



Methods, metaphors, and media messages: the uses of television in conversations about the environment¹

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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 paper 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. More specifically, we argue that the methods we use as researchers are "our media," the means by which we observe, make sense of, and communicate about, media and politics. These methods, therefore, 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 paper is threefold: to make explicit the implicit "metaphors" underlying mainstream media research and their relationships to the methodologies employed; to offer an alternative metaphor for the relationship between television and politics; and to present some findings from our initial attempts to empirically investigate this relationship. In the first section we examine the relationship between methods and interpretation, focusing on the dominance of survey research in mainstream media studies. We argue that this dominance both results from, and reinforces, the implicit metaphors of citizens as "political consumers," and media messages as "hypodermic injections." We then present an alternative metaphor for 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, while tentative, support the utility 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-consciously multimethod approach to the study of media and politics.

While the roots of mainstream media studies can be traced to the "minimal effects" and "two-step flow" models developed at the Bureau of Applied Research at Columbia University (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1960), the field has evolved in a number of distinct directions in recent years. Work in the areas of opinion change

(Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Page and Shapiro, 1989; 1991), agenda-setting (Iyengar and Kinder, 1982; 1987; Iyengar, 1987), information processing (Graber, 1988), the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984), cultivation analysis (Gerbner, et al., 1984; 1986), and uses and gratifications (McLeod and Becker, 1981; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1982) offer varied conceptualizations of the ways in which media and politics interact. Nonetheless, these approaches share several fundamental assumptions that identify them as a single school of research **4**.

Mainstream research explores the ability of nonfiction media messages to change citizens' political agenda, opinions, and/or cognitions. This exploration is usually limited to change occurring within what Hallin (1986) calls the "sphere of legitimate controversy." In the United States, this sphere is delimited ideologically and structurally by the institutions and processes of liberal democracy. Mainstream researchers assume that the meaning and/or bias contained in a particular message is non-negotiable: that is, it derives from the message itself rather than from the receiver's interpretation of it. In sum, 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.

Within the mainstream tradition, the orthodox approach for studying media effects has been some combination of survey research, correlational analysis, and quasi-experimental or experimental design. While there are numerous variations on this theme, 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 methodological 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, investigator bias can be limited and, if it exists, can be identified.

Much criticism of this method of inquiry focuses on its quantitative nature, arguing that the subtleties of human thought and action cannot be understood through closed-ended surveys, nor reduced to numbers. While these criticisms have some validity, the global rejection of such techniques is unpersuasive, ignoring as it does the considerable strengths and substantial findings of this sort of research. Nevertheless, researchers need to explicitly consider the assumptions underlying such techniques. These assumptions imply a very specific conception of politics, citizenship, and the political role of the media.

4 For a discussion of media research falling outside the "mainstream" model described below, see Delli Carpini and Williams, 1991.

5 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 use of schema theory and in-depth interviews goes beyond a simple cause-effect model; Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory and Gerbner's cultivation analysis have implications for the maintenance of Hallin's spheres of legitimate controversy, deviance, and consensus; Gerbner's work also explores the social impact of fiction media; and the uses and gratifications approach of Blumler, Becker, and McLeod allows some autonomy to the audience in selecting and interpreting media messages (as did some versions of the minimal effects and two-step flow models). Nonetheless these departures are exceptions to the rule and represent modifications rather than rejections of the mainstream model. For a fuller discussion of these variations, see Beniger, 1987; Katz, 1987; Delli Carpini and Williams, 1991.

6 Computer metaphors are especially prevalent in the recent work of political psychologists who emphasize the cognitive aspects of public opinion. An interesting variation on this theme is found in the work of Lodge, McGraw and Stroh (1989), McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh (1990a; 1990b), and Lodge, Stroh, and Wahlke (1990). They argue that the information used to evaluate candidates is not "stored and retrieved" (the most common type of computer metaphor), but instead is processed "on-line" and then discarded. However, the resulting affective evaluation is "stored" as a kind of running tally, to be "accessed" from memory during survey interviews.

7 Despite advances in both aggregate analysis and experimental research, the close ended survey remains the central tool for uncovering media effects, especially within the subfield of media and politics. Indeed, even the former two approaches rely heavily on close ended surveys in their research designs.

8 note the classic behaviorist roots of the term "respondent".

9 This approach has been labelled the "state of consciousness fallacy" by Bennett (1980).

10 Work by Zaller (1990a; 1990b), and Zaller and Feldman (1989) demonstrate the hazards of these assumptions, arguing that survey respondents often create opinions on the spot, drawing on whatever beliefs, information, etc., 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. Zaller goes on to argue that more sophisticated (i.e., informed, interested) citizens are more likely to access information that accurately reflects their overall beliefs, and so will hold (and express) more consistent opinions in surveys. While 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 and on-line processing models) continues to accept an internal and private model of public opinion formation. In addition, the equating of sophistication with stability, while valid in many cases, downplays the inherently ambiguous nature of certain types of opinions and beliefs.

With few exceptions, mainstream 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 **6**. It is important to remember that such notions are metaphors, changing as socioeconomic, 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 and 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 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-ended survey interviews **7** assume that "respondents" either have opinions or they don't **8**. 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. While there has been much progress in refining survey questions (e.g., presenting alternative choices in a balanced way, or allowing respondents to gracefully admit they have no opinion on a particular issue) this technique remains unavoidably based on an overly mechanical view of opinion formation.

Of course, 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. But this still assumes a form of political consciousness wherein opinions are stored in long-term memory as fixed, free-standing bits of information that can be easily retrieved. This notion has some validity (at least 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 **10**.

This static representation of opinions is reinforced by the structured, closed-ended, and cross-sectional nature of most surveys. By selecting specific topics (as well as when and how such topics are addressed), the researcher inevitably imposes his or her agenda. Closed-ended responses reify opinions by forcing respondents to present them as self-contained and pre-existing objects. And by using "snap-shot" surveys, the fluid, dynamic nature of public opinions is again largely missed.

In short, despite real advances in the way mainstream researchers conceptualize opinion-making, they continue to depend almost exclusively upon survey research methods. As a result, these studies continue to use research designs better suited to the "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.

Ultimately this is more than an issue of methodology. What survey research labels "public opinion" might better be termed "private opinion" (Barber,

11 The "hypodermic model" is held in disrepute by many mainstream media scholars, who see it as a "strawman" argument that no longer characterizes the field. Nonetheless studies of opinion change and agenda setting explicitly conform to this model, and more sophisticated models such as the spiral of silence, information processing, and cultivation analyses, because of their dependence on survey research, take the form of the hypodermic model in practice.

12 Movement in this direction is happening. For example, Graber (1984) uses 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 (1988; 1989; 1990), develop a "constructionist" model of media use, conceptualizing political learning as a "fluid and interactive" process, in which "the individual guesses, negotiates, interprets, and effectively puts new information in the context of what is already known" (1988: p.7). They also use relatively unstructured in-depth interviews both as independent data and to supplement findings based on more experimental, close-ended methods. Within critical media studies, scholars have begun to empirically study viewer reception of media messages (though not as part of an examination of specifically political attitudes and actions). Hobson (1982) and Tullock and Moran (1986), using participant observation, studied women watching soap operas in Great Britain and Australia respectively. Similarly, Palmer (1986) studied the way Australian children watched television in their homes. Brody and Stoneman (1983), Messaris (1983), and Leichter et al., (1983; 1985) employed ethnographic approaches to observe interactions among viewers and their effect on the way television messages are interpreted. Press (1990) interviewed American women to analyze the effects of class and generation on the uses and interpretations attached to television. Morley (1981; 1986), employing in-depth interviewing and participant observation, describes the way television is actually watched and used in British working-class families.

1984). Survey methods imply an underlying normative view of citizenship strikingly similar to the one criticized by Gitlin (1979), 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. A better understanding of this relationship requires developing alternative metaphors and methods.**12**

2 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 argued in *Democracy and Education*, societies can only exist through communication, since people "live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common; and 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 which are contested (Gallie, 1955-56; Gray 1977; Garver, 1978; Connolly, 1983). 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:

When disagreement does not simply reflect different readings of evidence within a fully shared system of concepts, we can say that a conceptual dispute has arisen. When the concept involved is appraisive in that the state of affairs it describes is a valued achievement, when the practice described is internally complex in that its characterization involves references to several dimensions, and when the agreed and contested rules of application are relatively open, enabling parties to interpret even those shared rules differently as new and unforeseen situations arise, then the concept in question is an "essentially contested concept" (Connolly, 1983, p.10)

Essentially contested concepts "...involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie, 1955-56, p.123). Gallie considers "democracy" such a term, and Connolly includes terms such as "politics," "political interest," "power," "responsibility," and "freedom." It is fair to say that 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 upon 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, imbedded in a dynamic process of interaction and debate (Connolly, 1983; Williams and Matheny, forthcoming). 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 Jürgen 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. This is so in part because, as the central source of information in the United States, television provides both the topics and substance upon which most conversations are based. In addition, however, our conversational metaphor points to a more active role for television in the shaping of public opinion¹³. Put simply, we argue that the interaction between television and a viewer is similar to a conversation. Of course in an important respect this conversation is one-sided: viewers are seldom seen or heard¹⁴. And yet the viewer is engaged in a conversation in many important respects. The most obvious example would be when he or she "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.

But even when sitting in silence, viewers are interacting with television in a way that is more analogous to conversation than to reading, to writing, or even to contemplation or deliberation (certainly viewers interact with television in ways that is more analogous to conversing than to inputting data or being inoculated!). This is so because more than any of the latter, television consciously 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 directly 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 pre-existing opinions so much as creates them in the structured interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Similarly, public opinion does not follow interactions with television, friends, co-workers, and so forth so much as it is that interaction. From this perspective, concerns over

¹³ It is important to note here that we are referring specifically to television, and not to print media.

¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that the use of "900" number polls, the reading of viewer mail on the air, experiments with interactive television, and so forth serve to enhance this conversational aspect of television viewing.

"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 and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In addition, television's messages (its point of view, if you will) adhere to a relatively constant, narrow ideology (Gitlin, 1980; 1985; Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990; Lichter, Lichter and Rothman, 1991). Television, therefore, serves not merely as a source of information for future conversations, but also as both a regular "conversant" in an ongoing discussion, and, ultimately, as the central forum for political discourse in the United States.

3 The utility of focus groups as a method of inquiry

For reasons we hope to make clear, 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, 1989: 18). Though little used in the social sciences today, its roots can be traced to Merton's examination of the effects of wartime propaganda (Merton and Kendall, 1946; Merton, et al., 1956; Merton, 1987).¹⁵

¹⁵ Two important exceptions to this is the work of Morley (1986) and Liebes and Katz (1990).

The typical focus group discussion includes between 6-10 participants, though as few as 4 and as many as 12 are not uncommon (Morgan, 1989; Krueger, 1989). Participants are selected in a variety of ways, but usually all 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. While the level of moderator involvement can vary, in general the less directive he or she is the better. It is important that the moderator elicit opinions, etc., without being judgmental. The typical length of time for a discussion is 1/2 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, 1989: 97).

Information generated by focus groups can be analyzed qualitatively (as one might do with an in-depth interview), or quantitatively (by careful content analysis). This information can stand alone as a way of providing insights into opinion formation, and even allow for what Krueger calls 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 (Morgan, pp. 30-36; Krueger, pp. 31-40).

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. They 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 short-sightedness by guaranteeing that interaction is not exclusively with the researcher him or herself, and by allowing enough open-endedness for unanticipated views to emerge from the discussion. And they strike a compromise between the generalizability of quantitative analysis and the depth of qualitative analysis.

Ultimately, "focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry" (Krueger, 1989: p. 41). 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 instead are dynamic, fluid constructs that form from numerous interactions. Focus groups are particularly well-designed to examine attitudes and opinions in this context:

The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions...are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us. A deficiency of mail and telephone surveys and even face-to-face interviews is that those methods assume that individuals really do know how they feel. A further assumption is that individuals form opinions in isolation. Both of these assumptions have presented problems for researchers. People may need to listen to opinions of others before they form their own personal viewpoints. While some opinions may be developed quickly and held with absolute certainty, other opinions are malleable and dynamic. (Krueger, 1989: 21)

How do people actually use Information, attitudes, opinions, values, beliefs, reason, emotion, etc., in political discourse? How does this discourse effect the development of those attitudes, opinions, and so forth? 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, 1989: 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 in which viewers converse with each other and with the TV: all of this suggests the need to think in terms of the uses of television rather than simply its effects. It also suggests that such uses will be subtle, varied, fluid, social, and context dependent. Focus groups, more than most qualitative methods, allows for a systematic examination of television and politics that is sensitive to the complexity of this relationship.

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 9 focus groups conducted in 1990-1991. Participants in these focus groups were residents of Lexington, Kentucky, and were recruited through a public notice placed in the local newspaper¹⁶.

In all, 34 people participated in our nine focus groups¹⁷. Ages varied from 18 to 72, with a median age of 39. Occupations ranged from student, to government employee, to housewife, to both blue and white-collar worker (one participant was currently unemployed). Twenty one of the 34 participants were women. Three of the participants were black. Overall our "sample" was slightly less affluent than the larger population from which they were recruited. Based upon responses to a brief telephone survey administered during the initial recruitment, as well as to a self-administered survey completed prior to the start of the focus groups, 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, while 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 viewing an edited version of the made for television docudrama, *Incident At Dark River*, which dealt 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 waste¹⁸. 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 pollution²⁰.

The focus groups without television lasted approximately one and a half hours, while 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 television was present or not, with two exceptions. First, in those groups where television was viewed, discussants were asked what they "thought of the show," prior to turning to a more general discussion of the environment. And 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 however, the broadcasts were not referred to by the moderator.

¹⁶ The notice reported that two university professors were engaged in research about public opinion, and asked for people interested in participating in small group discussions about current issues. A twenty dollar honorarium was offered, and no mention of television was made.

¹⁷ Given our intention of "replicating" the conversations people have with family, friends, coworkers, television, and themselves, we opted for relatively small focus groups of 4 persons each. We therefore invited 5-6 people to each session. In the end, one group consisted of 5 people, five groups consisted of 4 people, and three groups consisted of three people.

¹⁸ Based on 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).

¹⁹ For a detailed description and analysis of the messages contained in these broadcasts, see Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990.

²⁰ It is important to note that while our design allows us to make comparisons across three different settings, our analysis is not intended as a formal, controlled experiment. Given our assumption that opinions are inextricably intertwined within conversation itself, and that television is a participant in such conversations, our goal was to stimulate and simulate this process in a variety of settings where it could be observed and transcribed for later analysis.

Overall, the focus groups were intended to provide three types of "data." First, since 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 directly observe how citizens converse, and the role that television plays in that public conversation. And 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.

While the focus groups were conducted at the University of Kentucky, we attempted to make them as non-threatening and natural as possible, holding them in rooms with comfortable furniture, allowing participants to sit where they wanted and to move about freely, serving pizza and/or other snack food, 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, in which one moment a person is sitting at dinner, watching TV, conversing with family members, and so forth, and the next is engaged in a formal interview with a stranger about a variety of issues he or she has had no time to think about). In addition, more than the latter techniques, focus groups capture the dynamic nature of public opinion, limit the intrusiveness of the researcher him or herself, 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 so unobservable except through some level of intrusion and artificiality. Focus groups, by stimulating both television viewing and conversation, attempt to make this conversation visible. We can think of no other method that might do this less obtrusively, while providing systematic data for later analysis.

Given that "the richness of this method lies in the respondents' own words," the focus group transcripts were initially "read for themes that emerged...rather than coded for pre-determined categories (Crigler et al., 1988: p.8)." Following Crigler et al., 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 better capture 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 beginning to "test" the validity of our hypothesized pattern. This qualitative yet systematic reading of the transcripts was intended to uncover suggestive relationships.

21 the setting of the focus group itself might still be improved, perhaps by holding them with groups that exist naturally (e.g., with a family or with a group of friends). Participant observation (Morely, 1986) also seems a promising avenue for tapping into real conversations. In this case, however, much of the "public" aspect of conversations is lost.

22 The authors of Ethnograph stress that the primary function of the program is to aid in qualitative research, and not for the quantification of such data.

The next step in our analysis was to systematically code the transcripts using Ethnograph, a software package developed by John V. Seidel, Jack Clark and Rolf Kjolseth, and specifically designed for analyzing qualitative data. Ethnograph allows each one of a transcript to be coded for up to twelve characteristics (for example, direct and indirect references to television, particular points of view expressed by participants, and so forth). Once coded, the transcripts can be systematically analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analysis includes examination of the frequency of certain kinds of statements (for example, the number of times unsolicited references were made to the television program viewed in the focus group). **22** Qualitative analysis involves more interpretive readings of specific parts of the transcripts (for example, one can retrieve and examine all the statements made by a single individual about environmental activists, all the references to television made by one person, or all the interchanges between two particular discussants). In essence, Ethnograph does not replace interpretive analysis but rather eases the logistics of transcript management (i.e., "cutting and pasting," retrieving particular statements and exchanges, etc.), allowing more systematic and in-depth examination.

5

How citizens use television: preliminary findings from our focus group

In presenting our preliminary findings we have several goals. First, we provide evidence for the extensive role both non-fiction and fiction television plays in public discourse. Second, we show that, based on self-reports and our own observations, citizens do 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, where appropriate, resisting, television's ideological biases.

The Ubiquitousness of Television in Political Conversation. While we are primarily interested in how television is used in political conversation, we begin our analysis by demonstrating the extent to which it is used. To this end, we analyzed our transcripts for the sources of information that conversants drew on (or disagreed with) as they discussed environmental issues.

Our method for coding comments requires some explanation. We distinguished between three types of media references: references to the specific show watched at the start of the focus group (this category is not applicable to groups where 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 were general references to "the media." Within each of these categories we distinguished between "direct" and "indirect" references. Direct references referred to comments in which the media was 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

23 Note that while 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 since the denominator of each category changes with the number of possible comments.

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.... You know, they made it the owl against the lumberjacks..."), the comment was coded as an indirect reference to the media. In addition, we distinguish between "prompted" and "unprompted" media references. The former included any media reference made when we specifically queried about their reactions to the show, or about their general views concerning how well the media covers environmental issues (Sections II, III, parts of VI, X, and/or XI of the protocol). The latter included only those media references made spontaneously by our discussants.**23**

6

Tables I through 4 about here

As Table I reveals, media references peppered our subjects' conversations. Taking the groups together, 34% of all statements included at least one direct or indirect unprompted media reference (Row IV). Such media references varied depending upon the presence or absence of television. In groups without television (Table 2, Row IV), the total percentage of unprompted media references was 27%, substantial, but much less than the 40% (Tables 3 and 4, Row IV) that obtained in groups which started by viewing a television show. 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. For example, Dan, in trying to explain why he trusted the opinions of certain experts, used as an example a character from the docudrama Incident At Dark River:

Yeah, especially the more respected people. Like, even in that film, you have the officials, like the Johns Hopkins guy. There, you say, "A professor, he must know what he's talking about."

Similarly, Ann, in trying to explain her feeling that environmental regulation can be taken too far, referred back to the episode of 48 Hours, in which a relatively small-time polluter had been arrested:

Well there's just só much they can do. Like that man on the show that they arrested. Why that was ridiculous.... He just left a can or something didn't he? I don't know, it's just silly.

We argued elsewhere that understanding the full impact of television on political conversations and the public opinions formed during them requires expanding the definition of politically-relevant television to include both fictional and non-fictional programming (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990). Our focus groups support this argument. When subjects draw upon media in their conversations, they make few distinctions between fictional and non-fictional television. Unprompted references to the media were as frequent in those focus groups viewing fictional as non-fictional programs (Tables 3 and 4, Row IV). And

24 That is, the overall, combined percentage of direct and indirect references to the show (Tables 3 and 4 Row 1A).

25 The combined percentage of direct and indirect references (Tables 3 and 4 Row 1B).

26 In a related point, aside from isolated comments about two government agencies (OSHA and EPA), when subjects discussed solutions to environmental problems they almost always talked about what individuals, not government, could do (i.e., recycling, talking to friends, getting more information, etc.). We return to this point in our conclusion.

27 It was often impossible to determine the source of a discussant's information, as in Gail's comment which relies on a combination of "common sense" and specific information that may, or may not, have come from the media: "I think...when the water's gone, we're all gone, right? And the Kentucky River is so polluted they won't let you put one single finger in it, and we're drinking it."

comparing groups that saw Incident At Dark River with those who saw 48 Hours. we find little difference in the overall number of references to the shows themselves (32% in the former, 30% in the latter). **24** Indeed, when we examine only the non-prompted references, we find that subjects were slightly more likely to use the fictional show than the non-fictional show in their conversation (22% of all non-prompted comments in the former case, 13% in the latter case).

Beyond the specific shows viewed in the focus groups, we found that discussants were about as likely to invoke fictional and non-fictional programs to make or refute points. For example, where possible we coded direct references to television (other than to the shows viewed during the focus groups) as to whether the programs referred to were fictional or non-fictional. There were 102 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 non-fictional shows (e.g., 60 Minutes, CNN). Groups were about as likely to reference fiction as non-fiction programs regardless of whether they had been shown Incident At Dark River, 48 Hours, or no television at all.

The degree to which subjects rely on both fictional and non-fictional television is 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, Captain Planet (a cartoon character), John Ritter, Bill Moyers, Nadia Comaneci, Kitty Kelley, Nancy Reagan, Bette Midler, Ed Begley Jr., Bill Cosby, Jeremy Rifkin, Bob Barker, Phill 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. First, is the frequency with which figures from the media, especially entertainers associated with environmental issues, were referenced, often as authoritative sources. Second, is the almost complete absence of government representatives: other than a single reference President Bush, there were no mentions of specific elected or appointed public officials **26**.

The extent to which the mass media in general and television in particular dominated our conversations about the environment is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the above numbers to the frequency with which personal experiences were referenced. Where possible, we coded all comments that referred to personal experience as a source of information. Included here were statements based on either first-hand experience, or experiences of people with whom they were familiar **27**. Hazel's comment represents the first type of personal information, Marie's the second.

Hazel: I lived in the Washington Metropolitan area, and you see the dirty Potomac River out there and so many other things...

Marie: My husband said plastic bags are cheaper than paper bags...

How often do people draw upon 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 VI). This percentage varied only slightly between groups shown fictional television (7%), non-fictional 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 quote illustrates, and as we discuss in more detail below, 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 ²⁸.

A final way we demonstrate the general influence of television on political conversation is to compare how often it is addressed by discussants, relative to the frequency with which other members of the group are addressed. We coded all references made to other members of the group. Here, we were extremely generous, including both direct references to others (i.e., "I agree with her"), and more indirect references in which someone seemed to be taking his or her cue from the comments of another member of the group. Among the groups shown television, we find that the specific program was addressed almost as much as all the "other" group members combined. For the groups shown 48 Hours, 13% of all comments contained a direct or indirect, unprompted reference to the show, while 19% of all comments contained a direct or indirect reference to other members of the group. For the groups shown Incident at Dark River, the numbers were 22 and 26 percent respectively. This comparison, of course, drastically underestimated the frequency of overall television or media references, since it includes only references to the specific show ²⁹. Nevertheless, the number of references indicates that television remained an important "participant" throughout the conversation.

Conversing With Television. While 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 have argued 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, while 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 television, either at the time of viewing or shortly thereafter, and almost all of them said they did this with great regularity. When asked to recall the last time they had watched a show and talked about it, the following comments were typical. 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 ³⁰.

²⁸ This notion was brought home to us in our pilot focus groups conducted with students on the University of Michigan campus. When asked what she thought the Michigan campus was like in the 1960s, one respondent replied apologetically: "It's not really fair to ask me, since I'm from Ann Arbor and lived here during the sixties..."

²⁹ The enduring impact of the shows is further evidenced by the fact that the first portion of the protocol involved asking subjects what they thought of the program, and any comments in this portion of the conversation were not included in this comparison. Hence, even after discussing the show at the outset of the session, the show was referred to almost as frequently in the subsequent conversation as were other members of the group.

³⁰ Unless otherwise noted, quotations we use in the text are representative of broader patterns uncovered in our analysis of the transcripts. Also, the reader is reminded that quotes are provided verbatim, and that transcripts of the spoken word often appear awkward in print.

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: When my roommate and I are watching TV, he always likes to make comments about anything he's watching, and depending on my mood, I'll just take whatever's the totally opposite statement to what he says and just try and provoke an argument every once in a while, especially like on talk shows or something. He'll say something like, "why, I don't think that's right," and I'll say, "well, yeah, you should agree with him"....just to see what he says.

Paul goes on to recall another example that supports our argument that fictional shows can also spark political conversation.

It seems like we were watching LA. 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.

Viewer's 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 talked back to the television when watching alone, only three of the 34 participants said they never did. Of the three, one woman said that, while 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." And again, such interactions were not limited to news or talk shows:

Kara: Out loud? Yeah, sometimes. When I watch Cops. mostly...or if [a show] has a bad ending, I'll say, "she should have done this...I hate that damn ending."

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 utility 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 was the active role conversants

took 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 in which 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-ended surveys, this aspect of public opinion becomes clear. This inconsistency in part reflects a lack of information, interest, and so forth, but more importantly 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. Indeed, often the most consistent views were expressed by those who clearly were 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 engage(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. Some of those people are trying to sue Ashland Oil [a local company accused of polluting the environment].... They're just trying to get rich over it. Ashland is a good citizen.

As far as recycling, it's not going to work at all unless they're paying.... Everybody's collecting cans because they're paying.... They're not going to fool with anything unless they're paying.

I think the majority of them [businesses and industries] act responsibly [concerning the environment].

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 which, when placed back to back, appear incompatible. For example, Carol initially said "I don't think about the environment much," a point she reiterated at several points throughout the discussion. But interspersed throughout these denials were comments like the following:

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.

Carol also expressed fairly strong views on the distinction between the killing of animals for sport versus for food, and acknowledged having read several Greenpeace Newsletters (several points of which she disagreed with). 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. A similar "about face" is demonstrated in the following two comments by Mike:
Mike: I think everybody is concerned about the environment, because we all live here and I don't think anybody wants to see the earth destroyed....

Yet later, in response to Tim's comment:

Tim: I don't think we're concerned at all.... I don't think the majority of Americans would go to a meeting, lift a finger....
Mike: Yeah, I agree with that 100 percent.... I personally never recycled newspapers or anything until I was just about forced.... I think [people] are kind of apathetic towards it....

On some occasions, the ambiguities inherent in difficult political issues manifest themselves within the same comment, as in the following attempt by Elaine to express (more accurately to construct) her view on whether progress is being made in dealing with environmental problems:

Elaine: I'm thinking two prongs here. When you were talking about the Ohio River, just think about the pollution last year, how [you couldn't swim there]. When I was a child, you could swim there.... Then, on the other prong we're talking about, I just think it's great about the schools.... They're letting the school kids -- and the school kids want to -- bring these wire carts around [to recycle cans].... In the early seventies the thrust of environmental education really came on board.

The Construction Of Political Meaning. What is Carol's level of interest in environmental issues? Kara's view of the possibility of addressing the nation's problems? Mike's sense of how concerned the American public is? Elaine's level of optimism concerning the future? 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 importantly, 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 paper began with phrases such as "I agree with her," or "It's like on the show we saw." In addition, participants often picked up on themes, topics, etc., introduced by other members, or, in those focus groups with television, by the program they had just watched. For example, the plot of Incident at Dark River revolves around a local company's polluting a river with toxic waste. Similarly, one segment of the 48 Hours episode was devoted to toxic water pollution. In the discussions about the environment following both these shows, people were much more likely to focus specifically on industrial water pollution than were those people in groups who were without television's immediate influence (Elaine's comment above is one such example). The following were also taken from groups who had viewed these shows:

Mark: It [the docudrama] really made me more aware of things that I guess in the back of my mind I knew were happening. You read occasionally about all these factories dumping in rivers and I think I've read about some things going on up on the Ohio river...

Stephanie: One issue that's really affecting me right now...is the salt in the Jamestown River from that underwear company up there. You know, Lake Herrington, it's not even worth going there anymore, the banks are filled with trash. There aren't very many fish there and it's just nasty...

Similarly, both programs focused 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, while 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 was 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 first viewing TV:

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

Ruby: I don't have any children, but I have nieces and nephews.... What kind of world are they going to have....

In one sense these examples simply 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 not only shapes 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:

Tânia: 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 was 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.

Joseph: For international type things, the only way we're going to hear about them is through television and radio. Like Chernobyl in the Soviet Union. That whole problem there still isn't resolved, but I wouldn't know a thing about it if it wasn't for the media, you know. That's the only way we're going to know.

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

Mark: You know, I think that, in a way, most everybody's 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 fad like and then they're going to find something else to focus on six months from now. That can be a problem...when you involve the media.

The Limited Autonomy Of Television Viewers. Elsewhere, after closely analyzing several programs dealing with environmental issues, including the ones we showed to our focus groups, we concluded that these shows adopted a uniform perspective, but one that varied at different levels of politics (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990). At what we labeled "the substance level of politics" (i.e., discussion of issues that are on or becoming part of the political agenda), such shows adopted a liberal perspective on environmentalism, assuming that problems were worse than ever, posed a grave and immediate threat to humans and nature, and denied the need to consider trade-offs between protecting the environment and economic growth. At what we called "the institutions and processes level of politics" (i.e., discussion of the formal channels and institutions of government and the economy):

[the programs were] 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 and Williams, 1990: 27) ³¹.

Most of our discussants had the ability to critically analyze the slant of these shows and, at a certain level, to resist or accept their messages based upon a comparison with their own ideology. Employing our conversational metaphor, while dependent upon the media for information and the basic structure of political discourse, people continuously integrated and critiqued 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...some way 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 evenhanded.

Violet, commenting on 48 Hours, identifies the bias of the show, but accepts the need for such bias in order to combat wider apathy about environmental issues.

³¹ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams, "Fictional' and 'Non-Fictional' Television Celebrates Earth Day (or, Politics is Comedy Plus Pretense)." Paper presented at the American Political Science association Meetings, San Francisco, 1990, p. 27.

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?

Joe makes a similar point about media coverage of environmental issues more generally:

I think some people may think they're overemphasizing environmental issues and I think that may be true, but I don't think it's bad that they do because sometimes something needs to be overemphasized in order to balance it out. That has been neglected in the past, so I think they do a good job.

In addition to identifying the political slants of the shows, subjects also critically evaluated the reliance on sensationalism or emotionalism in both shows. This was especially interesting to us, since subjects were able to see the dramatic elements in both fiction and non-fiction. Violet criticizes one segment in "48 Hours" which dealt with a family's grief over their belief that their child had died from exposure to pesticides:

Yeah, but then like that TV, that was really too sad. I think the.....I'm sure the parents were really sad and I cannot imagine losing a child, but to show them sending balloons to heaven on a TV show like that, I think that's a bit much.

And Bob makes a similar comment about the emotional appeal of Incident At Dark River:

I think it was definitely a bleeding heart story. The underdog against the whole world. I mean, it brought up quite a few good issues, but I don't know if it was particularly objective.

Similarly, subjects understood the need to distinguish the dramatic elements from the more factual bases of the docudrama Incident at Dark River.

Ruby: ...with a movie, you find so much of it is factual and so much of it [is included] to make it interesting.

While recognizing the impracticality of only providing 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 was 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 the/re both useful and, you know, we shouldn't discount either because there's something we learn from both.

Barbara: Because a documentary would be in another place, another city, you'd say "oh, thats in New York and New Jersey, I can't do anything about that over there." But in a fictionalized account, it's like, "Oh, I wonder what's going on in my town."
Joe: I think if it touches the emotions of a person, laughter, sadness, whatever, it's going to stick with the person longer than if you just read statistics about it. I think that's a good way to bring a message across.

John while recognizing the power of entertainment figures to attract audiences for worthwhile causes, is 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 know come up and start speaking on some environmental issue, no one would go to see him...

While 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 were 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 pre-existing beliefs to organize and store the information provided by the media. Far and away the most widely known environmental group was 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 was "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, since the schema in 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: i.e., that it had been the Greenpeace ship "Rainbow Warrior" that had been blown up³².

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

...while 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 and Williams, 1990: 28).

³² We found other suggestive examples of this kind of information-processing regarding political activists: Rebecca's general references to "those kooks" mentioned earlier; the lumping of feminists, other political activists, even Al Sharpton into discussions of environmental activists, and so forth. As one student, trying to clarify who he meant by environmental activists, said, "you know, extremists.... People who wear Birkenstocks."

At this level, discussants were largely unable to identify or critically resist the slants used in the media. Focus group conversations seemed to simply 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:

Tom: I talk about building a geodesic dome...running off a windmill or solar power.

Sandra: I do go to Winn-Dixie and take all my paper and plastic there....

Jeff: I do little things, like sometimes I buy paper that's been recycled...

A similar attitude is revealed in their attitude towards 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:

Elaine: I think recycling is good, but I think the question is whether we can legally force anybody to do it. It just seems like it's a private decision.

Louis: What is it, 96 percent of all incumbents get elected.... I think it gets so corrupted that it's hard to figure out why the system doesn't work....

And group action is either viewed with suspicion, or else is simply not thought of as a serious alternative:

Kara: Greenpeace has knocked on my door two or three times and I will not open my door to them.... [They] are too militant for me and just do not agree with them.

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, as noted above, 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 came to identifying the bias in television's treatment of environmental issues at this foundational level were in comments like Mark's (cited above), that indicate some recognition that television does not provide all the ingredients necessary for stimulating political action:

... 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 (emphasis added).

7

Conclusion

Our focus groups presented strong, if only partial, evidence that citizens draw upon television, consciously and unconsciously, in deciding both what to talk about and how to talk about it. In addition, conversants seemed quite comfortable drawing on "fictional" television in their discourse about the environment.

More specifically, television served as a privileged member of the discussions, one to whom others felt an obligation to respond, even if it was to disagree with it. In this exchange television often shaped the substance of discourse, though in quite complex ways. Some messages were resisted by our participants, either by ignoring the message or messenger, or by consciously rejecting them as illegitimate. At other times television's images and information were used to help construct views that, under other circumstances, may have been expressed in very different ways.

In their various uses of television, discussants had some autonomy in selectively remembering or reinterpreting media messages, though this autonomy was limited. Clearly our participants were capable of identifying the media's power to shape both what they think and talk about, as well some of television's ideological biases. The ability of our discussants to critically identify some media biases, but not others, suggests that much of the acrimonious debate over whether the media is too liberal or too conservative may be misplaced. Our research suggests that viewers identify this type of bias fairly 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, while the material presented in this paper is more suggestive than conclusive, we believe it both supports and shows the utility of our "conversational metaphor." Some of these observations can, we believe, be used to confirm and flesh out findings drawn from more quantitative techniques. Some can be used as suggestive evidence for purely theoretical arguments. Some can be used as the stuff from 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, since the media and politics cut across institutional, textual, social, and psychological processes, its understanding requires a combination of methodological techniques: experiments, survey research, aggregate analysis, content analysis, participant observation, and so forth. To this list we would add focus groups.

Systematically cataloguing and empirically verifying the varieties of political uses of television requires a varied, subtle, and creative research design. We see focus groups as a useful piece of that design, and feel the evidence presented here supports that view. The interactive nature of these discussions both illuminates the conclusions of prior research and provides suggestive evidence that adds to those conclusions. Some of what we have uncovered supports findings drawn from the mainstream tradition: For example, minimal effects (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955); the media's role in agenda-setting and priming (McCombs and Shaw, 1971; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987); the way in which pre-existing schema influence the interpretation of new information (Graber, 1988).

In supporting these findings, however, we would argue that the use of focus groups provides much richer, subtler and dynamic evidence as to how television is used. Focus groups, more than most methods, allow us to observe the process by which individuals converse with television, struggling to resist messages, reinterpret certain messages, and so forth. As a result, it becomes possible to see competing research traditions as pieces of a larger, situation-based model.

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- I. 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 each person their name, a little something about him or herself.
- u. (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.
- III. (IF TELEVISION PRESENT): What did you think about the show.
- IV. How concerned are you about environmental issues? Which ones? How often do you talk about it? With whom?
- V. Do you ever act on your concerns? Get involved in any way? How?
- VI. How good a job do you think (government, industry, public interest groups, the media, technical experts) are doing in regards to environmental problems?
- VII. Do you think it is possible for us to adequately protect the environment in the United States today? Why? Why Not?
- VIII. What is the responsibility of corporations/industry in protecting the environment, the public?
- IX. What should citizens do (what is their obligation)?
- X. (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.
- XI. How often, if ever, do you talk about issues like the environment? With whom? Do you ever watch TV with others? Do you talk about what's on with them? 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.

TABLE 1: ALL GROUPS

	# of Comments	% of Comments
I. REFERENCES TO SHOW		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	240/913	26%
INDIRECT:	45/913	5%
B. Unprompted **		
DIRECT:	90/713	13%
INDIRECT:	37/713	5%
II. REFERENCES TO TV		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	122/1490	8%
INDIRECT:	18/1490	1%
B. Unprompted ***		
DIRECT:	59/1161	5%
INDIRECT:	14/1161	1%
III. REFERENCE TO OTHER MEDIA		
A. Overall *		8%
DIRECT:	126/1490	
INDIRECT:	115/1490	8%
B. Unprompted ****		
DIRECT:	74/1270	6%
INDIRECT:	105/1270	8%
IV. UNPROMPTED MEDIA REFERENCES*****		
DIRECT	145/886	16%
INDIRECT	159/886	18%
TOTAL	304/886	34%
V. REFERENCES TO GROUP MEMBERS		
DIRECT	284/1490	19%
INDIRECT	57/1490	4%
TOTAL	341/1490	23%
VI. REFERENCES TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	135/1490	9%

* = Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol

** = Excludes references to show from protocol sections III & X

*** = Excludes references to TV from protocol sections VI d (media) & XI

**** = Excludes other media references from protocol section VI d

***** = Number (and percent) of comments that contain unprompted reference to tv show, tv in general, other media, or media in general.

TABLE 2: NO TELEVISION

	# of Comments	% of Comments
I. REFERENCES TO SHOW		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	n.a.	n.a.
INDIRECT:	n.a.	n.a.
B. Unprompted **		
DIRECT:	n.a.	n.a.
INDIRECT:	n.a.	n.a.
II. REFERENCES TO TV		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	60/577	10%
INDIRECT:	7/577	1%
B. Unprompted ***		
DIRECT:	16/421	4%
INDIRECT:	4/421	1%
III. REFERENCE TO OTHER MEDIA		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	66/577	11%
INDIRECT:	52/577	9%
B. Unprompted ****		
DIRECT:	44/504	9%
INDIRECT:	47/504	9%
IV. UNPROMPTED MEDIA REFERENCES*****		
DIRECT	43/393	11%
INDIRECT	65/393	17%
TOTAL	108/393	27%
V. REFERENCES TO GROUP MEMBERS		
DIRECT	112/577	19%
INDIRECT	20/577	3%
TOTAL	132/577	23%
VI. REFERENCES TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	66/577	11%

* = Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol

** = Excludes references to show from protocol sections III & X

*** = Excludes references to TV from protocol sections VI d (media) & XI

**** = Excludes other media references from protocol section VI d

***** = Number (and percent) of comments that contain unprompted reference to tv show, tv in general, other media, or media in general.

TABLE 3: NON-FICTION TELEVISION

	# of Comments	% of Comments
I. REFERENCES TO SHOW		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	102/426	24%
INDIRECT:	26/426	6%
B. Unprompted **		
DIRECT:	17/300	6%
INDIRECT:	21/300	7%
II. REFERENCES TO TV		
A. Overall *	47/426	11%
DIRECT:	10/426	2%
INDIRECT:		
B. Unprompted ***		
DIRECT:	32/327	10%
INDIRECT:	9/327	3%
III. REFERENCE TO OTHER MEDIA		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	35/426	8%
INDIRECT:	13/426	3%
B. Unprompted ****		
DIRECT:	13/339	4%
INDIRECT:	12/339	4%
IV. UNPROMPTED MEDIA REFERENCES*****		
DIRECT	35/189	19%
INDIRECT	40/189	21%
TOTAL	75/189	40%
V. REFERENCES TO GROUP MEMBERS		
DIRECT	59/426	14%
INDIRECT	23/426	5%
TOTAL	32/426	19%
VI. REFERENCES TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	32/426	8%

* = Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol

** = Excludes references to show from protocol sections III & X

*** = Excludes references to TV from protocol sections VI d (media) & XI

**** = Excludes other media references from protocol section VI d

***** = Number (and percent) of comments that contain unprompted reference to tv show, tv in general, other media, or media in general.

TABLE 4: FICTION TELEVISION

	# of Comments	% of Comments
I. REFERENCES TO SHOW		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	138/487	28%
INDIRECT:	19/487	4%
B. Unprompted **		
DIRECT:	73/413	18%
INDIRECT:	16/413	4%
II. REFERENCES TO TV		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	15/487	3%
INDIRECT:	1/487	0%
B. Unprompted ***		
DIRECT:	11/413	3%
INDIRECT:	0/413	0%
III. REFERENCE TO OTHER MEDIA		
A. Overall *		
DIRECT:	36/487	7%
INDIRECT:	50/487	10%
B. Unprompted ****		
DIRECT:	17/427	4%
INDIRECT:	45/427	11%
IV. UNPROMPTED MEDIA REFERENCES*****		
DIRECT	67/304	22%
INDIRECT	54/304	18%
TOTAL	121/304	40%
V. REFERENCES TO GROUP MEMBERS		
DIRECT	113/487	23%
INDIRECT	14/487	3%
TOTAL	127/487	26%
VI. REFERENCES TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	36/487	7%

* = Includes all relevant references regardless of place in protocol

** = Excludes references to show from protocol sections III & X

*** = Excludes references to TV from protocol sections VI d (media) & XI

**** = Excludes other media references from protocol section VI d

***** = Number (and percent) of comments that contain unprompted reference to tv show, tv in general, other media, or media in general.