correlations just discussed reflect the range of importance that scholars attached to television's impact when they filled out that questionnaire. Turning to the second group of semi-partial correlations (not presented) — the one that reflects the "know/don't know" dichotomy — yields a good deal fewer patterns. Two points will summarize the most important findings. One is that there were only 18 significant associations between contextual variables and the decision of a mass media scholar to take a stand or not take a stand on an aspect of TV's impact. Related is the point that 15 of the 18 significant correlations associated with only one contextual variable — the academic orientation of the scholar. The pattern is clear. Scholars working in an academic environment are much more likely than their counterparts outside academia to feel they can make judgements about the effects of mass media on children.

DISCUSSION

This study presents several thought-provoking findings about mass media scholars' perceptions of television's effects on children. Overall, the scholars exhibited a good deal of certainty and conviction that television plays an important causal role in expanding children's views of the world, decreasing their reading behavior, increasing their propensity to engage in sex stereotyping, reducing their overall physical activity, and promoting excessive materilism. One would not exactly call this view a vote of confidence in the medium. Being female and, less often, being older and not having children at home seemed moderately related to the voicing of these concerns. Somewhat startling was the finding that highly published academics tended to not judge television's effects as negatively. Also surprising was the finding that most scholars placed television's ability to increase aggression rather low on the ladder of their concerns about television.

The last observation may indicate that large numbers of mass communication researchers disagree with the mounting evidence in empirical reports and literature that TV violence contributes to children's aggressive behavior. Before accepting this conclusion, though, alternative possibilities warrent a good deal more investigation. It may be, for example, that when playing down television violence many of the scholars are not quarreling with specific research results or approaches, but, rather, are responding to politically charged disputes on the issue in the society at large and to conflicting publicity characterizing the first Surgeon General's Report on Television and Social Behavior (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972). Moreover, it bears stressing that TV's involvement in violence was ranked low only in a relative sense. As Table 1 shows, 65% of the scholars did state that television was at least a "somewhat important cause" in increasing aggressive behavior. We might suggest that the reason television's role in aggression didn't receive higher ranking is precisely because of the great amount of scholarly attention and public debate paid over the years to the relation of televised violence and real life aggression. The debate has teased nuances for the issue and highlighted a gamut of contributing factors embedded in the social context that simply have not been salient to the same extent in discussions of other areas of TV's influence. Ironically, then, it might be the greater

sophistication about TV violence when compared to other areas that has led scholars to rank it lower on their scale of concerns.

Finally, we should consider the areas in which scholars indicated a substantial amount of uncertainty about TV's consequences. Television's contribution to children's alienation, to a breakdown of their social values, and to a distortion of their perceptions of political systems remains fairly ambiguous in the minds of scholars. The relationship of these three areas is quite apparent. They all address the issue of our culture's ability to effectively integrate succeeding generations into society. Another commonality among these three areas is that they focus on essentially long term consequences of the media. They are the difficult areas to study, not only in terms of methodology, but also in terms of the required degree of sophisticated theorizing. Micro theories dealing with sub-processes are not adequate to the task. Indirectly, then, the mass media scholars in our sample have implied a critical agenda for research: Theories of society must be reexamined in attempts to locate the role of mass media within a broader, more historically based on social context.

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TABLE 2

Semi-Partial Correlations Between Perceived Effects of Television and Selected Standard and Academic Demographic Variables

	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Standard Demographics										
Scholar's Age	00	09c	-03	04	02	07	05	00	05	14a
Scholar's Sex (M = +)	-23a	-08c	-12a	-10b	-16a	-03	-18a	-11b	-16a	-10c
Children (Yes = +)	-01	03	-10b	-09c	-11b	08c	-03	-12b	-05	-08c
Academic Demographics										
Academic Publications	-04	-04	00	-13	-04	-14a	00	00	-06	-07
Trade Publications	-03	05	04	07	00	05	05	01	05	10b
Popular Publications	-02	01	-04	-06	05	05	-01	-06	05	00
Research Orientation	-04	-05	-00	-03	-02	-07	-02	-10b	-07	-04
Teaching Orientation	01	-05	-08c	-02	-06	00	00	-02	-08	-06
Academic Affiliation	-02	00	-08c	09c	-03	00	-03	-07	09b	-04
N =	444	428	444	421	416	457	426	370	441	399

	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	Anti-Social Index	Pro-Social Index
Standard Demographics										
Scholar's Age	04	-09c	-07	-05	-11c	-02	-04	00	-04	-07
Scholar's Sex (M = +)	-06	-09c	-02	-10b	05	07	-14a	-09c	19a	02
Children (Yes = +)	13a	14a	-01	-07	01	02	00	-16a	-16a	04
Academic Demographics										
Academic Publications	-08	-07	03	-06	-07	-08	-02	-17a	-09	-11b
Trade Publications	00	00	00	08	06	07	-04	02	01	04
Popular Publications	07	00	03	01	-02	-01	01	01	-03	14b
Research Orientation	-08	-07	-10b	03	03	-05	00	00	-03	-09
Teaching Orientation	-00	-08	08	-06	01	-02	04	-02	-09	00
Academic Affiliation	00	-02	04	00	01	07	05	-03	-08	09
N =	427	430	426	406	388	419	422	378	273	273

All decimal points have been omitted for readablity.
Significance levels are as follows: a = .01; b = .05; c = .10.
Variables 01 through 18 are the eighteen effect variables listed in Table 1.