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Erin Gill

St. John Fisher College, egill_no@sjfc.edu

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How Children Perceive Mass Media

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

The media offers entertainment, news, sports, and even education. The media is an important part of our lives, but how do children perceive the media? What is it that children learn from watching television? Do they really understand what it is the media is trying to tell them? This paper will attempt to prove that a child's perception of TV can be related to a mass communication theory known as the schema theory. The schema theory basically states that people use prior knowledge or experiences to help them better understand the television program they are watching. Through analyzing a study performed by the author, the schema theory and how children use their own schemas to understand television will be further investigated.

How Children Perceive Mass Media by Erin Gill

Introduction

The media offers entertainment, news, sports, and even education. The media is an important part of our lives, but how do children perceive the media? What is it that children learn from watching television? Do they really understand what it is the media is trying to tell them? This paper will attempt to prove that a child's perception of TV can be related to a mass communication theory known as the schema theory. The schema theory basically states that people use prior knowledge or experiences to help them better understand the television program they are watching. Through analyzing a study performed by the author, the schema theory and how children use their own schemas to understand television will be further investigated.

There are many good reasons to give attention to children's use of television and other media. The media certainly provides many moments of enjoyment for children. Television for many years has accounted for a substantial proportion of time expenditures in children. Television viewing is such an everyday activity that it could be easily overlooked in its affect on children. The magnitude of television's involvement in our daily lives is rather impressive. Recent census figures estimate that 96 percent of the households in the United States contain at least one television set; many have two or more. In families where there are young children, the television ownership rate approaches total saturation-99 percent (Brown 285).

Review of Literature

Researchers say that children of all ages react to violent or tragic news events that

generate a lot of attention. The typical reaction, however, may not be noteworthy or does not happen when others are around, leading parents to assume a child is either not aware of the event or is not concerned about it (Meltz). "Children hear far more than we realize, and when they are left to their own devices to process what they hear, there's more room to make illogical connections, and to feel unsafe in the world," says New York psychotherapist and author Janice Cohn (Meltz). Not every story is important to a child, but when a story does become important it's usually for one of several reasons. One reason is that it resonates. "Don't presume a connection doesn't exist just because you don't see it," advises Cornell University psychologist James Garbarino, one of the nation's leading researchers on how real-life events affect children (Meltz). "Even 10-year-olds will glom onto a detail (often an obscure one) because they relate to it personally, in a magical-thinking kind of way" (Meltz).

Another reason a story could become important to a child is when the story is jarring (Meltz). What this means is that the child does not really understand what happened in the story or why it happened, so they are trying to work it out in their minds. The third reason why a news story might impact a child is that the story affects adults in his or her life. "It's not the facts or the words that matter, it's adult reactions to it: talking about it a lot, using strident voices, and hushing up around kids," says early-childhood consultant Sydney Clemens of San Francisco (Meltz).

Television is a stage where children's understanding of cause and effect is limited, and they can put things together in strange,

illogical ways (Meltz). So what is it that children understand about reality on television? Children's concepts about reality begin in the preschool years with discriminations between the way objects appear and the way they really are. Interviews with 2- to 3-year-olds suggest that they do not understand the representational nature of televised images. For example, when an egg broke on television, they attempted to clean it up, and when a bowl of popcorn was shown on television they would think it would spill if the TV were turned upside down (Asamen 42).

By age 4, children have mastered the distinction between real objects and televised images, and they begin to judge reality according to whether the images represent individuals and objects that are physically real outside the television world. For instance, they consider human actors "real," but cartoon characters "unreal" (Asamen 42).

Children understand that news is factual earlier than they understand that entertainment TV is fictional (Asamen 43). Between the ages of 6 and 11, children's correct judgments about factuality increase. For instance, most 11-year-olds know that an actor who plays a police officer on TV is not a police officer in real life. By age 10 or so, children's factuality judgments are about as accurate as adults' (Asamen 43).

There are some cues that help children judge reality when it comes to TV. Live broadcasts are characterized by poor sound quality, disfluencies in speech due to lack of rehearsal, and the absence of background music and special effects. News and documentary programs feature narrators, sometimes as voice-overs during visual footage of the topic or event (Asamen 44). By contrast, formal features in fictional television programs include close-ups of actors' faces, mood-setting music, studio-

quality sound, and special effects. Situation comedies often have laugh tracks. Dramas feature adult voices and background music. Cartoons are animated, rapidly paced, and use many sound effects and peculiar voices (Asamen 44).

Children's understanding of reality is based on judgments about the meanings of both content and form. During middle childhood, however, form replaces content as a cue for fact or fiction. Several studies have found that young children tend to name physically impossible events such as people flying as cues that a program is fictional, whereas older children increasingly named formal features (Asamen 44). Judgments about social realism, on the other hand, are typically made on the basis of content. Even though a child may know that a program is scripted and rehearsed, the program may be judged as realistic if the characters and events are similar to those the child would likely encounter in real life. News, sports, documentaries, and crime dramas were considered realistic, whereas cartoons were pretend (Asamen 45).

How do children process information from mass communication? A theory of mass communication that applies to this is the schema theory. According to Graber, a schema is a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that has been abstracted from prior experiences. It is used for processing new information and retrieving stored information (Severin 82). The concept of schema has become widely used by psychologists, cognitive and political scientists, and communication researchers because of its apparent usefulness in understanding how people process information.

According to Dennis Howitt, the audience approaches mass media with pre-existing behavioral tendencies, sets of beliefs and opinions, which are not

adaptable to change. Only when we can expect that individuals have no pre-existing tendencies or when there are circumstances particularly conducive to change can we expect the mass media to have much of an effect on the audience (Brown 324).

As a general principle, it is a reasonable proposition to suggest that for virtually all areas of social development, real-life influences will tend to operate over and above those of the mass media. Not only do we tend to overlook the complexities of social life in the acquisition of socialized forms of behavior, we also tend to ignore the role of real life in shaping the manifestation of media-learned behaviors (Brown 325-326).

Socialization of behaviors occurs both before actual manifestations of behavior and in retrospect. Real life may operate both prior to exposure to the socializing influence of the mass media and in retrospect of any such influence (Brown 325-326). Merely living with the TV set in the house helps the child develop distinctions between fantasy and reality. He or she comes to understand that the on-and-off switch provides them with some control over the picture on the tube. This control factor gradually weans the child away from their acceptance of the television picture as reality (Morris 18). Television critic Judith Crist remarked that death portrayed on TV loses its meaning. She was saying that kids see a television character die on one program and then, lo and behold, he is miraculously reincarnated. Kids know that TV death, with the exception of death shown on the news, is a put-on (Morris 21).

Somewhat older children, between three and five years old, are now beginning to separate portions of what they see as real from what they view as unreal. They anchor their reality, defining it in terms of their own personal life experiences. At about the time kids go to school, between five and seven

years old, they are learning to discriminate. Psychologist Barry Bricklin points out these children know their fathers do not act like people on the *Beverly Hillbillies* and that fathers do not always act as nicely as Fred MacMurray does towards his TV kids. By this age most children know these are just stories. They can now accept the idea that such things as news, space shots and sports events belong to the real world, while most of the other images lie in the realm of fiction (Morris 28).

Older children like singular experiences, which let them relive a part of their early life, so that they can relate to the experiences they have already had by what they are now seeing. At the same time, they like singular experiences that involve them. He or she imagines himself or herself as that boy or girl on that horse, whereas the younger child says, 'That is a boy on a horse.' The older child transfers himself or herself to that horse, 'That is me on the horse.' The older child wants an intimate kind of reaction (Morris 148).

Doris Graber (1988) has done research that indicates that people use schemas—cognitive structures consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that have been abstracted from prior experiences, and are used for processing new information and retrieving stored information—to process news stories from newspapers or news broadcasts.

She found that people processing news stories choose from a number of strategies, including straight matching of a news story to a schema (interpreting a political candidate as "another Nixon"), processing through inferences (deducing a cease-fire in Lebanon will not work well because cease-fires had not worked well in Northern Ireland), and multiple integration of a story with several schemas or schema dimensions (a story on school busing can be related to schemas about political participation, the

disruption of public education, or the achieving of a multicultural society). Graber found that in processing news stories, people tend to store the conclusions drawn from the evidence, rather than the evidence itself. She argued that processing news through schema is an effective means of dealing with information overload (Severin 82).

Collection of Data

In a study performed by the author, Erin Gill, 20 fourth graders (11 girls and 9 boys) from North-Rose Elementary School and 20 fifth graders (10 boys and 10 girls) from Margaret Cuyler Elementary School were surveyed. The researcher found that the schema theory applied because the children were able to make sense of the film clip she showed them by relating what happened in the clip to prior knowledge or experiences they had. Both of these schools are based in small towns where the population is approximately 2,000 people. The ages ranged from 9 years old to 11 years old. The survey consisted of ten questions. Some of the most significant questions in the survey included the following: What do you think happened to the boy in the video? Why did this happen to the boy? Could this happen to someone in the area you live in? Why or why not?

The clip she showed was a two-minute piece from a Rochester news channel about a boy who was missing. The boy was not known to have any prior history of running away; apparently he left while his mother was doing errands and hasn't been seen since. In the clip there were no concrete leads as to what happened to the boy, all the police knew was that he was missing and that he had left a note behind that said "sorry." The note points to a possible suicide, but the evidence at the time was inconclusive. There was no real background information given about the missing boy

either, it did not say whether or not he came from an abusive family or anything of the sort. The boy in the clip was approximately age fourteen and he attended a Rochester area high school.

This clip was shown to the fourth and fifth graders twice in their respective classrooms and then they were asked to fill out a ten question survey asking them about their perceptions about what happened to the boy and why it happened. Many of the responses from the survey support the schema theory in that even though the clip never gave a concrete reason for why the boy was missing many of the children created a reason based on prior knowledge or experiences they possessed to help them understand what the clip was trying to tell them.

Analysis of Data

The most pivotal question in the survey was why did the boy disappear? This question is what points to the schema theory, showing that the children used their own knowledge and experiences to understand the clip. Twenty-five percent of the responses to this question stated the boy disappeared because his family was upset with him. Five percent of the responses said that the boy disappeared because he was picked on. In just over twelve percent of the responses, children said that the boy disappeared because he was home alone, and 57.5% of the responses cited other reasons for the child's disappearance.

Some of the most interesting responses to the survey included a nine-year-old male saying that the boy had upset his family and ran away because of that. This relates to the schema theory because it shows that this child may know other children, or even himself, who have considered running away when their family is upset with them. Another response from a nine-year-old male

was that the boy disappeared because he was really crazy and wasn't thinking.

A nine-year-old female responded saying, "I think that it (the kidnapping) happened because the boy was home alone." Perhaps this child has had the experience of being home alone and when she's home alone she worries about having something bad happen to her. This child uses her worries about her own situation to help explain what happened to the boy in the clip. A nine-year-old male's explanation for the boy's disappearance was that the boy ran away because someone was picking on him at a baseball game. Possibly this child has had a similar experience and has wanted to run away because of being picked on. A ten-year-old female cited a similar explanation, "Maybe because of teasing (because of) an accent, appearance, or other things upset him." Teasing appears to be a real concern of children this age and a good example of a schema that they would relate the explanation of this story to. A ten-year-old male explains the boy's disappearance by saying, "It happened to the boy because somebody may not have liked him and killed him."

In response to the question, "Could this happen to someone in the area that you live in, and why or why not?" a nine-year-old female responded saying, "Yes, mostly my big sister will run away from home." This statement also supports the schema theory.

The majority of the responses from the students seemed to support other ideas as well as to why the boy in the clip disappeared. Some of the students responded saying that they were unsure what happened to the boy or why it happened.

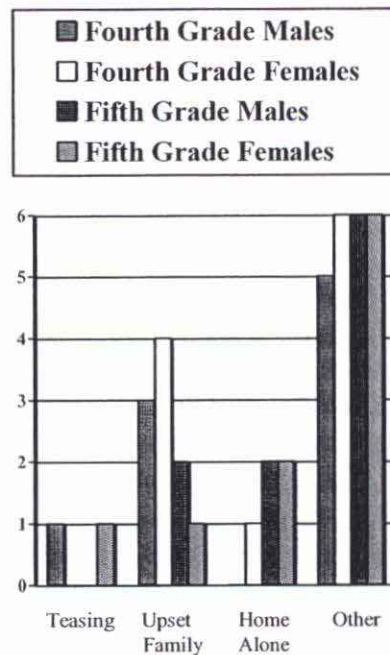
Discussion

Even though the responses to the survey varied on the question about why the boy was missing, it is obvious that the children didn't completely understand why. Because

the news did not tell them exactly why the boy was missing, the children had to try and relate it to what they know and feel to figure out what could possibly have caused the boy's disappearance.

Looking more closely at some of the highlighted responses just mentioned, it is clear to see that the children related the scenario that happened with the boy on the

Responses to why the boy disappeared



clip to similar case scenarios that they have experienced in their lives which proves that the schema theory is applicable to how children perceive the news. Often younger children will get in trouble at home from breaking rules, and feel that as an alternative to escape their punishment they should run away from home.

When the children responded saying that teasing was a possible cause of the boy's disappearance, we can also see how children would want to escape being picked on and how they would relate disappearing or

wanting to disappear as a way to stop constant harassment, once again relating to schema because of the child's prior knowledge or experience.

Another response that can be related to the schema theory was the response about the boy being home alone and how that was a possible cause of his being kidnapped. Many of the children are probably familiar with similar instances of hearing or seeing on the news about a child who was abducted because they were left alone and someone had the opportunity to take that child. Relating the schema theory to the children's responses seems appropriate because the schema theory says that people use prior knowledge or experiences to try and understand items in the news and it is obvious that this is what the children were doing in their responses to the survey. The news clip was rather ambiguous, never coming right out and saying what exactly happened to the child, because at that time no one knew the reason for his disappearance.

One of the implications of this survey is that children seem to have a hard time understanding the news as it is presented. Children must use their own schemata to scrutinize the media. Most news stories though are reported at a higher level that is more likely to appeal to adults than children, but at the same time perhaps we should consider the fact that children are watching the news as well as other television programs and are trying to learn something about the world through those programs. If children are constantly having to relate things on television to prior experiences that they have had it will probably make it harder for them to truly learn anything new from the media.

Another implication of this research is that no one experiences the same media message the same way, by using personal thoughts and experiences the message is

perceived differently based on the individual. Many of the responses to why the boy in the clip disappeared varied, showing that each child interpreted the clip differently. By the children using their own schema to break down the clip to understand it, each child had a different perception of what exactly happened to the boy and why because each child had different life experiences and knowledge.

Media messages have their own values and points of view. These viewpoints are built into the message itself. Children should compare the values and the viewpoints that the media gives them with their own values and perceptions. It is important for children to learn the difference between their own viewpoints and what the media is trying to tell them. Once they can differentiate between the two they will have a better understanding of the media.

In conclusion, the media as a whole should take into consideration the schema theory and realize that even though the news they are presenting is up-to-the-minute and recent, more often than not, children, and even people in general, will try to relate what the media is trying to tell them back to prior knowledge or experiences to understand it. With that in mind, perhaps the media itself should try to tie in current news stories with similar past news events. By relating news stories to other similar events, a more concrete connection will be able to be made in the viewer's mind, and the media message will have a greater impact on the viewer.

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