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The Power of Prime-Time Television

By

Chris Boyd

Senior Project
Jepson School of Leadership Studies
University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia
May, 1998
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Chris Boyd
Senior Project
Jepson School of Leadership Studies
University of Richmond
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Prime-time television has become an integral part of society. Families come together to watch it, coworkers discuss story developments in the office, and children mimic their favorite characters. Television takes us to extremes. One show displays brutal murders while the next will display heated romances. Recently, much has been made of the detrimental effects of prime-time television on American society. Researchers report statistics that correlate a rise in television violence to that which occurs on the streets of our cities. If this is true, however, then shouldn't the opposite also have merit? If prime-time television has the capacity to corrupt, would it not also have the capacity to lead? I intend to illustrate the possibilities of prime-time television's impact on creating positive social change. For this to occur, television would be acting as a leader to the audiences at home. Through the images shown on screen, lessons would be learned and attitudes could be changed. This change can happen through various avenues, but they all lead to the same goal, an improved society.

Although there are numerous interpretations of the definition of leadership, this paper will focus on leadership as "the process by which an individual is exposed to concepts or ideas, and the subsequent actions resulting from the messages that were internalized" (Boyd, 1998). With regards to television, the concepts will be the content of shows seen during the prime-
time hours: nightly, 8:00 - 10:00 p.m. If an individual does not take any messages away from television's content, then leadership is not occurring.

How does this definition of leadership relate to previous definitions? Although this is a new field for the topic of leadership, many prior ideas are still relevant. John Scully, chairman and CEO of Apple computers, states that leadership "revolves around vision, ideas, direction, and has more to do with inspiring people as to direction and goals than with day-to-day implementation" (Bennis, 1989, p.139). This is indeed what my definition identifies. Leadership is the process of inspiring and directing individuals toward a positive end. For this thesis, that end is prosocial behavior.

In this situation, television's content is serving as the leader. The television itself is just the means by which the message is reaching the viewer. The shows on television are the source of influence on the audience, thus representing the leader. The leader needs to embody a vision and help guide followers toward that vision. An effective leader instills trust in followers, through a wealth of knowledge or experience. These are all attributes that can be associated with television shows. Although they are not the typical leader one thinks of, they exhibit many of the necessary characteristics.

Furthermore, it is necessary to address the issue of positive versus negative leadership. Some scholars approach leadership in a strictly moral and ethical sense, arguing that an impact that does not exhibit these characteristics is not
leadership. Although this helps alleviate the difficulty of discussing the possibilities of negative leadership, I do not feel that this is the sole option. Unfortunately, I believe that leadership can be used for negative means. This leadership is overall unproductive, however, and will eventually be replaced by a positive form of leadership. The relationship of positive and negative leadership will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

Although the concept of positive social change is rather ambiguous, it is easier understood when it is broken down into smaller components. One way to better describe positive social change is to define it as promoting "prosocial behavior". Unfortunately, the term prosocial does not appear in most dictionaries, because it was created by social scientists as an antonym to "antisocial" behavior. According to C. Daniel Batson, prosocial behavior covers "the broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself- behaviors such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation" (282). Assuming that prime-time television can inspire, these are examples of behaviors that should help lead individuals to become better citizens.

This paper represents an archival analysis of research exploring prime-time television's characteristics and its ability to create prosocial change. To illustrate the possibility of television as a viable leader for prosocial change, I will research existing papers that relate to the topic. In the attempt to clarify the process by which positive social change is
possible, the argument presented in this paper will be organized as follows. To begin, I will briefly discuss previous research on the impact of prime-time television on viewers. Although there is a great deal of research on the topic, my intention is to simply outline studies and findings that correlate to television's possibility for positive change.

One particular difficulty regarding the material in this section is in differentiating whether television leads the American public, or it follows the public's lead, and simply portrays typical, everyday situations. To quote Aubrey Singer, a scholar of television and society, "Will television be a window on culture or a reflection in a glass?" (Singer, 1968). To help in understanding this causality issue, I will incorporate Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory (Lodziak, 1986), which implies that because there is a relationship between television and society, one can assume that each impacts the other. This will conclude the first section of the paper.

The second section will begin with various leadership theories that help describe and develop the role of television in society. These theories and concepts range from development of social norms, to modeling, to fostering a strong self-concept. I intend for this section to set the basis for showing the impact television can have on leadership. To this point, little research has been conducted that examines the idea of prime-time television as a viable leader in society. This may be because some feel that it is too simplistic of a concept. Alternatively, I believe that the more research that is done on this issue, the
more we will be able to appreciate television's capabilities in leadership.

At this point it is necessary to describe the parameters of leadership in regards to this paper. Presently, leadership is thought of in terms of a process or in reference to individual leaders. I contend that there is a third possibility for conceptualizing leadership: leadership through a medium. Through its content and portrayal of characters and situations, prime-time television has the extraordinary ability to lead its viewers. Television creates situations and dilemmas that require solutions. Consequently, television allows viewers to vicariously experience, and learn from, hypothetical issues. These issues, whether positive or negative in nature, permit the audience to grow and develop. Furthermore, television presentations allow viewers to have a greater wealth of knowledge concerning the world they live in.

The third section of the paper will examine the impact of prime-time television's creators on television's content and prosocial message. Up to this point in the paper, I will have discussed television's potential power and the leadership constructs that relate to it. In this section, I will investigate the influence producers and directors can have on positively shaping society. This will be accomplished by reviewing interviews, articles, and the like in which producers and directors have discussed these issues. I hope to find that these individuals intend to impact their viewing audience. Returning to Giddens' Structuration Theory, by showing that many
television producers intend to create a change in their viewers, one can determine that there is an impact on the audience. If the messages producers are transmitting are prosocial in nature, then the likely effect on the audience would push towards positive social change.

Finally, the concluding section of the paper will examine the role television plays within the entire social network of an individual. Television is one of the many factors that contributes to the development of an individual. To best understand the unique role of television in this development, it is necessary to analyze it alongside other significant factors: family, peers, school. It is the combination of all of these social forces that determines the thoughts and actions of an individual. This section will also serve as the platform to explore the relationship of positive versus negative leadership. I will illustrate how the social forces surrounding an individual establish what messages have an impact and what messages are discarded.

Literature Review of Prime-Time Television

The word television simply means 'seeing at a distance'. This basic concept, relaying images through space, through manipulation and development, has become to mean more than its dictionary definition. Television has changed drastically from its original form and function. Few can dispute the impact television has had on the American public. Consequently, many
scholars have shown a great deal of interest in studying its effects on society. Television has become such a pervasive force that some individuals compare it to a "fifth and artificial season, with the four natural ones. It differs from the natural seasons by remaining with us in some guise throughout the year" (Chaffee et. al. 1978). The data regarding television use is astounding. "The average American born today will eventually spend nine years watching television. With approximately 3,000 hours available annually for recreation and with forty-four hours per week consumed by television, no other form of the popular arts exceeds television and only sleeping takes more of man's time" (Murray, 1979).

The views and ideas that are expressed on prime-time television today are quite different than those of the recent past. During its development in the late 1950's and early 1960's, television portrayed a more conservative view of how society worked and the standards people should live by. The world of television was ideal, displaying close-knit families, secure job settings, and honest law enforcers. It was a world in which "social institutions worked, political concerns rarely intruded the private lives of the populace, the military assured our national security, and the churches looked after our spiritual values" (Lichter et al., 413).

In the middle of the 1960's, this world began to change. During this time, television began to display ideas that challenged the mentality of just a few years back. The families that seemed so close and carefree started to develop problems.
The police officers that were so strong and determined to fight crime began to work alongside gangsters and thugs. These are but a few ways in which the tables were turned. In essence, viewers were no longer reassured of the world around them and consequently, they began to question their surroundings.

There are numerous reasons for this great change. Some scholars believe that it was a direct representation of the Vietnam War, the Watergate incident and the Kennedy assassination. These events, within a close span of time to each other, altered the complexion of people's attitudes. The trust that once existed between individuals was lost, and the light that was at the end of the tunnel seemed to be fading. Just before these events, however, a scandal rocked the internal world of television.

Whereas the above mentioned crises affected society as a whole, the Quiz Show scandal of 1959 impacted the way television would be viewed in the future. In front of a congressional committee, the rigged quiz shows became exposed. This impacted television because it raised the issue of whether television was simply entertainment, or if it held the possibility of a higher purpose. Many viewers showed tolerance towards the scandal, because they felt that "what happened was a normal part of show business and it is perfectly all right" (Bower, 1993, p.185). Other viewers took an opposing view, arguing, "These practices are very wrong and should be stopped, but you can't condemn all of television because of them" (Bower, 185). Although viewers maintained a range of differing opinions, Congress felt quite
differently. Through their disapproval of the quiz shows actions, Congress set a higher standard for television which included integrity and honesty. The question now to be answered was: "What were the expectations of television?"

Though rarely thought of, television is simply an advanced version of old story tellers. "Similar to the way Homer provided the Greeks with a sense of history and common language through his Iliad and Odyssey, today's common cultural mechanism is television" (Coppa, 1979, p.142). The main difference between the two sources is that few value the role of television as much as they admire the genius of Homer. Instead, watching television is considered a source of simple leisure. Though it has numerous definitions, many scholars define leisure as "those activities which people do simply because they want to, for their own sake, for fun, entertainment or self-improvement, or for goals of their own choosing, but not for material gain" (Argyle, 1992, p.104). The viewing of television accomplishes all of the above goals, and yet, goes beyond this definition. Unlike other leisure activities such as playing chess or golf, more complex and diverse explanations are necessary for understanding the popularity of television.

There are numerous reasons individuals watch television. Although an audience may watch for different reasons, there are some similarities that unite us all. One such explanation is that watching television is a kind of "parasocial" activity - it is social behavior second hand. Dennis McQuail, in his Mass Communication Theory (1983, p.32-3), suggests that personal
identity needs are met through television viewing in that it enables audience members to find "reinforcement for personal values", to find "models of behavior", to gain "insight into one's self", and to identify "with valued others (in the media)". For many, the use of television promotes their integration into society and facilitates social interaction. In essence, television provides a "substitute for real-life companionship" (Lodziak, 1986, p.132).

Other studies have further contributed to the explanation of why individuals watch television. After completing his study in 1988, S.M. Livingstone compiled a list of the top seven reasons individuals watch television. In descending order, they were: 1) Entertainment and Escapism, 2) Realism, 3) Characters are an extension of real-world social networks, 4) As an educational medium, 5) As part of daily life, 6) Emotional experience, and 7) Keeping a critical distance. The first reason, which a resounding 92% of viewers chose, was for entertainment and escapism. This, by no means, is surprising. From the beginning, television has been principally entertainment. Other studies have demonstrated though that "even when a television program is designed to entertain, facts have been learned. This learning has been shown to include facts both essential and incidental to the plot" (Comstock et al., 1978, p.262).

The second most common reason for watching television was for realism. One viewer stated that television deals with the problems that occur in everyday life such as unemployment, racism, adultery, rape, alcoholism, and drugs. All television is
not based around fantasy. Although the characters and settings are often fabricated, the issues that they deal with strike a nerve with viewers. Television shows often relay the current issues in society. One reason for television's popularity is its power to produce shows that portray relevant, up-to-the-minute issues. This is one of the main differences between television and movies. Television has the ability to take today's headlines and turn them into tomorrow's shows. This process takes much longer with movies.

The third reason for television's popularity is that characters portrayed in shows are often extensions of real-world social networks. For many viewers, through continually watching of the same show, a relationship is born with characters. Although this is one-directional, where the audience receives energy and emotions from the television character, viewers can feel fulfilled from this relationship. One viewer stated, "I know after a while the characters do become real people and we are concerned for their well-being just as we are for our friends and colleagues". Somehow, through their constant appearance on our televisions, characters leave an indelible mark on we, the viewers, welcoming us to join them in their worlds.

The fourth reason for television's popularity is that it can be an educational medium. This is not the same education that is learned in school. Knowledge is often idealized in two ways, book smarts (facts) and experiences (emotions). This separation of knowledge is important because it differentiates one's rational side from one's emotional side. As an individual
develops, he is taught a limitless amount of facts in school, ranging from history, to language arts, to math. Television is different from school in that it is not based on such structured facts. Instead, it is educational in that it can offer information on different situations and emotions that a viewer can learn from. One viewer expressed that "we can relate to the situation and sometimes you can sort your own problems out through listening and doing what the character portrayed has done". This idea relates to the concept of modeling that will be addressed later in the paper.

A fifth reason viewers said they watch television was because it was a part of daily life. Many individuals find that their lives start to follow patterns, whether it is when to eat, when to sleep or when to wash. During the process when one is creating a pattern, television often plays a role. For most viewers, there are certain shows that are never missed. If a show plays every night, a missed show is not that great of a tragedy. If the show airs only once a week, however, six days must pass before the viewer can be reunited with the story and characters.

The sixth most popular reason for watching television is for the emotional experience. Few shows maintain the same emotion throughout an episode. Instead, shows cover the entire spectrum of emotions. One viewer commented about television shows, "You can experience a full range of emotions from anger and despair to sheer joy, excitement, and relief". Although this may seem like a great claim, television does, in fact, induce these emotions
from viewers. Furthermore, television creates a situation in which viewers can vicariously experience the emotions of the characters on screen. This gives audience members two opportunities for an emotional experience.

The emotional impact of television can not be overstated. According to Quinn Martin, a renowned television producer, "Emotion is the layer in any television show which must govern the ratio of melodrama and theme. Emotion, the universality of human response, is crucial in building a successful show. Located here is the honesty that cuts across socio-economic lines and builds the mass, general audience" (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p.51)

One last reason Livingstone found for television's popularity was that it allows viewers to keep a critical distance. This distance allow viewers to observe situations and predicaments that they would never want to be in, without the risk of physical involvement. This correlates back to the first reason for television's popularity, escapism. Television shows, however ridiculous they may be at times, intrigue audiences. Most viewers will never be in the situations they observe on television. For many, the most adventure they will explore in their lives will come via television. Regardless of this sense of implausible situations, viewers are able to get involved in the lives and struggles of television characters.

Television has developed a certain mystique. Scholars and laymen alike have difficulty in explaining television's popularity. Some believe that television has a magical quality
about it. One scholar stated, "Television has a magical capacity to yield influence so that, if the very same words came through a different medium, they are not received or perceived in the same way" (Glasser, 1988). Although television shares relatives in print and film, it has established itself as a different breed. Unlike newspapers where most ideas are often straight-forward, the slants to stories that television shows us can change the way we act and interact. This can happen with newspaper articles, but the effect is more prominent from television shows. Television has the ability to blend fact and fiction where even in fantasy stories, television carries a degree of truth that remains with the audience.

Shaping Prosocial Behavior

It is necessary now to return to the idea of shaping prosocial behavior. Through reviewing research on television, I have shown how important television has become to people's lives. It is acknowledged that television plays a significant role in one's day-to-day functions. We must now investigate the frequency of prosocial behaviors in prime-time television, and just as importantly, whether they are recognizable to viewers.

Barbara Lee, through analyzing four weeks (235 programs) of prime-time television during the 1985-86 season, helps answer this question. To begin, Lee first had to describe what would she would consider as "prosocial behavior". Her definition,
similar to the one in this paper, grouped prosocial behaviors into three categories. The first, altruistic actions, included ideas such as sharing, cooperating with, and helping others. The second category was socially approved affective behavior, where emotions and feelings were predominant such as showing affection, sympathy, and empathy. The final category was control over negative predispositions. Ideas represented in this category included resisting temptations or using reasoning as a way of resolving problems.

Lee gathered data that resulted in some remarkable conclusions. To begin, Lee found that almost all (97%) of the programs she analyzed included at least one prosocial incident. This impressive statistic means that only three shows out of one hundred lack some form of socially positive message. Of all of the incidents, showing sympathy or empathy was the most prominent example of a prosocial action. In a majority of the cases (56%), the use of prosocial behavior was intended to resolve an immediate conflict. In 80% of these cases, the prosocial behavior was considered either completely or partially successful in the resolution of the problem.

Finally, Lee investigated the predominant prosocial themes found in prime-time programs. There were four principle themes that accounted for almost half of the prosocial themes. The first was the importance of overcoming one's fears. These scenes dealt with both children and adult concerns, thus, not limiting the receiving audience by focusing on one particular age group. The second theme was the priority of people over material gain.
Similar to what was found in the first theme, many of these scenes involved different characters, ranging from doctors to a group of concerned townspeople. The final two most frequent themes were the destructive effects of deceit and lying, and the lesson of tolerance or the acceptance of differences (Lee, 1988).

The research conducted by Lee ties in with the work of Bradley Greenberg. Both scholars believe that there are two ways by which viewers can absorb prosocial content in a television program. Greenberg refers to this as the "drench hypothesis". Specifically, he states that "television may have more than a gradual, cumulative drip-drip-drip effect" (Greenberg, 1988). These drips could be considered as the individual events within a program that carry a prosocial intent. The drench, however, would relate to the impact of an entire story that helps build a prosocial mentality. This differentiation is important because it allows for two distinct opportunities for prosocial impact. This duality also can relate to the attention span of the viewer. Not all viewers have the time or attention span to watch an entire show, thus they may not receive the overall theme (drench). The viewer may observe a particular scene, however, that depicts a prosocial event. This individual scene may help in creating prosocial change (drip).

This leads us to the next section of the paper, the leadership constructs that help develop the possible prosocial role of prime-time television in society. Through research, we have found that prosocial behaviors are found in many prime-time programs. Now, we must answer the question of how can these
visible issues impact the audiences at home. Essentially, how can prime-time television lead viewers into internalizing the morals and lessons they watch on a screen? Inversely, how can viewers reject the amoral or anti-social images shown on television?

**Literature Review of Leadership Concepts**

Another piece of the puzzle that will help determine prime-time television's impact for positive social change are the leadership theories that help describe television's role in society. Although there seem to be volumes of research on how television negatively impacts audiences, there is limited information written on how television can impact prosocial behaviors. Whether this is because scholars feel that television is too popular of a medium, or simply because some of the subject matter is too sensationalistic, television's possible contributions to leadership have gone unexplored. Therefore, I needed to critique various leadership theories and gather the ones I felt best pertained to this issue.

In doing this, I established that television's impact is through audience observation. A television cannot physically alter an individual. Its power lies in its ability to portray images that interest and activate viewers. With this in mind, I reviewed various leadership theories in order to identify those that develop constructs and approaches that seem relevant to studying a medium such as prime-time television as a leader. Of
all of the possible theories, I have discovered four main theories that I consider relevant: Social Learning Theory, Modeling, Reinforcement, and Development of Norms (including Followership). These theories are pertinent because they have a basis in something that can be observed (Social Learning Theory and Modeling) or in the social interactions that can result from these observations (Reinforcement and Development of Norms). These theories explain the leadership of prime-time television from the moment an individual watches a show to the extent to which the viewer acts on the messages he receives from the program.

The majority of the leadership concepts that can be applied to the impact of television fall under the broad base of the social learning theory. Social learning theory takes into account intrapersonal and environmental determinants when evaluating the impact on an individual. Social learning theory can be broken down into three main components: modeling (vicarious learning), symbolism, and self-control. Modeling occurs when an individual observes and imitates the actions or attitudes of a model. The use of verbal and mental symbolism helps individuals to "organize and store convenient representations of reality" (Steers & Porter, 1991, p.171). Furthermore, values, goals, beliefs and rules are convenient symbolic guideposts for appropriate behavior. Finally, people can control their own behavior if they can "cue it, support it, and reward or punish it" (Steers & Porter, 1991, p.172). These
three aspects of the social learning theory are relevant in addressing leadership and prime-time television.

One of the leading scholars of social learning theory, Albert Bandura, believes that modeling plays a great role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Bandura states, "Social learning theory assumes that modeling influences produce learning principally through their informative functions and that observers acquire mainly symbolic representations of modeled activities rather than specific stimulus-response associations" (Bandura, 1971).

The concept of modeling, specifically in regard to children's viewing of television, has received some recent attention. Although many of these studies relate to the development of behaviors in children, the same can hold true for adults. Through these studies of acquisition of behaviors, several factors regarding models have been established. In observing others, children's attention is commanded by such stimulus as:

"the attractiveness of a symbolic model, the portrayed power of the model, and the portrayed rewards and punishments accruing to a model. These and such other model characteristics such as sex, age, social status, and ethnic identification can all be classed as attributes that are correlated with perceptions of different probabilities of receiving reinforcement- the child pays more attention to models with whom identification implies some increased probability of receiving at least vicarious reinforcement" (Comstock et al., 1978, p.270).
The modeling concept is the foundation of leadership throughout an individual's life. As a child grows, their first exposure to society is through their parents. Therefore, in order to act appropriately, a child will often mimic, or model, the characteristics he sees in his family. This process continues as the child becomes more developed. Models take form in teachers, religious figures, and other figures of authority. During this period, many children often model the characteristics of their peers, creating a social system of their own.

One last modeling source in this system is television. Many of the characteristics associated with individuals as models also hold true for television. Furthermore, most children's experiences with television "begin long before exposure to school or, in many cases, any socialization agent other than the family" (Huston, Wright, Rice, Kerkman, and St. Peters, 1990, p.409). Because of the early initiation of this relationship, television will likely play a lasting role in the decision-making process of developing individuals. Television, like other molding factors around us, will help dictate our actions and attitudes. Research has shown that individuals even mimic the facial expressions, vocal expressions, postures, and instrumental behaviors of those we value in order to enhance or connections with them (Hatfield, Caccioppo, and Rapson, 1993). Due to the fact that we will likely never meet our favorite television characters, modeling their behavior will be the closest association we can have.

Another leadership related theory that can be applied to the impact of prime-time television is Reinforcement theory.
Reinforcement theory is based on the idea that a follower can be influenced through repetitive interactions with a source. In experiencing something over and over, a follower will begin to internalize attitudes or beliefs. This relates well to television. As a viewer watches shows, the images he sees will begin to play a role in shaping his attitudes. When these images portray a prosocial theme, the thought that remains in the viewer's mind will also be prosocial.

Television's role in reinforcement is two-fold. First, television can reinforce what an individual observes in life around him. In this situation, television can strengthen what a viewer has picked up from his surroundings, be it friends, family or other sources. The opposite scenario is also true. An individual may make observations from the television and look for reinforcement from social forces around him. In order for prosocial change to occur, it will be necessary that the positive messages are reinforced, while the anti-social messages are strongly condemned. If amoral ideas are not criticized, then they will be just as likely to remain with a viewer as the prosocial content. The method by which this information is processed and interpreted will be discussed later in the paper with regards to constellation forces.

The lessons learned through modeling and reinforcement can result in individuals displaying high levels of conformity. Although in a society where individuality is cherished, conformity may sound negative, this hypothesis is positive in that it is working towards prosocial conformity. In this
situation, it is the conformity toward a group of guiding principles, not the conformity of the entire individual. The influence of the models can work in two ways; informational influence and normative influence. Informational influence can be described as "influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality". Normative influence, on the other hand, is described as "influence to conform with the positive expectations of another" (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955, p.629). These two types of influence can help describe the impact others can have in shaping one's attitude and actions. Although this influence often comes from another individual, the same idea holds true when the origin of influence is television.

One particular type of norm that is relevant to television's possible impact is subjective norms. Subjective norms reflect "a person's perception that most people who are important to him think he should or should not perform the behavior in question" (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1973). To measure these subjective norms requires individuals to identify whose opinions are important to them, and how likely they would be to comply with the expectation of the source. For most relationships, these opinions will come from family members and close friends. Although a bit more abstract in nature, television can play the role of the influential character. For many, television represents the thoughts and opinions of influential individuals, individuals who the viewer would like to be similar to. Therefore, the images and content that are on television symbolize the expectation of these influential individuals. The degree to which a viewer
tries to follow what he sees on television will depend on how much the viewer values the concept that is being requested in the particular television programs.

For example, imagine a scene on television where an individual is giving money to charity. To predict the likelihood that a viewer will join along and also donate money will depend on three variables. These variables are how strongly they believe in the necessity of donating money (their own attitudes), their perceptions of television's and society's expectation regarding donating money (their influences expectations), and the extent to which they want to comply with these expectations. All three of these variables must be working together in order for television to have an impact on the viewer. If the viewer does not feel strongly influenced by television's content and also feel that society expects him to donate money to a worthy cause, then the viewer will not act in that manner. In relationship to creating positive social change, television shows must make their expectations clear for viewers. If the prosocial messages are undecipherable, however, they will have little impact on the viewing audience.

Over time, the power of these norms can alter the individual. Returning to the work of Deutsch and Gerard, they feel that "Once a norm has been internalized, it becomes integrated into one's self-concept, and future normative behavior represents conforming to one's own expectations of self, leading to feelings of self-esteem or self-approval" (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Self-concept plays a crucial role in helping to create
positive social change because one of the primary motivations for acting in a prosocial manner is to see ourselves as kind or helpful people. Therefore, the more we hope to have a strong self-esteem, the more likely we are to act in a prosocial manner. In a study by Schwartz, he found that individuals act to be consistent with their own values in order to "enhance or preserve one's sense of self-worth and avoid self-concept distress" (Schwartz, 1977).

Another concept that accompanies the idea of self-esteem is that of tension reduction. In 1981, Pilavin et al. proposed that witnessing another's distress creates vicarious distress that has many similar characteristics with the victim's distress, and the witness needs to find a way to escape his or her own distress. One way to accomplish this is to help, because helping lessens the stimulus that caused the distress. (Batson, 1998).

Although it is not quite as personally upsetting as seeing a live version of distress, the situations that television creates for its characters can cause distress in its viewers. Especially when taken in conjunction with the fact that many viewers become emotionally attached to their favorite characters, seeing a victim on television could elicit many of the same responses as personally seeing a victim. The process of tension reduction would still explain a viewer's need to help, because the images on screen represent struggles that happen in real-life.

Some may argue that frequent examples of such events would desensitize viewers, creating an audience that would be less likely to aid a victim. Instead of desensitizing viewers to
distressful events, these scenes alert the audience to the needs of the victim and further amplify the importance of support.

Many scholars try to measure the social impact of the various influences that surround an individual. Latane describes social impact as the influence of a social force field on a single target. The impact of this force field is composed of three elements: strength of the source (the source's perceived credibility or power), the immediacy to the target, and the number of people constituting the source of the influence. When examining the force field around an individual, it is important to differentiate between various types of viewers. Like all relationships, one must take into account the role of the follower. In this study, the follower is the television viewer.

The audience of prime-time television varies greatly. Some audience members absorb broad topics, others are more attentive to specific details, while still others pay little to no attention. In regards to television, followership still returns to the idea of an active or passive follower. Similar to many other situations, a passive follower will be of little use. The possible impact of television will be lost on these followers, simply because they are not prepared to use the information that is being transmitted.

This is quite different for active followers. Active followers, through their attentive examination of what they observe, will be better able to extract the relevant, prosocial issues in prime-time television. Furthermore, these followers will be more likely to act appropriately on what they have
watched, taking steps in a prosocial direction. Most television viewers (followers) are active in that they are retaining messages from television's content. This will be important in the hopes of creating prosocial change in the viewing audience.

When analyzing the concepts of social impact and followers in regards to television, the two work quite nicely together. For many, television is viewed as quite credible and powerful. As we have seen before, television can be found in almost all homes, thus making its impact rather immediate. Finally, there are a great number of people that are involved in creating prime-time television shows. When one takes the impact of the three elements together (strength of source, immediacy to the target, and number of people constituting the source), television has great opportunity for social impact. Television can reach large numbers of people, and therefore, potentially impact their lives. If done effectively, this impact can be in a positive direction towards prosocial change.

Literature Review of Interviews and Articles from Producers

Unfortunately, the popularity of prime-time television brings with it a sense of concern. Some scholars feel that because television is so popular, its influence should be questioned. One scholar states that "The assumption holds that anything with widespread mass appeal, by definition, cannot be good and anything which can so easily influence the masses will probably be manipulated by agents with less than honorable
intentions" (Murray, 1979). This point raises many questions about the production of prime-time television shows. What are the intentions of producers? Do producers purposely try to impact their audience? What are the responsibilities of producers in shaping today's culture?

Through interviews, Lichter et al. found that the majority of producers and directors feel as though they play a role in shaping society. These individuals rejected the notion that television was too critical of traditional values by an 8 to 1 margin. This helps illustrate the fact that television producers intend to change the existing norms and lead viewers in a new direction.

In terms of program content, these leaders of television had a personal preference of realism over escapist fantasy. To further support this notion, 3 out of 4 believed that television should portray society realistically. Through realistic portrayal of plausible events, the points producers make through their shows can be more useful to the viewing audience. This point is clarified in an interview with David Victor, creator of Dr. Kildare and Marcus Welby, M.D. In referring to the realistic aspect of shows he said,

"We've done stories on epilepsy. You say you can't, well you can. As long as you also explain that it's a short-circuiting of nerve signals to your brain. You explain it and it's all right. People don't turn away from disgust. And they'd better not- Because next time they see somebody writhing on the sidewalk they may know something more about it. I'm proud of that. I think I educate as well as entertain" (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p.91).
As indicated through this quote, television's creators often have dual goals: to entertain and to educate.

Most importantly, two out of three agreed that TV entertainment should "play a major role in promoting social reform". This coincided with the view of television's creators that they are not "in it" just for the money. Instead, they seek to move the audience toward their own vision of the good society (Lichter et al., p.425). Relating back to the first statistic, producers intend to change societal norms, and therefore viewers, in a prosocial way. Simply opening the minds of viewers is not enough for producers. Instead, they want to impact their audience for positive social change.

Producers did not always feel this way, however. During the late 1960's and early 70's, television producers were inclined simply to create programming to entertain. As these individuals continued to age, their successors came in with different views as to the power of television. Muriel Cantor conducted research and interviews with the producers during this changing time. The young writer-producers who were now stepping into larger shoes aspired to make what Cantor called:

more "meaningful" television films, that is, films with social messages...They thought television should function as an instrument of social change...One of their main complaints is that instead of leading public opinion and social change, the networks follow social conditions after they have begun to change.(Lichter et al., p.426).

During the initial stages of this process, producers were weary to make great steps. Instead, they chose to implement
change on a smaller scale. Over time however, this began to change. As producers became more comfortable in their positions, they began to add more and more of their own ideas and issues they felt were relevant. Finally, producers felt as though they had great control as to the direction of their shows. To quote Linda Bloomfield-Thomason, creator of Designing Women, "It's 23 minutes of prime-time television...to address any topic I want. I'd be lying if I didn't say I put my personal opinions in. I do get my own propaganda in" (Lichter et al. 1994, p.427).

Although there are producers with such a set agenda, others simply create shows they feel will entertain. For many producers, their focus on social change comes indirectly through their topics. John Mantley, producer of shows including Gunsmoke and Buck Rogers, said, "I don't sit down and say, "I'm going to find an issue and I'm going to write a story about it.' I never do that. But things happen. When I say I want to make the best show I know how, I mean a show that people will look at and will enjoy, and, without knowing it, will learn and expand." (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, p.125). For some producers, their shows impact towards social change is not a prime concern.

Some of these producers simply base their stories around the ideals and issues that impacted their own development. Earl Hamner, writer of shows such as The Waltons and Falcon Crest, believes that "what you see on any television show reflects the morals and the conscience of the people on those shows who have influence" (Lichter et al. 1983, p.172). These individuals of influence are normally the producers.
From this research, one can see that there is a conscious effort on the part of television's creators to change their viewers towards prosocial behavior. At the same time, however, many of these creators add violence or anti-social behavior into their programs to add to the entertainment value. If there are these conflicting forces present in most shows, how is the viewer expected to ignore negative messages while maintain the positive ones? One explanation for this can be found when one examines all of the conditioning forces that surround an individual.

**Constellation Forces**

There are many diverse forces that impact an individual's attitudes and behavior. As exemplified in the previous research, television is one of these main forces. Along with television, family, peers and school influence development. Although there are other forces present, these are the four main ones that will be discussed. These four forces, when taken together, make up a constellation around an individual. These forces may pull a person in different directions, while at other times, they may all point together towards a singular behavior. To understand television's possible impact as a leader, it is necessary to investigate television's intricate role in this relationship.

A constellation is a way to envision the various social forces around an individual. These forces are constantly present, impacting an individual's moral and emotional development. Although the individual may ultimately choose the
path she takes, these forces offer different options. In academic terms, the constellation offers a variety of reference groups for an individual. These reference groups provide standards by which individuals can evaluate their own attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Hyman, 1942).

Quite often, the attitude of an individual can change as his reference groups change. As an individual ages, he will be apart of many different reference groups. As a child, the reference group may be a sports team, in college, a fraternity, and during adulthood, a group of co-workers. Therefore, one of the only constant reference groups for an individual is the immediate family. Sources such as peers, school, and content of television will change, thus likely changing the beliefs of the individual.

Although individuals generally like to believe that they personally select their own beliefs and values, the groups they are involved with play a large role in shaping these attitudes. Some researchers have even suggested that our self-concept, or the basic sense of who we are, is deeply rooted in the groups we belong to (Turner, 1985). These groups, through the critical impact they have on an individual, are responsible for many of an individual's characteristics. Therefore, if we hope to create prosocial change, it is necessary for an individual's reference groups to be prosocial.

One main attribute of reference groups is the presence of referent power. Individuals often become involved with such groups because they serve as "models for our self-evaluations" (Forsyth, 1990). As hinted to by Forsyth, the concept of
referent power is centered in modeling theory. With referent power, the powerholder is someone who the follower admires, respects, and hopes to resemble. In continuing the prosocial theme, it is necessary that the powerholder is prosocial if we hope for the follower to exhibit the same qualities. If the powerholder is amoral, one could likely expect the same result in the follower.

The concepts of reference groups and referent power both relate to the social forces involved within a constellation. These are the groups that an individual turns to for support and approval. Television is a integral member of these forces. Although it is not the natural, inter-personal relationship that is characteristic of the other forces, television can offer support to an individual's actions. This is accomplished through the depiction of similar actions on programs. If an individual observes the behavior in question on television, without opposing input from other social forces within the constellation, the individual will likely believe that such behavior is acceptable.

Relating back to the reinforcement theory, an individual has ideas confirmed or rejected through responses from others. If a behavior is appropriate, others will approve of it. Conversely, if a behavior is not ideal, the individual will likely receive negative feedback. In both cases, the behavior is being reinforced, either positively or negatively. This reinforcement happens from all of the four main sources within the constellation.
The question that still needs to be answered is whether there are any differences in the overall effect of the constellation when one of the main forces is missing. More specifically, how would an individual's development change if the influence from television, or peers, was not present? By removing one of the constellation forces, one is, in essence, eliminating one of the crucial determinants of an individual's behavior.

Eliminating one source may not seem that monumental, considering that there are numerous other sources that impact an individual. The removal of a particular force is grave though when the force represents the lone opposing opinion on an issue. If televisions programming coincides with the ideas of the other social forces, than its removal may have little to no impact on the individual's opinion on that issue.

If television was the lone dissenting opinion, however, its elimination will have serious consequences. By offering an idea that is contrary to other forces, it requires an individual to consider the different options. If the conflicting idea is not present, an individual could be more inclined to simply follow the lead of the surrounding forces. This conflict will not likely be this clean cut, but the idea still holds true. If there is a lack of a dissenting opinion, there will be less consideration given to other possible behaviors.
Conclusion

Through research, I have shown the power of television to lead viewers towards prosocial change. Television plays a significant role in our development, beginning during childhood and lasting throughout life. Although there has not been a significant amount of research on television's positive impact, it is a concept that should be developed. Television offers diverse topics that can both entertain and educate viewers. Due to its considerable presence in our lives, further research should be conducted involving television's ability to create positive change.

Television can serve as a leader to viewers, teaching individuals about the world they live in as well as personal interactions. The images on television can help shape the attitudes and behaviors of the audience. Furthermore, television is an integral component of the social forces that surround an individual. Through these two avenues, direct influence and as part of a constellation, television leads its viewers.
Works Cited


