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Abstract

Television's worthiness as a source of information about contemporary culture has been evaluated time and time again by researchers. Yet systematic analysis of the nature and social role of information and interview programs is virtually non-existent, even though public relations practitioners have long utilized these programs as important publicity outlets.

In this article, Joseph Turow and Ceritta Park describe their survey of "i & i" programming, noting that this broadcasting category represents "a rich lode" of opportunities for public relations firms seeking an appropriate means of communicating their clients' points of view.

Disciplines

Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Mass Communication | Public Relations and Advertising

Comments

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Joseph Turow
Ceritta Park

Television's worthiness as a source of information about contemporary culture has been evaluated time and time again by researchers. Yet systematic analysis of the nature and social role of information and interview programs is virtually non-existent, even though public relations practitioners have long utilized these programs as important publicity outlets.

In this article, Joseph Turow and Ceritta Park describe their survey of "i & i" programming, noting that this broadcasting category represents "a rich lode" of opportunities for public relations firms seeking an appropriate means of communicating their clients' points of view.

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Information and interview programs—shows that in whole or in part discuss and evaluate contemporary cultural happenings without treating them as breaking news stories—have, for some years, been recognized by broadcasters, public relations professionals, and sociologists as serving important roles. Local programmers and network officials have long realized the importance of such programs for fulfilling the "public affairs" obligations of their broadcasting licenses. Both groups of executives have also increasingly noted the ability of certain information and interview programs (e.g., "The Tonight Show," "60 Minutes," "PM Magazine," and "Hour Magazine") to garner substantial audience ratings and prestige at efficient costs.

Public relations professionals, for their part, have looked on information and interview programs as providing the quickest and most timely way to present new styles, people, and ideas to relevant segments of the country. Public relations firms routinely send authors, actors, advocacy group spokespersons, and other celebrities (or would-be celebrities) through the "talk show," "news show," and "magazine show" circuits.¹ Some sociologists have suggested that information and interview shows often serve as gatekeepers that "process fads and fashions" for society at large, thereby helping to set cultural agendas.² All three groups seem to agree that information and interview (i & i) programs have become the late 20th century's equivalents of the town crier.

In spite of the important functions that information and interview shows are thought to serve for broadcasters, public relations professionals, and society at large, systematic analysis of those functions is virtually nonexistent. Do information and interview programs indeed set nationally-shared cultural agendas? If they do, what is the manner in which these agendas are set? Are they likely to be set primarily at the network television level or at the level of local station programming? No answers to these questions are at hand. No investigation could be found of even the *number* of such programs across the country, the times at which they are broadcast, and the subjects with which they deal. Such basic information is crucial for formulating and testing hypotheses about the manner in which ideas, events, and personalities are filtered through the "information and interview circuit" to a nationwide population. The purpose of this study is to provide such a fundamental overview, based on a survey of the information and interview programs broadcast on television across the United States.

Method

The survey of information and interview programs was conducted with the aid of a respected public relations industry handbook, "TV Publicity Outlets—Nationwide."³ Compiled by a small Connecticut firm for the past several years, the handbook attempts to list every program on broadcast television in the United States that accepts topics, materials (scripts, films, slides), and guests from sources outside the local station, network, or syndicator that produces the show. The programs, presented alphabetically by the states and cities of the firms that originate them, are compiled and updated in the following manner: Four times a year, a questionnaire is sent to the coordinator of every known information or interview show in all 50 states; to every local television station in the country; to each of the four networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS); and to every commercial syndicator that originates new programming. Accompanying the questionnaire is the description of the coordinator's show as it already appears in the handbook, and a request to update the description if it is inaccurate. The station, network, and syndication executives contacted are asked to provide information regarding new programs the handbook does *not* cover. Non-responses are followed by a second questionnaire,

and non-responses to the second wave are followed by personal telephone calls from “TV Publicity Outlet” compilers.

This multi-faceted procedure has allowed “TV Publicity Outlets” to collect data on information and interview programs with a virtual 100% response rate. An executive in the firm that produces the handbook emphasized that, over the years, program directors have found it advantageous to respond—and respond truthfully—to the “Publicity Outlet” questionnaire. The handbook is used by many advertising and public relations firms, and being included in it enhances a show’s chances of receiving interesting program suggestions and guests. It should also be noted that a comparison of the stations listed in each of the top 200 markets by *Television Factbook* with those listed (along with the information and interview shows) by “TV Publicity Outlets” bore out the accuracy of the handbook’s station coverage.

With the goal of establishing a basic overview of the number and nature of the information and interview programs produced in the United States, several items were coded from every program listed in the “TV Publicity Outlets” of early 1979. The state, market of origin, and areas of distribution were coded, as were items related to the firm that originated the program—whether it was a local station, a network, or a syndicator; whether, if it was a local station, that station was a commercial network affiliate, a public broadcasting station, or a commercial independent; and whether, if it was a local station, it operated on VHF or UHF. Another set of items related to the show itself—the presentation form (taped or live); the day, time, and length of broadcast; the number of hosts; the apparent gender of hosts (as suggested by title—Ms., Mrs., Miss, Mr.—or first name); the public relations resources accepted (guests, scripts, film, slides, or a combination); the “major interest of the program,” and subcategories of the major interest. Regarding the “major interest,” program respondents were asked to choose one of four categories—general, men’s, children’s, or women’s. Beyond these broad, audience-related divisions, respondents were encouraged to specify the nature of their show further. Many did, and the 49 different subject subcategories found in the handbook were transferred directly to the program coding sheets.⁴

Findings

The “TV Publicity Outlets” survey uncovered 1,833 interview and information programs across the United States. Programs were found to originate in every state. Each of the top 200 television markets had its own i & i shows, and so did some smaller TV markets. The overwhelming number of programs (92% of them) originated from local stations for local broadcast; only 4% of the shows were carried on commercial or public networks, and only 4% were syndicated. Commercial network affiliates outnumbered public broadcasters and commercial independents in producing i & i programs, as might be expected by the relative presence of these station types. Interestingly, however, the commercial network affiliates overrepresented their presence among television stations producing such shows, while the public broadcasters strongly underrepresented their presence. Specifically, the commercial affiliates produced 78% of the programs while comprising 62% of the 988 stations nationwide in 1979,⁵ and the noncommercial broadcasters produced 7% of the shows while comprising 27% of the stations. Commercial independents, meanwhile, essentially matched their nationwide presence among stations (10%) with the percentage of i & i programs they originated (13%). It might also be noted that among all broadcasters, VHF stations, which comprised 63% of all stations nationwide (the rest—37%—being UHF), overrepresented their presence in the interview and information area. They produced 78% of the shows, compared to the 23% originated by UHFs.

The i & i originators exhibited a few strong choices regarding the days their shows were broadcast. The most popular choice (characterizing 34% of the shows) was a five-day, Monday-through-Friday, schedule. Sunday-only drew second place (25%), and Saturday-only amounted to 14% of the shows. Aside from Saturday and Sunday, no single day held more than 2% of the i & i programs by itself. More frequent were a variety of day combinations (other than Monday through Friday) which together represented 19% of the programs. The situation was somewhat similar regarding the time of day a program was broadcast. Here, morning (6 a.m.-11:59 a.m.) comprised the most popular slot, holding 32% of the shows, with the presence of other day-parts falling off sharply. A noon starting time (12 noon-12:59 p.m.) characterized 15% of the shows; afternoon (1 p.m.-5:59 p.m.) characterized 12%; early evening (6 p.m.-7:59 p.m.) saw 14%; late evening (8 p.m.-10:59 p.m.) saw 6%; and night (11 p.m.-5:59 a.m.) saw 2%. It should be added that a substantial number of programs (19% of the total) were listed as airing at “various” time slots. While this sometimes meant that the show was not regularly scheduled and that the viewer had to “catch as catch can,” much more often it meant that the program

aired a few times during the day and would accept guests and other forms of publicity at either time. For example, “Newswatch,” of KOAI-Flagstaff, Ariz., was listed as accepting guests and publicity material during both its early and late Monday-through-Friday evening newscasts.

Exploring the basic format of the information and interview programs yielded a pattern that was, in a broad sense, similar to the one seen in scheduling: Clearly dominant tendencies were observed, but so was room for variation. Unfortunately, one fundamental aspect of format—program duration—was noted in the handbook for only 43% of the shows. Among these, the half hour was, by far, the Number One choice (66%), with hour-long programs coming in a distant second (19%), and programs longer than one hour even farther behind (6%). Interestingly, shows lasting less than 30 minutes—generally an unorthodox duration in commercial television—comprised 9% of the programs whose lengths were noted. Included were 15-minute local news and community affairs programs (e.g. “Morning Edition,” on WNEM-TV, Saginaw, Mich.), and five-minute “community bulletin board” programs (e.g. “Good Morning, Acadiana,” on KATC-TV, Lafayette, La.) designed to fit into the hour breaks of commercial network information and interview shows (“Today,” “Good Morning, America,” and “CBS Morning”).

As it happens, only one of the five programs just mentioned (“Good Morning, Acadiana”) was not presented “live.” Overall, however, the number of pre-recorded i & i programs exceeded those aired live, 58% to 41%. At the same time, the five programs did follow the dominant trend in naming a single “host” for the information and interview proceedings. Across the entire sample, 74% of the shows listed one host. A two-host setup characterized 11% of the programs; 1% had more than two hosts; and 14% were noted as simply having “various” hosts. Denoting a program as having a single host did not necessarily mean that only one person appeared on a continuing basis; on “Good Morning, America,” for example, several cast members joined “host” David Hartman every day. Rather, the title “host” designated a powerful, central on-camera position by the named individual or individuals. Judging by first names and sex-linked titles, men enjoyed that position quite a bit more often than women did. Men were the sole hosts of 59% of the information and interview shows that named regular hosts, women alone were listed in 26% of the programs, and men and women together were named in 10%.

Guests were recognized as the mainstays of information and interview formats. A full 94% of the shows invited submission of guest suggestions. While 41% wanted guests only, 53% listed guests and/or other materials (scripts, films) as acceptable. Only 4% invited scripts or films exclusively, no guests allowed. (Two percent listed no information regarding publicity resources.)

What subjects were the information and interview shows set up to cover, both individually and as a group? Most of the people who responded to the questionnaire about their shows seemed to opt for unspecified broadness in noting program orientation, as if to indicate that they would use anything “of interest.” In response to the request to check the “major interest area” of the program, representatives from 91% of the i & i shows checked “general,” representatives from 5% checked “children,” those from 3% of the shows checked “women,” and those from two-tenths of 1 percent (in all, just three shows) checked “men.” The majority—59%—did not choose to specify the nature of their show further. Among those who did (representatives of 758 shows), 20% noted “public affairs”—a category still quite broad in subject and audience orientation. “Public affairs” was the most common category among the 49 that the respondents named. “News”—similarly broad in subject and audience orientation—took second place; 11% chose it.

The number of i & i shows described by the same categories dropped sharply from then on. Some relatively common labels were community and local events (8%), black affairs (7%), minority affairs (7%), controversial subjects (5%), agriculture (5%), Spanish and Hispanic (4%), magazine format (4%), consumer information (3%), and religion (3%).⁶ Among the subjects mentioned in still smaller numbers were preteen and teenagers, senior citizens, environment and ecology, feminist movement, investments, personality profiles, Jewish affairs, health, music, and Indian affairs. Although such narrow-interest categories made up the bulk of volunteered labels, their actual presence, even when combined, was not very large, as Table 1 shows. The table incorporates the “major interest” categories in cases where no subcategories were volunteered and collapses the 49 subcategories into 7 areas of knowledge for times where they were used. As can be seen, the large majority

TABLE 1	
SUBJECT OF INFORMATION AND INTERVIEW PROGRAMS	
	% (N=1,833)
General	51
Public affairs	23
Ethnic, minority and women's concerns	12
Children's programming	5
Hobbies, cultural affairs	3
Business	3
Health	.5
Entertainment	.5
Other or mixed	2
	100

of programs (75%) fell into the categories that most strongly indicate broadness in subject and audience orientation—"general" and "public affairs."

Table 2 presents the distribution of interview and information programs across the United States according to the nine major regions designated by the Census Bureau. The table lists the ranking of each region in terms of the percentage of programs which originate in it and in terms of its percentage of the national population, according to the 1980 census. It will be recalled that 8% of the 1,833 programs were transmitted both within and outside their cities of origin through networking or syndication. Not surprisingly, most of those programs (60%) were produced in the nation's major cities and broadcast centers—New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Moreover, half of the programs that were networked or syndicated (particularly those not originating on the two coasts) remained within their regions of production. For every program like "The Dick Cavett Show" (which in 1979 appeared from New York on the entire Public Broadcasting System) there was one like "IPBN Presents Mary Jane Odell" (which originated from Des Moines for the Iowa Public Broadcasting Network only). As a result, a full 96% of the programs reflected in Table 2 were produced by local stations for local, or, at most, regional release. As the table shows, the number of shows produced in each region roughly paralleled the population of the region. The four most populous regions were also the top four in the number of interview and information programs they originated, though not necessarily in the same order. Likewise, though the order was somewhat different, the five least populous regions also held the bottom five positions regarding the i & i shows.

The distribution of i & i programs across the United States raises a related issue: To what extent are the format and subject characteristics that were discussed earlier regarding the overall sample present in the various regions of the country? The answer is that there was remarkable similarity across all the regions regarding those basic characteristics of information and interview shows. All the dominant and secondary tendencies discussed earlier were echoed in every region. Moreover, differences from the percentages in the sample as a whole exceeded nine points in only one case.

That one case related to the kinds of publicity resources the programs accepted, and it raised an intriguing question about the connection between a show's geographical location and the control its producers exert over the flow of subjects and people they need to continue the show on the air. It would seem that accepting either guests or publicity materials (e.g. scripts or films) for a program would indicate a greater willingness on the part of program planners to relinquish part of an i & i spot to scriptwriters, filmmakers, and publicists from outside the program than would inviting guests only (a "guests only" policy would seem to imply a greater emphasis on journalistic autonomy and pride, since it places all stages of program production at the hands of program staff members). Recall that, overall, representatives from 53% of the information and

interview shows indicated a willingness to accept either guests or publicity materials; 41% invited guests only, and 4% accepted films or script only. (Two percent did not describe the resources accepted.) This general pattern was followed very closely (within just a few percentage points) in every region of the United States but two—the Mid-Atlantic and the East South Central parts of the country. The differences involved the two main categories—“guests only” and “guests or materials.” In the Mid-Atlantic region (comprising the states of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania) “guests only” characterized 52% of the shows (11 points higher than in the sample as a whole), while “guests or materials” characterized 39% of the shows (14 points lower than the overall mean). By contrast, in the East South Central region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama), the situation was reversed. “Guests only” characterized 31% of the shows (10 points *lower* than the mean), while “guests plus materials” characterized 66% (13 points *higher* than the mean). The differences were significant beyond the .01 level (chi square= 71.89, 24 degrees of freedom).

It is not difficult to suggest reasons for the disproportionate number of Mid-Atlantic programs that insisted on guests only. The large population concentrations of the region, along with the existence of publishing, art, broadcast, and public relations capitals of the nation within its boundaries, would seem to give

<i>Region</i> ¹	<i>% of Shows</i> (N = 1,833)	<i>Rank in</i> <i>Programs</i>	<i>Census Rank</i>	<i>% of Population</i> ² (N = 225.7 Million)
South Atlantic	19	1	3	16
East North Central	16	2	1	18
Pacific	13	3	4	14
Mid-Atlantic	12	4	2	16
West North Central	10	5	6	6
West South Central	10	6	5	10
Mountain	7	7	9	5
East South Central	7	8	7	6
New England	6	9	8	5
	100			98

¹*South Atlantic* : Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida; *East North Central* : Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin; *Pacific*: Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii; *Mid-Atlantic* : New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania; *West North Central* : Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; *West South Central*: Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas; *Mountain*: Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada; *East South Central*: Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi; *New England* : Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut.

²*Source* : "Preliminary Census (Figures Based on Actual Count)," *The New York Times* , Dec. 17, 1980, p. A18.

The total is less than 100% because of rounding error.

the shows' producers leverage to be very choosy about their outside sources and to avoid the appearance of simply transmitting pre-packaged publicity. Other parts of the United States, with fewer nationally recognized cultural sources to draw upon for programming, with population concentrations that would not attract publicity tour planners, and without monetary support that would shoulder large production and travel budgets, would seem more likely to relinquish some journalistic autonomy for expensively-produced material about famous or interesting people. At the same time, it is difficult to suggest a satisfying reason for the East South Central i & i shows' situation. Why should that region—as opposed to the Mountain or West North Central regions, for example—accept “guests or other materials” to a disproportionate degree? Perhaps an answer might be found in the manner in which publicity firms circulate their clients throughout the nation.

Conclusion

This overview of broadcast television's information and interview shows points to a rich lode of programming across the United States that discusses and displays contemporary cultural phenomena. While nationally networked and syndicated i & i programs certainly exist, by far the greatest number of such shows are produced and telecast on a local basis. The shows air on a fairly wide range of days and times, and they include the well-watched local news slots. Moreover, the individual programs seem amenable to carrying a wide spectrum of subjects; most of the program representatives opted to describe the subject matter they solicit in the most “general” terms, or to get just a bit more specific and mention “public affairs.” Patterns in subject matter and scheduling were similar across the different “census” regions of the United States. However, differences in the kinds of publicity resources accepted by i & i program planners in certain regions point to the possibility that geographical proximity to established media centers or “publicity circuits” sometimes influences the extent to which the planners can apply the value of journalistic independence to their subjects and formats.

Of course, these findings and the others in the study raise more questions than they answer. Just how large—and how diverse—are the audiences for these programs? How much actual overlap in subject matter exists between the shows at (and across) network and local levels? In practice how do program planners define the “general” and “public affairs” subject categories and how do they choose specific topics? What role do other programs—and other media—play in these choices? Do representatives of i & i shows (and non-broadcast media) keep in touch with one another, and if so, to what effect? How strong *are* traditional journalistic norms in subject selection and presentation? To what extent do public relations agencies and other idea promoting organizations play a role in helping to determine the content of i & i shows in different regions of the country? The present investigation has provided a launching pad for these questions. Answering them will help illuminate the role of a much neglected form of television programming in shaping a broadly-shared cultural agenda within the United States.

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- ¹Grant Pick. “On the Road with Craig Claiborne and His Gourmet Diet,” *TWA Ambassador*. (January 1981), pp. 9-18.
- ²See, for example, Paul Hirsch, “Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 77. (1972) pp. 639-659; and Gaye Tuchman, “Assembling a Network Talk Show,” Gaye Tuchman, ed., *The TV Establishment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974). pp.119-136.
- ³“*TV Publicity Outlets—Nationwide*,” (Washington Depot, Conn.: TV Publicity Outlets, 1979.)
- ⁴For all categories, the choices used on the coding sheets to describe the programs were equivalent to the handbook's program descriptions. This situation ensured that no problems of interpretation would arise in the data transference. And, in fact, when the study's coder (the second author) pretested the coding instrument for reliability at the start of research, no problems were found.
- ⁵The source for the number and kinds of television stations nationwide is *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1979 (Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, 1979), pp. A-1 and D-49.
- ⁶It should be stressed that only religious programs that routinely accepted guests from outside the producing organization or religious groups were included in the “Publicity Outlet” survey.