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Paul Messaris

University of Pennsylvania, pmessaris@asc.upenn.edu

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Abstract

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Disciplines

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Family Conversations About Television

PAUL MESSARIS

Annenberg School of Communications

University of Pennsylvania

Even in households with more than one television set, family members seem to do much of their viewing in each other's company (Bower, 1973). How do parents and children interact with each other at such times? In early research on television, the evidence appeared to indicate that the new medium was suppressing conversations and other family interactions (see Maccoby, 1951; Steiner, 1963: 101-103); but later findings (such as those of Barcus, 1969; Lyle and Hoffman, 1972) have not supported this notion, and in-home observational studies (for example, by Bechtel et al., 1972; Bryce, 1981; Lull, 1980; Wolf et al., 1982) have found that watching television is not so passive an activity as is sometimes imagined. As Murray (1980: 54) has noted, it may well be the case that, once television becomes an established part of family life, social activities are reconstituted around it. This article examines one aspect of families' television-related social activities, namely, conversations between parents and children about programs they are watching. What role do such conversations play in family members' developing relationships to one another and to the "outside" world? This question is the focus of the discussion.

Naturally, not all kinds of family conversation about television are equally interesting from this perspective. Previous descriptive studies (e.g., Alexander, 1982a, 1982b; Lull and Meyers, 1981; Weisner, 1981) have reported many types of conversations whose implications probably do not extend much beyond the speakers' relationships to television itself: for example, discussions about who a certain actor or actress is and where he or she has been seen before; requests to be "filled in" on segments of a program that have been missed; deliberations about which channel to switch to next; and so forth. While some of this kind of thing may have important consequences for a child's developing understanding of the nature of the television medium (see Messaris and Sarett, 1981), such conversations were considered less relevant to present concerns, and, despite the frequency with which they appear to occur, they will not be dealt with here.

The types of conversations (including "one-way" remarks) to be examined here may conveniently be grouped under two main headings: first, conversations in which information about some aspect of the real world is sought and/or given following a televised portrayal of or reference to that aspect of the world; second, conversations in which behavior portrayed or

referred to on television is examined as a possible model (either positive or negative) for the behavior of other people in real life, and, in particular, of the family members themselves. Elaborations on and implications of these two types of conversations will be discussed under each of these two headings.

In examining the implications of these kinds of conversations, this article draws on the findings of existing research in this area, in addition to offering some speculations of its own. The various kinds of conversations to be considered in the course of this discussion are illustrated with examples from a set of observations of families watching television in their homes. The families, 113 in all, were all residents of a large eastern U.S. city and its suburbs, and they ranged in social class from upper-middle-class professionals to unemployed receiving public assistance. Each family included at least one child below the age of 13.¹ Observations were scheduled for periods when, in the judgment of the parents, it was likely that at least one parent would be watching television with the child(ren).² All observations were conducted by one of two members of a team of trained student observers, who were instructed to record all conversations explicitly referring to television, as well as other relevant aspects of the social context.³ All quotations in the following text are excerpted verbatim from these observational records.

INFORMATION-ORIENTED CONVERSATIONS

Given television's capacity to confront children with the new and the unfamiliar, one should not be surprised to find that, when parents and children are watching television together, children often make requests for additional information about things shown or mentioned on the screen. For example, here is a brief exchange between an eight-year-old boy and his mother, following the mention of an electric chair in a crime drama set in the past.

Son: Is there still an electric chair?

Mother: In some states. They want to vote on it.

Son: What is it?

Mother: It's a chair where they strap you down like this. [She demonstrates.] And then they pass an electric current through you so you die. It's not good.

Son: So why do they want it?

Mother: Some people think it's good. That a criminal deserves to die.

As this example suggests, conversations of this kind may have several dimensions (in this case, a moral or political one in addition to the informational one), and the distinction between them is by no means always straightforward. For the moment, however, these complications will be kept in the background of this discussion.

What are the consequences of parents' television-inspired informational comments? In part, the answer must depend on the nature of the topic about which the comment is made. Some of the informational exchanges recorded in this study dealt with topic areas, such as history, geography, or natural science, that are part of the standard curriculum in formal education. For example, a twelve-year-old girl's question about George III (mentioned in a *Masterpiece Theater* production) brought forth from her mother the explanation, "He was the king of England during the American revolution when we won our independence," to which the daughter responded, "That's right I remember. We learned that in history class." A Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew program

set in Transylvania prompted the following exchange between a six-year-old girl and her father: "Transylvania really exists?!" "Yes, it's an area in Southern Europe, in Rumania." To the extent that children do absorb the information in such comments, cases of this kind may be seen as supplementing or reinforcing the formal educational process (a possibility also suggested by Lull, 1980). In this regard, it should be noted that there is considerable evidence, in the work of Corder-Bolz and others (see Corder-Bolz, 1980; Corder-Bolz and O'Bryant, 1978; Kerr et al., 1982), that informational commentary by parents or other influential adults does indeed increase the educational potential of children's television viewing.

However, much of the informational commentary to which television gives rise is bound to deal with subjects that are only tangentially related to formal education or totally unrelated to it. For example, parents were asked to explain such things as fishing through a hole in the ice (shown on *One Day at a Time*), the origin of the horses in Budweiser commercials, or why some trombone players wiggle their hands in front of their instruments (Father's answer: "They have a mute inside"). In strictly academic terms, the educational value of these kinds of conversations is probably small. However, their broader implications may be considerable. To begin with, some of these conversations—although not the ones in the preceding examples—revolve around what might be termed "adult" issues (marriage, sex, reproduction, and so on). As others have also found (see Kirkland, 1981; Anderson et al., 1979)—and as one might expect—children's television-inspired questions about these issues can lead to stressful confrontations. For example, an eleven-year-old boy's repeated questions about why his parents had laughed at Archie Bunker's mispronunciation of "minstrel show" as "menstrual show" were met first by the mother's statement that a word had been used incorrectly and then by an irritated "Watch the show!" from the father. Conversely, Kirkland (1981) has reported instances in which parents would deliberately use television as a means of introducing their children to some of these issues. As Meyrowtz (1981) has argued, "adulthood" can be defined in part in terms of the types of information one possesses; and in this sense family conversations about these issues may be seen not merely as exchanges (or nonexchanges) of information but also as means by which relationships of authority and protection within the family are probed, tested, or adjusted.

Up to this point, the implications of information-oriented conversations have been considered in relation to the particular kind of topic with which they happen to be concerned. However, such conversations may also have implications that do not depend on the specifics of their topics. The possibility is suggested by Bateson's (1972) argument that an important result of any investigation is what one learns about the nature of investigation itself, rather than about the object of the particular act of investigation. In the present instance, it could well be that one of the most important lessons that children derive from their television-inspired requests for information has to do with the value of trying to go beyond what one is given in this or any other medium. In reading through the observational records, one is struck almost immediately by the considerable differences in the ways parents treat their children's questions. Whereas some parents are either completely unresponsive or give only minimal answers (even in cases in which the topic of the question does not call for any specialized knowledge), others answer questions in detail and at length. Furthermore, there are cases in which parents themselves quiz their children about the content of a program (providing additional information if necessary), as in the following exchange between a mother and her four-year-old daughter, who were watching *Charlie's Angels*.

Mother: Is that a plane or a helicopter?

Daughter: A helicopter.

Mother: You're my smart little girl, aren't you!

It seems reasonable to assume that these differences in parental behavior may affect a child's tendency to ask further questions and to probe beyond the immediately available, on television and perhaps elsewhere. This supposition is consistent with Popp's (1982) finding that children of parents with very little formal education tended to ask fewer questions when watching television, and it is also consistent with the finding by Chaffee et al. (1971) that children brought up in families that encouraged free inquiry were more likely to have an "informational" orientation to television.

There is a further aspect to the issue of how parents handle their children's requests for information about things they see on television. Although, as noted earlier, parents' unresponsiveness to children's questions does not seem to be typically a result of lack of information, there were cases in the observational records in which this latter possibility did seem to be the case, while, conversely, there were also instances of detailed and repeated conversations about areas in which a parent clearly had extensive knowledge. The following pair of examples illustrates this contrast. In the first example, a child's repeated questions about an episode of *Wild World of Animals* are met first by acknowledged ignorance and then by what might be interpreted as an attempt to change the subject.

Son: Mommy, what do you think them African people eat?

Mother: I don't know, I never studied them. Probably meat and things we do.

Son: Dead animals?

Mother: They cook them probably. Meat [pause] mostly. Probably.

Son: [a few moments later] Is that a country or a state?

Mother: A country-look at that. [She points to a herd of elephants on the screen.]

On the other hand, here are a few excerpts from comments by a father, his fifteen-year-old son, and his twelve-year-old daughter at various points during the movie *MacArthur*.

Daughter: Where is this?

Father: The Philippines, World War II.

Son: Who's speaking?

Father: F.D.R.

Son: Where are they now?

Father: Off the coast of Australia.

Daughter: Who's that?

Father: Tokyo Rose.

Son: What is this speech?

Father: They got MacArthur out of there by issuing a presidential order and then they went and surrendered.

Son: Who's Wainwright?

Father: He's the general who announced the surrender of the Philippines.

Daughter: What does "expunged" mean?

Father: Gotten rid of.

Son: Was Eisenhower a good president?

Father: He was a good father-figure but had little to do with his presidency. He was a puppet under John Foster Dulles.

Son: Who was Dulles?

Father: Secretary of State.

Whatever such instances may teach a child about the ostensible topic of the conversation, they are also demonstrations of the depth and breadth of a parent's knowledge about the world—and, more specifically, about those aspects of reality that merit the attention of the most important mass medium. Through their contributions to this aspect of children's perceptions of their parents, then, such conversations may influence the degree of esteem and deference in the child-parent relationship. (See Lull, 1980, for a dramatic example of what can happen when family members become self-conscious about this kind of television-related encounter.) Of course, since the degree to which a child values knowledgeable ability is itself subject to familial influence, predictions about how specific families should behave in this area must necessarily be complex.

CONVERSATIONS INVOLVING BEHAVIORAL PRESCRIPTIONS

Much of the public and professional concern over television has to do with the medium's capacity to provide behavioral models for its viewers. Although most of the research on this issue has dealt primarily with the direct relationship between viewer and medium, considerable attention has also been paid to the ways in which the social context of viewing complicates this relationship. This latter concern is the focus of the present section, which will draw on and refer to the earlier work where necessary. The kinds of conversations with which this section is concerned are those in which family members discuss the appropriateness or inappropriateness of things they have seen on television as examples for children's, parents', or other people's behavior.

The following three instances will serve as illustrations of some aspects of this sort of interaction. In the first case, a father and mother were watching a crime drama in the company of their six-year-old daughter. At one point in the program, the hero is shown aiming and firing a gun at the villain. The daughter raised both hands in imitation of the hero's grip on the gun, pointed at the screen, and pretended to shoot. "Stop that," her father shouted at her. The child crouched in her seat and started to cry. Her father lifted her onto his lap, saying, "Little girls shouldn't do things like that." His wife then turned to him and said, "And neither should little boys." In the second example, a mother and her nine-year-old daughter are discussing one of the girls on the *Brady Bunch*.

Mother: Oooh. Look at her, Jody. Doesn't Jan look beautiful in that dress?

Daughter: It looks stupid.

Mother: Oh, I don't think so. I think she looks like a beautiful little lady.

Daughter: I hate it. It's ugly. I never wear that stuff.

Mother: Dresses are pretty for a change.

Daughter: I can't run around in it. How'm I supposed to play on the monkey bars at school with a dress?

Mother: O.K. O.K. I don't care what you wear. It's fine if you never want to look like Jan. [pointedly:] That pretty.

Daughter: It's stupid, anyway.

Finally, here is a brief conversation between a twelve-year-old boy and his mother while watching *Private Benjamin*.

Mother: He's doing needlepoint-how funny!

Son: But mom, you said lots of men do needlepoint.

Mother: Yes, but it still seems out of character for an army colonel.

What are the consequences of these kinds of exchanges between parents and their children? There are several factors that may make a difference here. First of all, one can distinguish between cases in which the parent's comment is addressed at behavior a child has already performed (as in the first example above) and cases in which the parent's comment comes without any previous indication (at that moment, at least) of a child's tendency either to imitate or not to imitate what is shown on the screen (as in the other two examples). Since in the first case the comment is related more directly to the child's actual behavior, it may well be that its efficacy is greater than that of the other type of comment. It must also be noted, however, that there is evidence that comments of the first type (direct responses to a child's behavior) are by far the rarer of the two (see Messaris et al., 1982). A second distinction that may be made here is between comments in which the implications for a child's own behavior are mentioned explicitly (examples one and two above) and comments in which this is not done—in which, in other words, on-screen behavior is evaluated without any direct prescription issuing from it (example three). Again, one might assume that the former type of comment, being more direct in its linkage to the child's own conduct, would be the more effective of the two. The issue here is not as clear, however, because, as the second example indicates, even when a parent does start out without any explicit reference to a child's own behavior, personal implications may be readily apparent to the child all the same. At any rate, the efficacy of the second type of comment (completely "nondirective") is not a matter for speculation, since there are several experimental studies that have addressed precisely this kind of intervention by adults in children's viewing experiences. Both Grusec (1973) and Hicks (1968) have shown that this kind of adult commentary can influence children's tendencies to imitate what they see on the screen, and findings supportive of this conclusion have also come from the work of Corder-Bolz (1980).

A third factor that undoubtedly plays a part in determining the effectiveness of television-based behavioral prescription is the relationship between a particular comment or piece of advice and the normative cues to which a child has been exposed at other times. In this regard, a possible interpretation of the resistance of the children in the latter two examples to their parents' comments is that these comments probably contradict the standards of the girl's "peer culture," in the one case, and the boy's previous experience with the mother herself, in the other. Finally, as this last example suggests, degree of consistency is obviously another factor that must play a part in the operation of these kinds of behavioral prescriptions. It should also be noted that, while the discussion thus far has focused only on parental advice to children, the opposite situation did occur in this study's observations, and, while it will not be analyzed here, its most noteworthy form will be touched upon below.

As with information-oriented conversations, so, too, with conversations involving behavioral prescriptions, it seems reasonable to assume that their consequences may extend beyond the specific behavioral feature to which any particular comment may happen to be

addressed. One interesting possibility emerges from the frequency with which parents give behavioral prescriptions based on television in the absence of any prior indication by the child of a tendency either toward or away from imitation. In cases of this kind, then, it is only through the parent's actions that the suitability of imitating television is raised as an issue. Indeed, some parents refer explicitly to a belief in the "contagiousness" of behavior portrayed on television, as in the following exchange between a ten-year-old boy, a thirteen-year-old girl, and their mother while watching a scene in which teenagers are shown racing a stolen car.

Son: That's so stupid. They're gonna get killed.

Daughter: They're not gonna get killed. It's TV.

Mother: Yeah, it is just TV. But unfortunately a lot of kids take TV stories seriously and imitate them.

Assuming that a child is faced with repeated instances of such "unmotivated" treatment of television as a behavioral model, it might be the case that the parental comments themselves contribute to the child's sense of the medium as a locus of information about behavioral norms.

Whether or not the possibility outlined above is at all valid, what does seem to be true is that certain comments, particularly by children, appear predicated on the assumption that things one sees on television are to be taken as the norm, against which one's own behavior and abilities, as well as those of one's family, are to be judged. This possibility has been described in general terms by several writers (such as Gerbner, 1972), but it becomes particularly interesting when examined in the context of family life. As Messaris and Thomas (1981) have found, perceived discrepancies between television's images of family life and viewers' own experiences can be sources of considerable friction among family members (see also Kerr et al., 1982). As an example, they cite mothers' complaints about children who ask them, "Why don't you solve things like Mrs. Brady?" or who point out, "Mrs. Brady wouldn't do it like that." In the observations for the present study, there were several instances of children's comparisons between television and such things as the complexity of a father's occupation, the quality of the family car, or the attractiveness of a divorced mother's suitor. An extreme example of the treatment of television as a standard for emulation occurs in the following discussion between a five-year-old boy and his mother. They were watching *One Day at a Time*, a program about a divorced mother of two.

Son: Who is the dad?

Mother: She's divorced. The dad doesn't live with them anymore.

Son: Will we see him?

Mother: No, he doesn't live there anymore.

Son: Why don't you get divorced?

Mother: Because I don't want to get a divorce. I love your daddy and he loves me, and we both love you and Danny and Alice. So why should we get a divorce?

Son: But lots of people do.

Mother: Barry, divorce is *not* fun. It's often sad and angry.

One consequence of this kind of situation seems to be that a certain amount of parental discussion of television is aimed at demonstrating that the parents and their family compare favorably with their counterparts on television, or with what television might imply to be true of

real-life families. An example of this occurs in the following discussion between a five-year-old girl and her mother, in response to a commercial in which Easter eggs and the Easter bunny were mentioned. Since the family is Jewish, the child's question could have led to a troubling consideration of what it means to belong to a minority religion, and, according to the observer, the mother seemed to be experiencing some difficulty with the early part of the conversation.

Daughter: What is the Easter bunny?

Mother: Well. Hm. It is a bunny which comes around this time of year and leaves colored eggs and candy around the house for kids.

Daughter: Why don't we get any?

Mother: Ah, because he doesn't come here.

Daughter: Why not?

Mother: Because, we have enough and he usually comes to people who are needier than we are.

Daughter: I want some candy.

Mother: You can have some, wait here.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article was to examine parent-child conversations about television programs they were watching and to suggest what some of the consequences of such conversations might be. Two overall types of conversations were the focus of this discussion: first, information-oriented conversations, that is, those in which parents and children seek and/or exchange information about some aspect of reality that is portrayed or referred to on television; second, conversations involving behavioral prescription, that is, those in which family members discuss the appropriateness or inappropriateness of behavior shown or mentioned on television as a model for their own or other people's conduct.

With regard to the first of these two types of conversations, the following points were made: To the extent that such conversations deal with topics that are within the bounds of the formal educational curriculum, one of their consequences can be that of supplementing the formal educational process. Even when the topic is not "educational" in this sense, however, such conversations may have important implications for the regulation of boundaries of authority and protection within the family. Furthermore, regardless of the topic of such conversations, patterns of parental response to children's questions may condition children's attitudes with regard to probing beyond the immediately available information, on television and, perhaps elsewhere. Finally, information-oriented conversations about television may also serve to defile parental competence and authority regarding the facts and issues to which the medium has given its stamp of publicity.

As for the second type of conversation considered here, namely, that involving behavioral prescription, the arguments made may be summarized as follows: There are several criteria that are likely to influence the capacity of such conversations to bring about or to inhibit a particular action or manner of conduct. Although relatively rare, comments that are directly responsive to children's imitations of televisions are likely to be more effective than those that are not linked to a child's actions in this way. On the other hand, comments involving direct advice may be no more effective than more "abstract" evaluations of television characters' behavior, since the personal implications of the former may be readily apparent even to younger children, as several

experimental findings would suggest. At the same time, degree of consistency between comments over time and across sources must also play an important role in determining the efficacy of such conversations. Regardless of efficacy, however, such conversations may be sources of considerable tension within the family, if they are associated with a sense that television's portrayals should be taken as norms for family life.

NOTES

1. The average number of children per family was 2.0 (SD: 0.8). The average age of the youngest child was 6.0 (SD: 4.4), and the average age of the oldest child was 10.7 years (SD: 4.9).

2. Of the total observations, 72% were conducted during the evening, 22% during the afternoon, and 6% on Saturday mornings. The average duration of the observations was 2.2 hours (SD: 01). At least one parent was present in all cases. More precisely the frequency of co present adults was as follows: mothers only in 26% of the cases; fathers only in 14% of the cases; both parents in 51% of the cases; at least one parent plus other adults (friends or relatives) in 8% of the cases.

3. Ten of the families were observed three times each, rather than once, with two observers present on one of these three occasions. This procedure was used as a basis for examining the reliability of observations of this sort, and the results of this investigation have been described in detail elsewhere. For present purposes, it may be noted that interobserver agreement on the wording of observed comments and on the identification of speakers was satisfactory, although other matters (notably the choice of which comments to record) were more problematic. Since this article is not concerned with accounting systematically for all conversations that might occur during a particular viewing session, this problem does not affect the arguments made here.

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Paul Messaris is Assistant Professor of Communications at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104. His area of interest is visual communication, and his recent research deals with the nature and consequences of parent-child interactions about television.

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