

These methods are intertwined, often in unexamined ways, with our assumptions about politics, participation, communications, and so forth. They are also intertwined with what we find, and how we interpret those findings. In short, the method is the message.

Our purpose in this article is threefold: to make explicit the implicit "metaphors" underlying much mainstream public-opinion research and their relationships to the methodologies employed, to offer an alternative metaphor for the relationship between television and public opinion, and to present some findings from our initial attempts to investigate empirically this relationship. In the first section, we examine the relationship between methods and interpretation, focusing on the dominance of survey research in studies of the impact of television on public opinion. We argue that this dominance both results from, and reinforces, the implicit metaphors of citizens as "political consumers" and media messages as "hypodermic injections," both of which have been widely questioned in the critical communications literature but little examined in public-opinion research. We then suggest an alternative metaphor for conceptualizing the relationship between television and politics, one that emphasizes the role of discourse in the formation of public opinions and that conceptualizes television and viewers as participants in an ongoing "conversation." The third section is a discussion of focus group methodology, pointing out its strengths (and weaknesses) as a means of observing the ways in which citizens and television "converse." We then describe our own focus group project and present some initial findings. These findings, although tentative, support the usefulness both of focus groups as a method of inquiry and of our conversational metaphor. We conclude with a brief summary and an appeal for a more self-conscious multimethod approach to the study of media and politics.

## The Methods and Metaphors in Media Studies

Most public-opinion research focusing on the mass media explores the ability of nonfiction media messages to change citizens' political agenda, opinions, and/or cognitions. This exploration is usually limited to what Hallin (1986) called the "sphere of legitimate controversy." In the United States, this sphere is delimited ideologically and structurally by the institutions and processes of liberal democracy. Further, as has been often criticized in the critical communications literature, researchers assume that the meaning and/or bias

MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI  
BRUCE A. WILLIAMS

## Methods, Metaphors, and Media Research: *The Uses of Television in Political Conversation*

*The purpose in this article is threefold: to make explicit the implicit metaphors underlying mainstream public-opinion research and their relationships to the methodologies employed, to offer an alternative "conversational" metaphor for the relationship between television and public opinion, and to present some findings from the authors' initial attempts to investigate empirically this relationship. First the authors argue that most public-opinion research results from, and reinforces, an implicit metaphor of citizens as "political consumers" and media messages as "hypodermic injections." The authors then present an alternative metaphor that emphasizes the role of discourse in the formation of public opinions and that conceptualizes television and viewers as participants in an ongoing "conversation." The third section discusses focus groups as a means of observing this conversation. The authors describe their own focus group project and present some initial findings that support the usefulness both of focus groups as a method of inquiry and of their conversational metaphor.*

A cornerstone of media studies is that the content of communication, and the understanding derived from it, cannot be divorced from the medium through which it is transmitted. In the extreme, the media is the message. In this article, we use this insight once removed, not only as a way of thinking about the media but also as a way of thinking about how we study the media. We argue that the methods we use as researchers are "our media." Methods are the means by which we observe, make sense of, and communicate about media and politics and, more specifically, about media and public opinion.

contained in a particular message is nonnegotiable and determined by its effect; that is, it derives from the message itself rather than from the receiver's interpretation of it. Finally, in most public-opinion research, a media effect is defined as an individual thinking or feeling differently about an issue, candidate, public official, or institution of government after receiving a message than he or she did before receiving it.<sup>1</sup>

Research designs typically require surveying public opinion over a limited period and correlating changes in opinion and behaviors with media use and media messages. The strengths of this approach are well known and substantial. Findings are generalizable, data can be summarized efficiently, results can be tested for their statistical significance, studies and analyses are replicable, and investigator bias can be limited and, if it exists, identified. Nevertheless, researchers need to consider explicitly the assumptions underlying such techniques. These assumptions imply a very specific conception of politics, citizenship, and the political role of the media.

With few exceptions, public-opinion research assumes that citizens are receptacles that store fixed opinions. This approach has been elaborated through a variety of metaphors, most recently, that public-opinion formation is analogous to computer processing.<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that such notions are metaphors, changing as technological and scientific developments alter the way we perceive the world. For example, as technologies of information storage and retrieval changed, computer-based metaphors replaced older library-based ones (Illich & Sanders, 1988). Of course, neither view describes the way the world really is; the brain is not, in an ontological sense, a library or a computer. Rather, such metaphors are useful only to the extent that they help us to understand different aspects of public opinion.

Metaphors that characterize citizens as receptacles both emerge from and reinforce the methodologies of mainstream research. Closed-end survey interviews assume that either "respondents" have opinions or they do not. The researcher's job is to retrieve them in a way that does not create the opinion, alter the fixed opinion, or create the illusion of an opinion.<sup>3</sup> Although there has been much progress in refining survey questions (e.g., presenting alternative choices in a balanced way or allowing respondents to admit gracefully that they have no opinion on a particular issue), this technique remains unavoidably based on an overly mechanical view of opinion formation.

Most researchers would correctly argue that their conceptualization of opinion formation is more sophisticated than this and that the survey is

intended only to capture opinions as they exist at the moment of the survey. This still assumes a form of political consciousness wherein opinions are stored in long-term memory as fixed, freestanding bits of information that can be easily retrieved. This notion has validity (as a useful metaphor) for some types of opinions. But it also misses much about the process of opinion formation and change by focusing almost exclusively on individual psychological (rather than social and political) processes.<sup>4</sup>

This static representation of opinions is reinforced by the structured, closed-end, and cross-sectional nature of most surveys. By selecting specific topics (as well as when and how such topics are addressed), researchers inevitably impose their agenda. Closed-end responses reify opinions by forcing respondents to present them as self-contained and preexisting objects. By using "snapshot" surveys, the fluid, dynamic nature of public opinions is again largely missed.

In short, despite real advances in the way mainstream public opinion researchers conceptualize opinion making, they continue to depend almost exclusively on survey research methods. As a result, these studies continue to use research designs better suited to the widely discredited hypodermic metaphor, in which opinions are measured, a media message is "injected," and opinions are remeasured. Undoubtedly, this metaphor does capture certain aspects of the media's effect on politics, but the methodology greatly increases the likelihood that only this particular kind of effect will be found (Herbst, 1993).

Ultimately, this is more than an issue of methodology. What survey research labels "public opinion" might better be termed "private opinion" (Barber, 1984). Survey methods imply an underlying normative view of citizenship similar to the one criticized by Gitlin (1978), Ginsberg (1982, 1986) and Barber (1984). Citizens are viewed as isolated, individual decision makers consuming information and privately choosing at specific points in time among competing elites, parties, or ideas. In this citizen-as-consumer metaphor, politics is a marketplace (or, more accurately, a mail-order catalogue or home shopping network) and opinions are the currency with which public goods are purchased.

Survey research is a valuable tool of social inquiry, and much of contemporary politics is captured by the metaphors described above. However, mainstream research also misses a good deal of what is important about the relationship between media and politics (Herbst, 1993). A better understanding of this relationship requires developing alternative metaphors and methods.<sup>5</sup>

### Conversing With Television: An Alternative Metaphor for Studying Media and Politics

Our own view of the relationship between media and politics assumes the importance of having a collective political language. As John Dewey (1916/1974) argued in *Democracy and Education*, societies can only exist through communication because people "live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common; communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). Developing and maintaining a common language is an ongoing process because politics necessarily involves issues that are contested (Connolly, 1983; Gallie, 1955-1956; Garver, 1978; Gray, 1977). The meaning of any concept or issue varies over time and among different people. Certain concepts, however, are likely to generate a greater variety of meaning by their very nature.

Essentially contested concepts "involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1955-1956, p. 123). Gallie considers "democracy" such a term, and Connolly includes terms such as *politics*, *political interest*, *power*, *responsibility*, and *freedom*. Most of the fundamental concepts of political and social thought are essentially contestable. In turn, specific opinions about political institutions, officeholders, policies, and so forth rest on the meaning ascribed to these more fundamental concepts and so are themselves open to negotiation.

Emphasizing the inherently ambiguous nature of politics leads to a significantly different conceptualization of public opinion than the one developed by mainstream researchers. Opinions are viewed as shifting constructs that are situationally based and recreated rather than retrieved (Bennett, 1980). In addition, opinions are understood as social, embedded in a dynamic process of interaction and debate (Connolly, 1983; Williams & Matheny, in press). That is, politics is about public issues that are discussed in public. It is through "conversations" that political opinions are continuously created and recreated. The need to consider seriously the position of others is what distinguishes private life from public life and private opinion from public opinion.

Our notion of public opinion as emerging from discourse is both normative and heuristic. We agree with political theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas that a defining characteristic of democracy should be that political decisions are reached through public dialogues wherein only reason has force. However, we also argue that opinions are formed through interactions that occasionally approximate and that often mimic, even mock, such

public dialogue. It is in the conversations that one has with coworkers, family members, even with oneself, that public opinion resides.

Envisioning public opinion as a conversation is especially useful in understanding the political relevance of television.<sup>6</sup> This is, in part, because, as the central source of information in the United States, television provides both the topics and the substance on which most conversations are based. In addition, however, our conversational metaphor points to a more active role for television in the shaping of public opinion. We argue that the interaction between television and a viewer is similar to a conversation, even though this conversation is one-sided: Viewers are seldom seen or heard. Yet the viewer is engaged in a conversation in many important respects. The most obvious example is when and individual "talks back" to the set or, more indirectly, when two or more viewers comment to each other about a show as it is being watched.

Even when sitting in silence, viewers interact with television in ways more analogous to conversing than to reading, writing, or even contemplating (certainly, viewers' interactions are more analogous to conversing than to inputting data or being inoculated!). This is because television closely mimics the elements of immediate personal exchange. The information transmitted is ephemeral. Messages are contained in a combination of aural and visual cues, including tone of voice, body language, and so forth. Televised conversants (whether newscasters, celebrities, or characters) are often familiar to the viewer. The illusion of intimacy and dialogue is heightened by techniques such as looking directly into the camera or addressing the viewer through asides or stock phrases like "We'll be right back," "Don't go away," or "I'll see you next time."

The conversational metaphor leads to a somewhat different set of expectations and concerns than those derived from most mainstream metaphors. Opinion formation and opinion expression are no longer seen as two fully distinct processes. Rather, opinions exist only within interactive dynamic contexts. Survey research does not tap preexisting opinions so much as creates them in the structured interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Similarly, public opinion does not *follow* interactions with television, friends, coworkers, and so forth so much as it is that interaction. From this perspective, concerns over "how long" the effects of a particular media message last become less central. The average American spends almost half of his or her free time conversing with television (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Television, therefore, serves not merely as a source of information for future conversations but also as a regular "conversant" in an ongoing discussion, and, ultimately, as the central forum for political discourse in the United States.

### The Usefulness of Focus Groups as a Method of Inquiry

Focus groups offer a promising way to explore our conversational model of opinion formation in general, and of television viewing in particular. The focus group is a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger, 1988, p. 18). Although little used in the social sciences today (see Liebes & Katz, 1990; Morley, 1986), its roots can be traced to Merton and his colleagues' examination of the effects of wartime propaganda (Merton, 1987; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946).

The typical focus group discussion includes between 6 and 10 participants, although as few as 4 and as many as 12 are not uncommon (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). Participants are selected in a variety of ways but usually share some common characteristic of relevance to the study at hand. Discussions are led by a moderator who follows a loose protocol designed to direct discussion without dominating it. The typical length of time for a discussion is 1½ to 2 hours. The number of groups one conducts varies, but "a helpful rule of thumb is to continue conducting interviews until little new information is provided" (Krueger, 1988, p. 97).

Information generated by focus groups can be analyzed qualitatively (focusing on critical interpretation, as one might do with an in-depth interview) or quantitatively (by systematic content analysis). This information can stand alone as a way of providing insights into opinion formation and even allow for what Krueger (1988) called cautious generalizations (pp. 43-44). Focus groups are also useful in conjunction with other methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, experiments, and surveys (Krueger, 1988, pp. 31-40; Morgan, 1988, pp. 30-36). These qualities make the focus group methodology uniquely suited to bridging the chasm in communications research between critical interpretive methodologies and other more conventional social scientific methods. Offering some of the qualities of each, they are also ideal for studying the fluid and dialogic aspects of opinion formation.

Focus groups have certain limitations when compared to other methods of inquiry. The setting is less natural than participant observation. The researcher has less control than in an in-depth individual interview or an experiment. Results are less easily analyzed and generalized than in survey research. However, focus groups have some significant advantages over these other methods. They allow one to examine the role of social interaction in opinion formation and expression and to combine the probing and flexibility

of in-depth interviews with the ability to talk to a larger number of people. They help guard against researcher bias and shortsightedness by guaranteeing that interaction is not exclusively with the researcher and by allowing enough open-endedness for unanticipated views to emerge. Focus groups also strike a compromise between the generalizability of quantitative analysis and the depth of qualitative analysis.

It is our argument that focus groups are especially appropriate for exploring the conversational aspects of public opinion and the role of television in these conversations. As we argued above, public opinions are not discrete entities but dynamic, fluid constructs that form from numerous interactions. Focus groups are particularly well designed to examine attitudes and opinions in this context (Krueger, 1988).

How do people actually use information, attitudes, values, reason, emotion, and so forth in political discourse? How does this discourse affect the development of those attitudes, values, and so on? Focus groups allow one to examine politics in a communal setting and to focus on how citizens interact with each other: "The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group" (Morgan, 1988, p. 12).

Finally, focus groups are particularly appropriate for examining the relationship between television and politics, especially in light of the conversational metaphor presented above. The ubiquitousness of television, a rejection of the hypodermic model of media effects, the assumption that messages and audiences interact in complex ways that allow for multiple meanings to emerge from the same broadcast, an understanding that television watching is often a social activity during which viewers converse with each other and with the TV—all of these suggest the need to think in terms of the uses of television rather than simply its effects. They also suggest that such uses will be subtle, varied, fluid, social, and context dependent. Focus groups, more than most conventional social science methods, allow for a systematic examination of television and politics that is sensitive to the complexity, interpretive dimensions, and dialogic nature of this relationship.

### Discussing the Environment: A Case Study

We are currently engaged in an ongoing research project aimed at exploring the role of television in political discourse and in the formation/expression of public opinions. The findings we present below are based on a series of nine focus groups conducted in 1990-1991. Participants were residents of Lexington, Kentucky, recruited through a public notice placed in the local newspaper.<sup>7</sup>

In all, 34 people participated in our nine focus groups.<sup>8</sup> Ages varied from 18 to 72 years, with a median age of 39 years.<sup>9</sup> Occupations included student, government employee, housewife, and both blue- and white-collar worker (one participant was currently unemployed). Of the 34 participants, 21 were women and 3 were Black. Overall, our "sample" was slightly less affluent than the larger population from which they were recruited. Responses to a brief telephone survey administered during the initial recruitment and to a self-administered survey completed prior to the start of the focus groups showed that our participants varied in the strength and direction of their partisan affiliation, their ideological self-placement, and their views concerning issues such as the environment, prayer in schools, government aid to minorities and women, abortion, and defense spending. They also varied in their self-professed interest in politics, their likelihood of talking about politics with friends, and their television viewing habits. In short, although not a random sample of either the local or the national population, our participants brought a range of backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions to the discussions.

The topic of discussion in each of our nine focus groups was environmental pollution. Three of the discussions (one from each age group) were preceded by a viewing of an edited version of the made-for-television docudrama "Incident at Dark River," which deals with the issue of toxic waste. Another three groups began by viewing an episode of the CBS news magazine *48 Hours*, also dealing with the issue of toxic waste (for a detailed description of these broadcasts, see Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). In both cases, the broadcasts were introduced as "a way to get us thinking about the topic." The remaining three groups watched no television and simply began by discussing their views on environmental pollution.<sup>10</sup> The focus groups without a television lasted approximately 1½ hours, whereas those with television averaged an additional 45 minutes.

The discussion protocol was loosely structured and designed to stimulate discussion rather than to uncover particular pieces of information (see appendix). The protocol was identical regardless of whether a television was present or not, with two exceptions. First, in those groups in which television was viewed, discussants were asked what they "thought of the show" prior to turning to a more general discussion of the environment. Second, at the end of sessions that had begun by watching television, discussants were asked a few specific questions about the programs. Other than this, the broadcasts were not referred to by the moderator.

Overall, the focus groups were intended to provide three types of "data." First, because at various points in the protocol we directly asked discussants about their reactions to the show they had seen, their views of the media

more generally, their television viewing habits, and so forth, the focus group transcripts provided information concerning people's own perceptions about their relationship with television. Second, by asking people to engage in a public discussion of a timely political issue, we were able to observe directly how citizens converse and the role that television plays in that public conversation. Third, by having people watch television and then requiring them to talk both about the program itself and about issues touched on in the program, we were able to approximate what we argue is the ongoing, silent conversation people are regularly engaged in while watching television.

The focus group setting was designed to be as nonthreatening and natural as possible. Focus groups were held in rooms with comfortable furniture, allowing participants to sit where they wanted and to move about freely, and pizza or other snack food was served, allowing people time before the focus groups to get used to each other and so forth. Nonetheless, we readily acknowledge that these groups do not fully simulate the way in which most people either watch television or talk about politics. However, focus groups are certainly no less realistic than are the techniques of survey research, experiments, or in-depth interviews (consider, for example, the dynamics of a telephone interview, during which in one moment a person is sitting at a dinner, watching TV, conversing with family members, and so forth, and in the next is engaged in a formal interview with a stranger about a variety of issues about which the person has had no time to think). In addition, more so than the latter techniques, focus groups capture the dynamic nature of public opinion, limit the intrusiveness of the researcher, and allow citizens to speak in their own voice. Finally, much (perhaps most) of the "real conversation" that takes place between a viewer and television is unspoken and, therefore, unobservable except through some level of intrusion and artificiality. Focus groups, by stimulating both television viewing and conversation, attempt to make this conversation visible.

Following Crigler, Just, Neuman, Campbell, and O'Connell (1988), each transcript was read aloud and discussed by the authors in an attempt to uncover systematic patterns (the recordings were also replayed both to validate the transcripts and to capture better the nuances in the discussion). Once we felt that we had identified certain structures to the discussions, we repeated the process from the beginning, this time "testing" the validity of our hypothesized pattern. This qualitative yet systematic reading of the transcripts is intended to uncover suggestive relationships.

The next step in our analysis was systematically to code the transcripts using *Ethnograph*, a software package specifically designed for analyzing qualitative data. *Ethnograph* allows each line of a transcript to be coded for

up to 12 characteristics (for example, direct and indirect references to television, particular points of view expressed by participants, and so forth). It is important to note that *Ethnograph* does not automatically do any coding; researchers must make the coding decisions on a line-by-line basis. This software, however, makes the manipulation of the coded data quite easy; once coded, the transcripts can be systematically analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analysis includes examination of the frequency of certain kinds of statements (e.g., the number of times unsolicited references were made to the television program viewed in the focus group). Qualitative analysis involves more interpretive readings of specific parts of the transcripts (e.g., one can retrieve and examine all the statements made by a single individual about environmental activists, all the references made by one person to television, or all the interchanges between two particular discussants). *Ethnograph* does not replace interpretive analysis but rather eases transcript management, allowing more systematic and in-depth examination.

### How Citizens Use Television: Preliminary Findings From Our Focus Groups

In presenting our preliminary findings, we have several goals. First, we provide evidence for the extensive role of both nonfiction and fiction television in public discourse. Second, we show that citizens interact with television in ways consistent with our conversation metaphor. Third, we examine the fluid, often inconsistent, nature of public opinion, pointing out how people construct rather than retrieve their views on complex issues. Fourth, we explore the role of television in this process of opinion formation, focusing on our discussants' surprising awareness of (and concern for) their dependence on the media. Finally, we provide examples of the real but limited autonomy individuals have in identifying and, when appropriate, resisting television's ideological biases.

#### *The Ubiquity of Television in Political Conversation*

Although we are primarily interested in how television is used in political conversation, we first describe the extent to which it is used.

During coding, we distinguished three types of media references: references to the specific show watched at the start of the focus group (not

applicable to groups to which no television was shown), references to television more generally, and references to other mass media (i.e., newspapers, magazines, radio, etc.). Included in this last category are general references to "the media." Within each of these categories, we distinguished between "direct" and "indirect" references. Direct references refer to comments in which the media were specifically mentioned (e.g., "I was in Miami over the weekend and I picked up a newspaper that had an 'Earth News' section" or "I saw this thing on TV about how enough pollution could cause some kind of ice effect"). When the specific reference was less clear (e.g., "If it's like they showed in Mexico City where the people can't walk down the street, they have to have their noses covered" or "You know, when the spotted owl was the big issue . . . they made it the owl against the lumberjacks"), the comment was coded as an indirect reference to the media. In addition, we distinguished between "prompted" and "unprompted" media references. The former includes any media reference made when we specifically queried about their reactions to the show or about their general views concerning how well the media cover environmental issues (see appendix, sections 2 and 3, parts of sections 6, 10, and 11). The latter includes only those media references made spontaneously by our discussants.

As Table 1 reveals, media references pepper our subjects' conversations. Taking the groups together, 34% of all statements included at least one direct or indirect unprompted media reference (Table 1, row 4). Such media references vary depending on the presence or absence of television. In groups without a television, the total percentage of unprompted media references was 27% (Table 2, row 4), which is substantial but much less than the 40% obtained in groups that started by viewing a television show (Tables 3 and 4, row 4). Most of this difference is accounted for by the continued reference to the shows after we had turned the discussion to more general issues of the environment.

We argue elsewhere that understanding the full impact of television on political conversations and on the public opinions formed during them requires expanding the definition of politically relevant television to include both fictional and nonfictional programming (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). Our focus groups support this argument. When subjects draw on media in their conversations, they make few distinctions between fictional and nonfictional television. Unprompted references to the media are as frequent in those focus groups viewing fictional as nonfictional programs (Tables 3 and 4, row 4). Comparing groups that saw "Incident at Dark River" with those that saw *48 Hours*, we found little difference in the overall number of references to the shows themselves (32% in the former, 30% in the latter).<sup>11</sup>

Table 1  
All Groups

	Number of Comments/ Total Number of Comments		% of Comments
1. References to show			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	240/913		26%
Indirect	45/913		5%
B. Unprompted <sup>b</sup>			
Direct	90/713		13%
Indirect	37/713		5%
2. References to TV			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	122/1,490		8%
Indirect	18/1,490		1%
B. Unprompted <sup>c</sup>			
Direct	59/1,161		5%
Indirect	14/1,161		1%
3. Reference to other media			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	126/1,490		9%
Indirect	115/1,490		8%
B. Unprompted <sup>d</sup>			
Direct	74/1,270		6%
Indirect	105/1,270		8%
4. Unprompted media references <sup>e</sup>			
Direct	145/886		16%
Indirect	159/886		18%
Total	304/886		34%
5. References to group members			
Direct	284/1,490		19%
Indirect	57/1,490		4%
Total	341/1,490		23%
6. References to personal experience			
	135/1,490		9%

Note. Although we express the frequency of comments in terms of a percentage of the total number of statements made, these figures cannot be added across categories because the denominator of each category changes with the number of possible comments.

a. Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol.

b. Excludes references to show from protocol sections 3 and 10.

c. Excludes references to TV from protocol sections 6d (media) and 11.

d. Excludes other media references from protocol section 6d.

e. Number (and percentage) of comments that contains unprompted reference to TV show, TV in general, other media, or media in general.

Indeed, when we examined only the unprompted references, we found that subjects were slightly more likely to use the fictional show than the nonfictional show in their conversation (22% of all unprompted comments in the former case, 13% in the latter case).<sup>12</sup>

Table 2

No Television

	Number of Comments/ Total Number of Comments		% of Comments
1. References to show			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	n.a.		n.a.
Indirect	n.a.		n.a.
B. Unprompted <sup>b</sup>			
Direct	n.a.		n.a.
Indirect	n.a.		n.a.
2. References to TV			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	60/577		10%
Indirect	7/577		1%
B. Unprompted <sup>c</sup>			
Direct	16/421		4%
Indirect	4/421		1%
3. Reference to other media			
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>			
Direct	66/577		11%
Indirect	52/577		9%
B. Unprompted <sup>d</sup>			
Direct	44/504		9%
Indirect	47/504		9%
4. Unprompted media references <sup>e</sup>			
Direct	43/393		11%
Indirect	65/393		17%
Total	108/393		27%
5. References to group members			
Direct	112/577		19%
Indirect	20/577		3%
Total	132/577		23%
6. References to personal experience			
	66/577		11%

Note. Although we express the frequency of comments in terms of a percentage of the total number of statements made, these figures cannot be added across categories because the denominator of each category changes with the number of possible comments.

a. Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol.

b. Excludes references to show from protocol sections 3 and 10.

c. Excludes references to TV from protocol sections 6d (media) and 11.

d. Excludes other media references from protocol section 6d.

e. Number (and percentage) of comments that contains unprompted reference to TV show, TV in general, other media, or media in general.

Beyond the specific shows viewed in the focus groups, we found that discussants were about as likely to invoke fictional and nonfictional programs to make or refute points. For example, when possible, we coded direct references to television (other than to the shows viewed during the focus groups) according to whether the programs referred to were fictional or nonfictional. There were 102

Table 3  
Nonfiction Television

	Number of Comments/ Total Number of Comments	% of Comments
1. References to show		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	102/426	24%
Indirect	26/426	6%
B. Unprompted <sup>b</sup>		
Direct	17/300	6%
Indirect	21/300	7%
2. References to TV		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	47/426	11%
Indirect	10/426	2%
B. Unprompted <sup>c</sup>		
Direct	32/327	10%
Indirect	9/327	3%
3. Reference to other media		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	35/426	8%
Indirect	13/426	3%
B. Unprompted <sup>d</sup>		
Direct	13/339	4%
Indirect	12/339	4%
4. Unprompted media references <sup>e</sup>		
Direct	35/189	19%
Indirect	40/189	21%
Total	75/189	40%
5. References to group members		
Direct	59/426	14%
Indirect	23/426	5%
Total	82/426	19%
6. References to personal experience		
Direct	32/426	8%

Note. Although we express the frequency of comments in terms of a percentage of the total number of statements made, these figures cannot be added across categories because the denominator of each category changes with the number of possible comments.

- a. Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol.
- b. Excludes references to show from protocol sections 3 and 10.
- c. Excludes references to TV from protocol sections 6d (media) and 11.
- d. Excludes other media references from protocol section 6d.
- e. Number (and percentage) of comments that contains unprompted reference to TV show, TV in general, other media, or media in general.

references to television that could be coded in this way. Of these, 49 were to fictional programming (e.g., "The Day After," *The Simpsons*) and 53 were to nonfictional shows (e.g., *60 Minutes*, CNN). Groups were about as likely to reference fiction as nonfiction programs regardless of whether they were shown "Incident at Dark River", *48 Hours*, or no television at all.

Table 4  
Fiction Television

	Number of Comments/ Total Number of Comments	% of Comments
1. References to show		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	138/487	28%
Indirect	19/487	4%
B. Unprompted <sup>b</sup>		
Direct	73/413	18%
Indirect	16/413	4%
2. References to TV		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	15/487	3%
Indirect	1/487	0%
B. Unprompted <sup>c</sup>		
Direct	11/413	3%
Indirect	0/413	0%
3. Reference to other media		
A. Overall <sup>a</sup>		
Direct	36/487	7%
Indirect	50/487	10%
B. Unprompted <sup>d</sup>		
Direct	17/427	4%
Indirect	45/427	11%
4. Unprompted media references <sup>e</sup>		
Direct	67/304	22%
Indirect	54/304	18%
Total	121/304	40%
5. References to group members		
Direct	113/487	23%
Indirect	14/487	3%
Total	127/487	26%
6. References to personal experience		
Direct	36/487	7%

Note. Although we express the frequency of comments in terms of a percentage of the total number of statements made, these figures cannot be added across categories because the denominator of each category changes with the number of possible comments.

- a. Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol.
- b. Excludes references to show from protocol sections 3 and 10.
- c. Excludes references to TV from protocol sections 6d (media) and 11.
- d. Excludes other media references from protocol section 6d.
- e. Number (and percentage) of comments that contains unprompted reference to TV show, TV in general, other media, or media in general.

The degree to which subjects relied on both fictional and nonfictional television was also revealed when we examined the specific public figures mentioned by our discussants. The following is an inclusive list of all the people mentioned at least once in our groups: George Bush, Carl Sagan, Ralph Nader, Ted Turner, Dan Rather, Cher, Contain, Planet (6), ...

character), John Ritter, Bill Moyers, Nadia Comaneci, Kitty Kelley, Nancy Reagan, Bette Midler, Ed Begley, Jr., Bill Cosby, Jeremy Rifkin, Bob Barker, Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Sally Struthers, Tom Cruise, Clint Eastwood, Cindy Lauper, and Al Sharpton. At least two things seem striking to us about this list. The first is the frequency with which figures from the media, especially entertainers associated with environmental issues, are referenced, often as authoritative sources. The second is the almost complete absence of government representatives: Other than a *single* reference to President Bush, there are no mentions of specific elected or appointed public officials.

The extent to which the mass media in general and television in particular dominate our conversations about the environment is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the above numbers to the frequency with which personal experiences were referenced. When possible, we coded all comments that referred to personal experience as a source of information. Included here are statements based on either firsthand experience or experiences of people with whom they were familiar.<sup>13</sup> How often did people draw on personal experience in political conversations about the environment? Not very often when compared to mediated sources. Overall, only 9% of the comments referred to personal experience (Table 1, row 6). This percentage varied only slightly between groups shown fictional television (7%), nonfictional television (8%), and no television (11%). Even when citing direct experiences, our discussants often evaluated them against information drawn from the media:

Violet: I feel really guilty because we just had our lawn treated today and we just started it this year, but I've been reading more and more articles about how that may not be the best thing to do as far as having small children that play in the grass and, I know when you read things and you see things on TV that they sort of sensationalize it, it may not always present an accurate picture, but if there's even a small chance that something could happen to one of my children, I would want to avoid it at all costs.

As the above quotation illustrates, people are ambiguous about their dependence on the media for information. Nonetheless, part of the media's power to shape political discourse comes from an underlying, only partially conscious, belief that information provided by it is more reliable than other sources, including personal experience.

### Conversing With Television

Although the aggregate patterns discussed above provide strong evidence for the media's importance in discourse about public issues, they tell us little about the specific ways in which citizens use television. We argue that it is useful to conceptualize public opinion as a conversation wherein citizens "discover" their political views in the give-and-take of discussions with others. Television plays a central role in this conversation because, although individuals may not regularly talk with each other about political issues, television is engaged in an ongoing political conversation; when we turn the set on, we dip into this conversation.

Some of the strongest support for our conversational metaphor comes from the discussants' own reports of their viewing habits. Literally all of them said they talked with others about what they saw on television either at the time of viewing or shortly thereafter, and almost all of them said they do this with great regularity. The following comments are typical of answers to requests to recall the last time they watched a show and talked about it. Note how the point at which the viewer enters into television's ongoing conversation (i.e., the particular show that is watched and the specific topic being addressed on it) shapes the topic that is then discussed with others.<sup>14</sup>

Jane: I do [talk about what's on television] all the time. So do my friends. . . . If we go out to dinner, or if there was something that really grips me. Or I might call them up and see if they read about something or watched it on TV . . . and we discuss it.

Kara: When I watch TV with my friends, we'll get into big, big discussions about what's going on. If I watch it with my boyfriend, I'm kind of like her [points to another group member], I kind of argue with him about stuff.

Paul recalled an example that supports our argument that fictional shows can also spark political conversation:

It seems like we were watching *L.A. Law* and there was some issue being discussed, like the right to die or something, and he said, "well, I'd always want to do it this way" . . . and I say, "I'll remember that you want to die," or something like that, just little things mostly.

Viewers' interaction with television has a conversational quality even when one watches alone. In our focus groups, it was common to see viewers smiling, nodding, groaning, and so forth as they watched television. It was also not unusual for them to gesture at the television during discussions (even though the set was off) much as they gestured at other members of the conversation. Indeed, many viewers (as we do) talk back to the tube. When asked if they ever talk back to the television when watching alone, only 3 of the 34 participants said they never did. One of the three said that although she didn't her husband did all the time. Another one of the three said, "I don't actually verbalize but I think, boy I'd like to be . . . like on Donahue or something . . . I'd like to be there right then just to say this." More typical was Catherine's comment: "I scream at the TV, just like I scream at other people when I drive." Of course, as the following comment by Mark reveals, not everyone is tolerant of actually verbalizing the conversation we have with television:

How do you think I lost my first wife? Sitting there and talking back to the TV. She left me for that.

### *The Shifting Nature of Public Opinions*

The usefulness of the conversation metaphor (and of focus groups as a method of recovering this conversation) is also illuminated by participants' discussions about the environment. These conversations provide a rich data source for confirming and deepening our understanding of the ways in which citizens interact with television, as well as of how they use television in forming and expressing public opinions. One of the most consistent and telling of our observations is the active role conversants take in attempting to make sense of the political and social world. Drawing on their own store of information and beliefs, the views of others in the group, and the views presented by television, discussants engaged in an ongoing effort to construct their opinions about environmental issues.

Key to understanding the role that conversation (with both television and other citizens) plays in the formation and maintenance of public opinion is first understanding the contextual, fluid, and often inconsistent nature of opinions themselves. Freed from the forced restraints of closed-end surveys, this aspect of public opinion becomes clear. This inconsistency in part reflects a lack of information, interest, and so forth but, more important, also reflects the inherent contestability of most important public issues. An examination of all the comments made by individual discussants throughout the focus groups demonstrates that even the most thoughtful citizens express views

that are contradictory. Often the most consistent views are expressed by those who clearly are uninterested and unreflective of the issues under discussion. For example, Sarah, a "born-again" Christian, acknowledged that she was "just not concerned about the environment at all," was "just not interested in it," and "never engaged[s] in any conversation about it [the environment]." Throughout the discussion, however, she maintained a consistent (one might say stubborn) critique of environmental problems:

I think they've gone too much into this pollution. I don't believe in all of it. The Lord's going to take care of it, for one thing. There's just a bunch of kooks around. I think [environmental problems] are overblown a lot so they can sell more papers. . . . I don't think most [journalists] know anymore about it than my cat.

Some of these women [activists] that are involved in this stuff should just stay home and do something productive. . . . They're always wanting their mug on the TV.

Much more common were opinions expressed by the same person at different points in the conversation that, when placed back-to-back, appear incompatible. For example, Carol initially said, "I don't think about the environment much." Yet she later commented,

I work for a regulatory agency and we deal with hazardous materials on a daily basis. We give permits to the companies that haul the stuff in and out. The laws just do not support caring for the environment.

I started paying attention to what was going on, you know, the garbage being dumped and other flammable and medical [waste]. I realize that it's very easy for them to unload here. . . . The law just does not support . . . Kentucky being environmentally sound.

And consider the following two comments by Kara:

I think it definitely is [possible to protect the environment in today's world]. I mean, to think there's all these big brains and all this big money for making things, surely they can come up with some way to make them in a safe manner, or to protect the public, or the land or animals.

Yet later in the conversation, she says,

There's just a lot of other stuff you have to deal with . . . I mean, you would just have to take over the world pretty much, it would have to

be every person in the United States, every company, every—I just don't think it would be possible [to protect the environment in today's world] . . . I hate to be Miss Negative, but I just don't think so.

### *The Construction of Political Meaning*

What is Carol's level of interest in environmental issues or Kara's view of the possibility of addressing the nation's problems? Our argument is that their "true" opinions do not reside in one or the other of their statements. Rather, their opinions are to be found in the full set of statements they make about a particular issue and can be understood only in the specific context in which they are made. More important, we argue that citizens play an active, if limited, role in the construction of these opinions and do so in part through ongoing conversations with other people and, especially, with television.

Examples of our discussants' actively using their own experiences, the comments of others, and the "comments" of television abound throughout the transcripts. Many of the examples already cited in this article began with phrases such as "I agree with her" or "It's like on the show we saw." In addition, participants often pick up on themes, topics, and so forth introduced by other members or, in those focus groups with television, by the program they watched. For example, both programs focus attention on the human costs of environmental pollution by emphasizing its effect on children. In the docudrama, the lead character's daughter dies after playing in a river polluted with toxic waste, whereas one segment of *48 Hours* centered on parents whose young son had died of leukemia, the possible result of pesticides used in the area. In focus group discussions following the viewing of these programs, the costs of pollution are frequently measured in terms of children. Comments like the following, found in all the discussions in which television was present, were largely absent from those discussions held without viewing TV:

Susan: I think that [pollution] is very serious . . . if we don't do something our grandchildren and their children won't have a chance.

In one sense, these illustrate the agenda-setting and priming effects demonstrated by mainstream research. Ruby's comment is typical: "I never really think about them [environmental issues] too much unless I happen to see something on television." However, allowing people to speak for themselves, as in focus groups, also helps expand our understanding of these processes. First, our discussions suggest that the media shape not only what

people think about but also what they talk about. Second, they provide evidence that people are very much aware of this process. In some important ways, the agenda-setting function of television is not the insidious process often implied in media research:

Tania: I think people talk about it [environmentalism] more now than they did before because it's brought out so much more now . . . But, I think now you hear so much about it that it's on your mind. Whether you're talking about it or not, you are thinking about it.

Catherine: I guess it just depends on who I'm talking to, you know. I don't think it's [environmental problems] something that's a major, major concern. I think . . . it's like . . . the war in the Persian Gulf. If you asked me about it [when it was going on], I'd say [I talk about it] everyday. You know, you talk about it and so people kind of put aside other things.

Often, our conversants' understanding of the degree to which they rely on the media for determining what is and is not important is fairly sophisticated. Violet and Catherine, for example, note the power of television as a visual medium to dramatize environmental issues:

Violet: I thought it [the program] was real interesting. I think lots of times . . . you know, you can have all these ideas in your head then you have this visual representation of a landfill or this visual representation of a child and here's their picture and now they've died. Or, these individuals that are actively campaigning that look like very normal people that you would not normally envision as campaigning on environmental issues. I think that's real important.

Catherine: that's what the media is there for, sometimes they don't belong in people's business, but it's a good thing they're being concerned. So we can see what is going on, what needs to be done, they let us know. They're our eyes, kind of . . . they let us see. You know, if we didn't get to see what was on TV, well, unless we went to a landfill ourselves, would we really know what it looked like? You know, in our heads, we can visualize what it looked like to have all that.

At the same time that subjects recognize their dependence on the media, they often seem troubled and ambivalent about the potential such dependence has for selectively shaping their perception of the importance of various political issues. Although the media may set the agenda, the public's concern over this process, revealed in the following quotations, is often overlooked by researchers:

Mark: You know, I think that, in a way, most everybody says that we're definitely concerned, I mean, I think I'm concerned, but then on the other hand, I think I spend very little time thinking about it until I see something like this [gestures to the blank screen] or I see the oil wells burning out of control or something to bring it home. . . . I think we need to have more hard facts put before us. I think we need to be bombarded with more things to make us think about it and hopefully therefore to make us act.

Hazel: I think, you know, some of the best people or the most expert people may not have an avenue to get . . . to the public . . . if the media doesn't involve themselves in that, then there's really no way to get the exposure.

Some subjects moved beyond simple ambivalence to an understanding of the reasons for the shifting nature of media coverage. Such sophisticated understandings open up the possibility of maintaining a critical distance between the media's definition of what is important and other hierarchies of importance:

Paul: One problem with the media is that . . . if they talk about some issue then two weeks later if it's not changed, they really don't want to do the story again. . . . They don't want to do the same thing over and over, they think the viewers are going to get bored and change to something else. I wonder if the media's attention to environmental concerns is going to be fat like and then they're going to find something else to focus on 6 months from now. That can be a problem . . . when you involve the media.

#### *The Limited Autonomy of Television Viewers*

After closely analyzing several programs dealing with environmental issues, including the ones we showed to our focus groups, we conclude that these shows adopt a uniform perspective, but one that varies at different levels of politics (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). At what we label "the substance level of politics" (i.e., discussion of issues that are or are becoming part of the political agenda), such shows adopt a liberal perspective on environmentalism, assuming that problems are worse than ever, pose a grave and immediate threat to humans and nature, and deny the need to consider trade-offs between protecting the environment and economic growth. At what we call "the institutions and processes level of politics" (i.e., discussion of the formal channels and institutions of government and the economy), the programs are

critical of the problem solving capabilities of political and economic institutions. Government . . . is seen as corrupt, incompetent and completely inadequate to the task of dealing with the problems posed by environmental pollution. Thus, all three shows make it quite clear that we cannot count on government to help solve this problem. Nor can we count upon business to act responsibly. In all three shows, the business sector is represented by either evasive corporate spokespersons or shady disreputable owners. (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994, p. 93)

Most of our discussants had the ability to analyze critically the slant of these shows and, at a certain level, to resist or accept their messages based on a comparison with their own ideology. Employing our conversational metaphor, although dependent on the media for information and the basic structure of political discourse, people continuously integrate and critique the media's side of this conversation. The following comments were fairly typical:

Mark (noting the degree to which "Incident at Dark River" presented a biased portrait of businesspeople): Well, for the purposes of the movie, I guess they wanted them [presented this way] . . . but I saw it as being slanted. I think they really portrayed those guys as not having any heart at all and, you know, being guilty. We seem to already draw the conclusion that they were guilty and they didn't care whether they were guilty or not, and if it hadn't been for the little lowly guy at the bottom there which gives us all hope that no matter how big the company, there's always somebody . . . somehow to bring them down, you know, working in the basement and talking to a reporter. But I thought it was biased.

Richard: I think it had a pretty liberal slant, which is ok with me because I agree with it, but still you've got to admit it wasn't exactly even-handed.

Violet, commenting on *48 Hours*, identified the bias of the show but accepted the need for such bias to combat wider apathy about environmental issues:

I think sometimes it needs to be biased in order to make people more aware of what the issues are. I think it was biased on the side of environmental issues, you know, that we should be more aware that these are the horrible consequences. Yes, these are consequences and yes, these are horrible, but how many times do these things happen?

In addition to identifying the political slants of the shows, subjects also critically evaluated the reliance on sensationalism or emotionalism in both

shows. This is especially interesting to us because subjects were able to see the dramatic elements in both fiction and nonfiction. Violet criticized one segment in *48 Hours* that deals with a family's grief over their belief that their child died from exposure to pesticides. Similarly, subjects understood the need to distinguish the dramatic elements from the more factual bases of the docudrama "Incident at Dark River."

Although recognizing the impracticality of providing only facts and figures on television and the benefits of emotional appeals, our subjects were troubled and divided over the implications of television's use of such dramatic devices. This interrogation of the motives and the methods of the media is fairly subtle and not unsympathetic to the dilemmas of attracting and educating an audience:

Mark: I think a documentary usually gives us more hard cold facts, but again, the dramas tend . . . I mean, I found myself [after watching "Incident at Dark River"] . . . crying and I was mad and those are the things that tend to get us fired up and ready to go out and take action right now if we knew where to go to, you know, after watching that. So, I think they're both useful and, you know, we shouldn't discount either because there's something we learn from both.

John, although recognizing the power of entertainment figures to attract audiences for worthwhile causes, was also clearly troubled by this state of affairs:

Well, they're public figures, they are recognized and I think most American people would probably in some way trust a movie star for some reason. I'm not sure why, but they're well known and they're not foreign and if you just had somebody like Ralph Nader who isn't real well known come up and start speaking on some environmental issue, no one would go to see him.

Although many subjects were able to articulate concerns about the media's ability to shape the agenda, raising the potential for critical resistance, other aspects of their use of information was much less accessible to conscious reflection. Consistent with the arguments of researchers using schema theory, we found a troubling example of the way people use preexisting beliefs to organize and store the information provided by the media. Far and away the most widely known environmental group is Greenpeace, which was mentioned in all our focus groups (the second most frequently mentioned group, the Sierra Club, was brought up in fewer than half the groups).

When asked to describe what they knew about Greenpeace, most subjects mentioned that the group is "radical," "extremist," or "violent." And in four of our groups, the following story (here told by Marcie) was recounted:

I mean, you see them with a little rubber dingy between the Russian trawler and the whales and that type thing which grabs your attention, but I guess they got accused of blowing up a ship once, so . . . they also have a political activist wing.

It appears that because the schema through which information about Greenpeace is filtered centers on images of "radical activism" the vague recollection of a ship being blown up becomes reconstructed into further evidence for this point of view: Greenpeace blew up a ship. In only one of our focus groups did someone tell the story correctly—that it had been the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* that had been blown up.

The inability of discussants to see, and so actively to use or to resist, opinions expressed by television is most apparent once one moves beyond the institutions, processes, and substance of politics. At what we label "the foundations level of politics" (i.e., discussion of the values and beliefs on which the very ideas of politics and government are based), the television programs are highly conservative, emphasizing individualism to the exclusion of any forms of collective or political action.

[W]hile institutions are portrayed as flawed and inadequate, the solution is never political organization aimed at institutional reform or change. Rather, individuals acting on their own as individuals are seen as the solution to the problem . . . the only solution offered on these shows that is designed to call forth any sort of action by viewers is recycling (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994, pp. 94-95).

At this level, discussants were largely unable to identify or critically resist the slants used in the media. Focus group conversations seemed simply to take for granted individual actions as the only acceptable course of action. Thus, when discussing what actions they actually took, planned to take, or thought they should take, virtually all discussion was limited to individual activities like recycling or shopping more wisely. A similar attitude was revealed in their attitude toward government and citizen action: Government should do more but without stepping on individual rights and, in general, is too corrupt or incompetent to count on. And group action is either viewed with suspicion or else simply not thought of as a serious alternative such as:

Sandra: Unfortunately, I met two people who I did not particularly like who were from the Sierra Club.

Mike: I'm not sure if it was Greenpeace, it was one of those organizations. They invaded the Soviet Union to save some seals. . . I think that hurts their cause more than helps it. I personally feel that people like that are crackpots.

Linda (after being pressed to be more specific about what groups she thought were doing a good job addressing problems of the environment): I don't really think in terms of groups, I think in terms of individuals.

Once the distinction between levels of politics is made, it becomes less surprising that, despite the critical treatment of government and business, political or business leaders are essentially absent from the list of people cited in conversations. The closest people come to identifying the bias in television's treatment of environmental issues at this foundational level is in comments like Mark's (cited above) that indicate some recognition that television does not provide all the ingredients necessary for stimulating political action.

### Summary and Conclusion

The ability of our discussants to identify critically some media biases, but not others, suggests that much of the acrimonious debate over whether the media is too liberal or too conservative is misplaced. Our research suggests that viewers identify this type of bias easily and that they adjust their uses of television accordingly. Rather than simply asking what the bias of television is, a more fundamental question may be which biases viewers can identify and which they are unable to identify or resist.

More generally, although the focus group results are not conclusive, they both support and show the usefulness of our conversational metaphor. Some of these observations can be used to confirm and flesh out findings drawn from more quantitative techniques, as with our agenda-setting results. Some can be used as suggestive evidence for purely theoretical arguments and as the foundations on which more formal hypothesis testing is done. And some, through the use of ethnography, discourse analysis, and so forth, can stand on their own as empirical evidence of the uses of television. Ultimately, because the media and politics cut across institutional, textual, social, and

psychological processes, understanding them requires a combination of methodological techniques. Especially important for exploring television's impact on democratic politics is the development of techniques that allow us to recover the conversation of citizenship.

### Appendix: Focus Group Protocol

1. (Introduction): We're interested in finding out a little about what people think about a variety of issues, where they get their information from, and so forth.
  - A. Set them at ease, introduce coinvestigator, explain loose structure of discussion (break, etc.).
  - B. Go around the room, ask persons their name, a little something about themselves.
2. (If television present)—Introduce show as way of getting us to think about the topic of the environment. Tell them to relax, feel free to move about, talk during the video.
3. (If television present): What did you think about the show?
4. How concerned are you about environmental issues? Which ones? How often do you talk about it? With whom?
5. Do you ever act on your concerns? Get involved in any way? How?
6. How good a job do you think (government, industry, public interest groups, the media, technical experts) are doing in regards to environmental problems?
7. Do you think it is possible for us to protect adequately the environment in the United States today? Why? Why not?
8. What is the responsibility of corporations/industry in protecting the environment, the public?
9. What should citizens do (what is their obligation)?
10. (If television present): Think back to the show. Do you think it was fair? Did it hold your attention? Did you learn anything? Would you watch it if it were on at home? Did you like or dislike the format (documentary, magazine/fictional, docudrama, etc.)?
11. How often, if ever, do you talk about issues like the environment? With whom? Do you ever watch TV with others? Do you talk with them about what is on? Do you talk about what you've watched on TV with others later? Describe the circumstances. When watching alone, do you ever "talk back" to the TV? Out loud? Describe circumstances.

### Notes

1. Many of the researchers we list as mainstream scholars develop models that diverge from one or more of the characteristics summarized above. For example, Graber's (1984) use of schema theory and in-depth interviews goes beyond a simple cause-effect model; Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1984) spiral of silence theory and Gerbner's cultivation analysis (1984, 1986) have implications for the maintenance of Hallin's (1986) spheres of legitimate controversy. Nonetheless, these departures are exceptions to the rule and represent modifications rather than rejections of the mainstream model (see Beniger, 1987; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1991a; Katz, 1987).
2. Computer metaphors are especially prevalent in the recent work of political psychologists who emphasize the cognitive aspects of public opinion (see Lodge,

- McGraw, & Stroh, 1989; McGraw, Lodge, & Stroh, 1990a, 1990b; Lodge, Stroh, & Wahlke, 1990).
3. Bennett (1980) has labeled this approach the "state of consciousness fallacy."
  4. Zaller (1990, 1992) and Zaller and Feldman (1989) demonstrated the hazards of these assumptions, arguing that survey respondents often create opinions on the spot, drawing on whatever beliefs, information, and so forth that they happen to pull from memory at the moment of the interview. As a result, the opinions tapped at one point in time will likely differ from those tapped at another point. Although this "sampling model" of opinion formation is a significant improvement over the more static conceptualizations implied by earlier opinion research, it (and other process-oriented models such as schema theory) continues to accept an internal and private model of public-opinion formation.
  5. Movement in this direction is happening. For example, Graber (1984) used a sophisticated schema theory that assumes citizens play an active role in the acquisition of information from the media. Her analysis also uses in-depth, open-ended interviews and personal diaries. Neuman, Crigler, and Just (1992) developed a "constructionist" model of media use, conceptualizing political learning as a "fluid and interactive" process, and they also use relatively unstructured in-depth interviews along with more experimental, closed-end methods. Within critical media studies, scholars have begun to study empirically viewer reception of media messages—although not as part of an examination of specifically political attitudes and actions—(see Morley, 1981, 1986; Press, 1990).
  6. We are not the first to identify the centrality of conversation for the formation of public opinion (see, e.g., Clark, 1969). In an excellent study, Gamson (1992), for example, employed a conversationally based approach to public opinion and even used focus groups, as do we. However, he did not examine the role of television.
  7. A \$20 honorarium was offered, and no mention of television was made.
  8. Given our intention of replicating the conversations people have with family, friends, coworkers, television, and themselves, we opted for relatively small focus groups of four persons each. We therefore invited five to six people to each session. In the end, one group consisted of five people, five groups consisted of four people, and three groups consisted of three people.
  9. On the basis of the assumption that people would be more comfortable talking with people roughly their own age, we stratified the focus groups as follows: Three consisted of people in their late teens and twenties; three, of people in their thirties and early forties; and three, of people in their mid-forties and older (this last set of groups consisted mainly of people in their forties and fifties).
  10. It is important to note that, although our design allows us to make comparisons across three different settings, our analysis is not intended as a formal, controlled experiment.
  11. That is, the overall, combined percentage of direct and indirect references to the show (Tables 3 and 4, row 1A).
  12. That is, the combined percentages of direct and indirect references (Tables 3 and 4, row 1B).
  13. Sometimes, of course, it was impossible to determine the source of a discussant's information.
  14. Unless otherwise noted, quotations used in the text are representative of broader patterns uncovered in our analysis of the transcripts. Also, the reader is reminded that quotations are provided verbatim and that transcripts of the spoken word often appear awkward in print.

## References

- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Beniger, J. (1987). The flirtation with mass society. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, 46-66.
- Bennett, W. (1980). *Public opinion in American politics*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Clark, T. (Ed.). (1969). *Gabriel Tarde: On communication and social influence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Connolly, W. E. (1983). *The terms of political discourse* (2nd ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Crigler, A., Just, M., Neuman, W., Campbell, D., & O'Connell, J. (1988). *Understanding issues in the news: "I don't know much about this but . . ."* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, held in Toronto, Canada, in May 1988.
- Delli Carpini, M., & Williams, B. (1991). *Media and politics: A critical review of the literature*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Delli Carpini, M., & Williams, B. (1994). Fictional and non-fictional television celebrate Earth Day (or, politics is comedy plus pretense). *Cultural Studies*, 8, 74-98.
- Dewey, J. (1974). *Democracy and education*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University. (Original work published 1916)
- Gallie, W. B. (1955-1956). Essentially contested concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56, 167-198.
- Gamson, W. (1992). *Talking politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Garver, E. (1978). Rhetoric and essentially contested arguments. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 11, 156-172.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorelli, N. (1984). Political correlates of television viewing. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 48, 283-300.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorelli, N. (1986). Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on media effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ginsberg, B. (1982). *The consequences of consent*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Ginsberg, B. (1986). *The captive public*. New York: Basic Books.
- Graber, D. (1984). *Processing the news*. New York: Longman.
- Gray, J. (1977). On the contestability of social and political concepts. *Political Theory*, 5, 331-348.
- Hallin, D. (1986). *The uncensored war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herbst, S. (1993). *Numbered voices: How opinion polling has shaped American politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Illich, I., & Sanders, B. (1988). *ABC: The alphabetization of the popular mind*. New York: Vintage.
- Katz, E. (1987). Communications research since Lazarsfeld. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, 25-45.

- Krueger, R. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kubey, R., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Television and the quality of life*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1990). *The export of meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lodge, M., McGraw, K., & Stroh, P. (1989). An impression-driven model of candidate evaluation. *American Political Science Review*, 83, 399-420.
- Lodge, M., Stroh, P., & Wahlke, J. (1990). Black-box models of candidate evaluation. *Political Behavior*, 12, 5-27.
- McGraw, K., Lodge, M., & Stroh, P. (1990a). On-line processing in candidate evaluation. *Political Behavior*, 12, 41-60.
- McGraw, K., Lodge, M., & Stroh, P. (1990b). *Processes of candidate evaluation*. Unpublished paper.
- Merton, R. (1987). The focused interview and focus groups: Continuities and discontinuities. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51, 550-556.
- Merton, R., Fiske, K., & Kendall, P. (1956). *The focused interview*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Merton, R., & Kendall, P. (1946). The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology*, 51, 541-557.
- Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Morley, D. (1981). *The nationwide audience*. London: British Film Institute.
- Morley, D. (1986). *Family television*. London: Comedia.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence: A theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*, 24, 43-51.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1984). *The spiral of silence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Neuman, W. R., Just, M. R., & Crigler, A. N. (1992). *Common knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Press, A. (1990). *Women watching television*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Williams, B., & Matheny, A. (in press). *Democracy, dialogue, and social regulation: The contested languages of environmental disputes*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Zaller, J. (1990a). Political awareness, elite opinion leadership, and the mass survey response. *Social Cognition*, 8, 125-158.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaller, J., & Feldman, S. (1989). *A simple model of the survey response*. Paper presented at the meeting of the Political Methodology Society, Chapel Hill, NC.

JANE D. BROWN  
 CAROL REESE DYKERS  
 JEANNE ROGGE STEELE  
 ANNE BARTON WHITE

## Teenage Room Culture: Where Media and Identities Intersect<sup>1</sup>

*An adolescent's bedroom is an important site for the everyday work of creating identities. What the authors have come to call room culture is both a theoretical perspective and a valuable research strategy. Theoretically, it is assumed that individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. For teens, the mass media are central to this process because they are a convenient source of cultural options. Over the past 5 years, the authors have pursued this line of reasoning with a series of small-scale, primarily qualitative, studies with adolescents. They have found that getting teens to talk about their bedrooms is a productive way to establish rapport, especially around sensitive issues such as sex and alcohol use, and to understand in context who each person is in relation to the larger culture.*

Over the past 5 years, we have been interviewing adolescents in their bedrooms. We have come to call our project *room culture*, which connotes for us a particular theoretical and methodological approach to the study of how individuals work and play with the variety of available cultural symbols, myths, and artifacts in the process of creating a sense of themselves. We have found that the mass media are an important "cultural tool kit" (Swidler, 1986) from which adolescents choose as they grapple with growing up. Here we discuss what we have learned about the value of speaking and working with adolescents in a context they find meaningful.

As young people move through adolescence, they become increasingly involved in "identity work" (Show & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348), the process of creating a sense of self in the context of the immediate and larger social world.