
EDITORIAL



Studying Up

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Like most folks on the cultural left who are concerned with such matters, I have long felt ambivalent about investigations into media effects. When I look at the data on the impact of product placement and advertising, where correlations between campaigns and purchases can be arrived at quite easily, I have little doubt that there is a link. But when claims are made about ties between violence on- and off-screen, I am rather dubious about the seemingly endless cycle of public-policy panic, research funding, and academic sucking. We got the answer on this question quite a while ago: some people some of the time are encouraged, for brief moments, to replicate in their conduct what they have seen in dramatic form. In response to a referral from Bill Clinton after the Columbine school shootings, the Federal Trade Commission (2000) surveyed studies of "exposure to violence in entertainment." It concluded that consuming violent texts was only one "factor contributing to youth aggression, anti-social attitudes and violence. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement that it is a cause for concern." The Commission noted that high levels of exposure to violent texts generated "an exaggerated perception of the amount of violence in society" (2000, i-ii). Thank you, Aristotle of *The Poetics*—and thousands of overemployed behavioral scientists since the 1960s. Can we move on now?

Perhaps not. Because I think there is room for a new effects study. It seems to me that a major research program is needed that looks at the viewing patterns since early childhood of U.S. congressional representatives, Defense Department officials, and state politicians and judges who preside over capital punishment. This might allow us to understand their blood-thirsty arrogance in world affairs and domestic executions—in short, their violent tendencies. The Bush Administration supports the death penalty, despite the welter of evidence that it fails to deter criminals and arguments

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against its constitutionality (Sarat 2001). It presides over the most violent developed capitalist society in world history. Its foreign policy is opposed to international law's attempt to provide norms of conduct that are democratically arrived at and enforced. It asserts that threats to U.S. society exist where rigorous scrutiny by academic and policy experts doubt the fact. In short, this seems like a suitable case for inquiry. Put another way, and following Laura Nader's (1972) imprecation to her fellow anthropologists that they "study up," let's investigate hegemony.

Here are some threshold questions:¹

How many war films has Donald Rumsfeld seen?

Which movies espousing anti-Palestinian positions has Ari Fleischer been exposed to?

Does Paul Wolfowitz have a history of antisocial conduct after watching *The Wild Bunch* or playing *Grand Theft Auto—Vice City*?

Did Colin Powell attend any screenings of *The Green Berets* before, during, or after his work to conceal the My Lai massacre, or his other wartime service?

Does Dick Cheney have a special relationship to the *Rambo* films that can be correlated with his policy advice? Could he in any sense be said to 'cycle' with these texts?

When George W. Bush sent a record number of people to be executed during his time as Governor of Texas, which TV programs and movies had he been watching and which Biblical texts had he been reading? Conversely, what was George Ryan watching before he became governor of Illinois and during his tenure?

When George W. Bush was arrested for driving while intoxicated, what had been his history of interaction with screen texts involving alcohol, and what has it been since?

When George W. Bush's children were arrested for underage drinking, what had been their record of parental supervision of film, television programs, and advertisements involving alcohol? What has it been since?

When Jeb Bush's daughter was arrested for drug use and parole infractions, what had been her record of parental supervision of films, television programs, and advertisements concerning drug use? What has it been since?

When the cabinet is shown graphics referring to "collateral damage" from proposed military intervention, are members' heartbeats and other signs of excitation regularly measured?

When the administration offers or witnesses military PowerPoint presentations, have any studies been done of their genital responses to the material?

Which members of the administration have been exposed to criminological studies of the costliness and ineffectiveness of capital punishment, and what have their responses been to this research?

Does the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the key means of establishing sanity and insanity cross-culturally (Katigbak, Church, and Akamine 1996), need rewriting in the face of this administration's attitudes and values?

I hope that *TVNM* readers will pick up on this challenging agenda. Perhaps we can mount a collaborative project, complete with coder validity, N = information, regression analysis, avowedly nonrandom sampling, and electrodes planted on audiences. Cultural studies grows up. Enough arguments about whether the audience is a “dope” (Garfinkel 1992). This time we can approach *that* question with supreme confidence.

Note

1. DNA testing of remote controls and game boys (in both senses of that term) would be required to ensure reporter accuracy.

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