

# Prejudgments of Educational Television: A Study of Stereotypes\*<sup>1</sup>

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A FIRST TASK of broadcast educational television is to reach viewers. People who do not tune in live out their lives unaware of the experiences that have passed them by. This may be tragic in the case of people who feel a strong need for what educational television has to offer but whose unfavorable preconceptions of "education" or of "educational television" preclude them from finding out that these needs can be met.

Conversely, there may be a problem with people who have exaggeratedly favorable preconceptions of educational television. Such a person, expecting technical achievements or types of programming which are not available, tunes in, and settles back in his chair, filled with faith and hope. The dissatisfaction and disillusionment that may result can make such a viewer an enemy of educational television for life.

Consider a third possibility: A viewer turns to his set, assuming that educational television consists of professional educators delivering pedantic, technical, academic lectures which are boring and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, he tunes in, because he has nothing else

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<sup>1</sup> The term "stereotype," as first used by Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1922), refers to "pictures in the mind" which prejudice and predefine experiences.

to do, because he has an image of himself as thirsting for knowledge, because he wants to make a gesture in support of education, because he wants to prove that he is broadminded, or for any of an infinite number of possible motives. The program he selects is indeed a lecture, but it is generously supplemented with visual aids, the language is simple, the talk is interspersed with fascinating and relevant illustrations, the organization is meticulous. The speaker himself is animated, moves around (though not excessively), and smiles frequently. His voice is rich and modulated. The topic is one of general interest, with thought-provoking implications.

How will the viewer react? One possibility we could entertain is that the program changes his mind about educational television. He sees the program as we do. He abandons his unfavorable stereotype, and he substitutes a view based on his satisfying positive experience. Another possibility would be that he dismisses the program as an exception to the rule, and never tunes in again. But he has a third option: He can sit through the program, watch very carefully, and find his expectations fully confirmed. He notes that the program is in fact a lecture and that it has an academic setting; he compares the simple slides used by our speaker with the elaborate dramatizations of commercial documentary programs; he selects a few phrases from the script which have a relatively high Flesch count, to illustrate the abstruseness of the program; he points up the professorial appearance and delivery of the speaker, as compared with that of a professional announcer or actor. He introspects, and finds that he has not been entertained, elated, or moved.

The point is that stereotypes not only stand in the way of experience, but frequently shape and govern what we do perceive. If one is to communicate effectively, one must be aware of the stereotypes that one's communications are likely to encounter. Being forewarned at least provides the possibility of being forearmed. At worst, one can always give up, if the resistance is such that one could only increase it by foisting undesired communications on a hostile audience. Or one can prevent oneself from being needlessly defensive if one knows he is fully accepted to begin with. At best, one can modify communications so as to make them more palatable, or precede them with a campaign designed to bring the expectations of the audience reasonably in line with the offerings one is in a position to provide.

In the present study, the concern was with stereotypes held about educational television, in a setting (a) in which educational television

in the restricted sense of the term was not available in quantity, except to a minority of the television audience,<sup>2</sup> but (b) where educational television was about to become widely available, and in fact has become so since the time of the study.<sup>3</sup>

The inquiry was based on the assumption that despite the fact that the subjects would not have been exposed to much educational television, they could be expected to have some image of a program of this type. Since these preconceptions might color subsequent perceptions of educational television (or even preclude exposure), it was desirable to explore them in preliminary fashion.

### *Procedure*

The information was gathered incidentally, from audiences assembled to view educational television programs in evaluation sessions. Prior to the start of the program, questionnaires were administered, containing a series of open-ended questions designed to explore the stereotypes of educational television held by the respondents. These questionnaires were subsequently content-analyzed.

A total of 148 subjects were used. The sample makes no claim to representativeness, but is more typical of the audience sought by educational television than college sophomores or military trainees. Most of our subjects (72 percent) were women; their mean age was 39.1, the range being from 15 to 75. Their mean years of schooling were 14.2. Fifty-seven of our subjects were housewives; next in number were clerical workers (23), professionals (19), students (17), business and managerial (10) and sales and skilled workers (8). The remaining six included unskilled workers, service workers, and one farmer. More than half the subjects (84) were married; two-thirds of these couples had children.

Except for five non-TV watchers, the subjects reported watching television relatively habitually. The most determined addict managed 64 hours in the seven days preceding the session—an average of nine hours a day. Twenty-nine of the 148 subjects owned a television set capable of receiving the then available educational television station, WKAR-TV; 51 subjects confessed never having listened to WKAR.

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<sup>2</sup> Michigan State University's television station, KWAR-TV, was available over a UHF channel, but relatively few sets in the area had UHF tuning attachments.

<sup>3</sup> VHF Channel 10 has recently started operating under the joint ownership of Michigan State University and a commercial telecasting corporation.

What did "educational television" mean to this sample? How did they feel about what they pictured as "educational television"? Where did they get their information? The present study found the following preconceptions and their sources existing within the sample.

### *Image of Educational Television*

The first question asked the subjects was, "In your own words, how would you describe educational television?" It was not surprising to learn that most of the subjects thought of educational television as *something educational*. Thirty-seven of the subjects talked about educational television as a source of information, knowledge, or facts; another 30 had something more specific in mind, such as some type of subject matter; another 13 thought of educational television as being elevating, enriching, broadening, or illuminating; the remaining subjects gave answers which were evaluations rather than descriptions.

Several dimensions of television programs were mentioned as characteristic of educational television. The most common, as indicated, was subject matter. Science, health, music, mathematics, religion, news, and history were among the subjects specifically named. Format was brought up by some: skits, quiz shows, and panels were mentioned in this connection. Some respondents identified educational television in terms of the audience it reached or tried to reach. A number of respondents felt educational television was for everybody; others, however, mentioned specific groups, such as young people, those with little formal education, and families. There was good indication, in some cases, that respondents regarded educational television as being something for people other than themselves.

In order to gain a clearer idea of exactly what the respondents visualized when they thought of educational television, we asked them to "think of educational television" and to provide illustrations of "the sorts of programs" that came to mind. Their responses have been recorded in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 provides a rank-ordered listing of subject matters they mentioned, and Table 2 lists specific programs cited.

The listing of subjects in Table 1 is of interest, if one remembers that comparatively few of the respondents had been exposed to educational television in the past. The listing, therefore, in part may represent a picture of what our respondents would *like* educational

TABLE 1—SUBJECT MATTER OF EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION AS VISUALIZED BY RESPONDENTS

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of Times Mentioned</i>	<i>Rank Order</i>
Science, new developments, ideas	28	1
Travelogues, geography, outdoor life, going through other countries, exploration, travel	26	2
History	17	3
Current events, news	16	4
Medical, health	10	5
Music	9	6
Literature, English, fiction	8	8
Drama, plays	8	8
Education (general), classes	8	8
Farming, agriculture, conservation	7	10
Home economics, cooking	6	12
Panels, discussions	6	12
Industry, manufacturing	6	12
Trade, mechanical skills, crafts	5	14
Religion	4	16
Sports	4	16
Social problems, human understanding, other people's problems	4	16
Quiz shows	3	20
Safety, prevention	3	20
Mathematics	3	20
About school education	3	20
For children	3	20
Other (mentioned once each): Art, foreign visitors, child care, professions		

television to feature. A look at the most frequently mentioned categories increases this suspicion. Science, travel, current events, and health are fields which publishers, pollsters, and others have traditionally found to be of public interest. A comparison of the subject matters listed by our respondents with lists of programs available from the Educational Radio and Television Center shows a discrepancy between expectations and offerings.

Table 2 shows several factors at work in tracing the public's picture of the typical educational television program. One such factor is *availability*. Most of the programs cited were commercial programs accessible at hours commonly acceptable to most viewers. *Popularity* also enters into the picture. Among the programs readily available some are selected more frequently than others. This choice reflects back on the public's image of what a typical program is like. The third factor is a semantic one. Once programs have been viewed, for whatever reason, the viewer defines some of these programs as "edu-

ational," and others not. Walt Disney's programs, for instance, although both more *available* and more *popular* than some of the other programs listed in Table 2, are cited less frequently. Fewer people see these programs as educational television programs. Conversely, the miscellaneous listings show that some people apply the label "educational" with relative indiscriminatio. In summary, the public image of educational television in part rests on the programs that strike people as educational out of the ones they select from the repertoire of quasi-educational, juvenile, documentary, and other programs available over commercial stations. Insofar as this image differs from that held by producers of educational television programs, this constitutes a liability.

What do people see as the purpose of educational television? The respondents were asked: "What do you think is the aim of the people who produce and put on educational television programs?" Table 3 contains a listing of the responses to this question. Again, the most frequently perceived purpose of educational television was that of teaching, in the sense of transmitting information.

Next in order are two classes of responses in which education is given a more liberal definition. In 19 cases, respondents saw educa-

TABLE 2—SPECIFIC PROGRAMS MENTIONED BY RESPONDENTS AS EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION PROGRAMS

<i>Program</i>	<i>Number of Times Mentioned</i>	<i>Rank Order</i>
Watch Mr. Wizard	18	1
University of Michigan program	10	2
Wide Wide World	8	3.5
Industry on Parade	8	3.5
Omnibus	6	5
You Are There	5	6
Walt Disney Presents	4	7
Bold Journey	3	8
Bell Telephone	2	11
Medic	2	11
4-H	2	11
Today	2	11
Meet the Press	2	11

Other (mentioned once each):

Your Health, Stage 3, Camera 3, Dr. Spock, Agricultural Agent, Father Knows Best, \$64,000 Question, This Is Your Life, Bishop Sheen, Loretta Young Show, Twenty-One, Sixteen, Youth Wants to Know, The Twentieth Century, NBC News, Lowell Thomas, Curtain Going Up, Mr. Sunday, PAA Travel Films

tional television as aimed at improving people's minds or increasing their awareness; 13 respondents envisioned an even broader aim, such as the general betterment of mankind. On the other hand, 10 respondents saw a more narrowly defined educational function in educational television. They characterized it as an adjunct to formal education. It is interesting to compare these responses to the programs or subject matters the respondents saw as typical of educational television. It appears as if either the educational television source is regarded as aiming at educating the public in areas of greatest interest to them, such as science, foreign customs, and current events, or (and one gets this feeling from some of the responses) the aim of educational television is somehow felt to be the education of somebody else, such as persons requiring formal education but unwilling or unable to face a classroom.

TABLE 3—PERCEIVED AIM OF EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION

<i>Aim</i>	<i>Frequency of Mention (in rank order)</i>
TEACHING: educating, to inform about situations in other countries, to teach those who can't leave their homes, educate masses, to teach by vision as well as vocally, to teach [what is] not known or learned in school, to further educate those who aren't able to learn rapidly.	39
IMPROVING PEOPLE'S MINDS: enlightenment, to widen scope of knowledge, to show what is happening in world today, offset low level of commercial television.	22
GENERAL BETTERMENT: create better race of Americans, improve community and world conditions, to instruct, educate, and broaden the lives of ordinary citizens, to better equip our people to cope with and understand present problems.	13
AID TO EDUCATION: to make people understand our present situation in education field, to create interest in education's goals, aid those in field of education, to know how to steer children into lives of education.	10
ENTERTAINMENT VALUE: to please <i>all</i> the public, to entertain and hold your attention, keep people interested enough to keep their programs on and not turn to other stations, and to benefit something.	9
OTHER: produce more worthwhile programs; I think their aim is good, to reach more people and present programs in the best manner for all; to please the majority; to reach people that can't be reached otherwise; to use the time of people usefully by visual aids.	16
NO ANSWER:	21
TOTAL	130

*Evaluation of Educational Television*

Respondents were asked whether they thought that "educational television as we have it today is a good thing." Sixty-five voiced outright approval, 42 expressed approval with some reservation or suggestions for improvement, 28 said they didn't know (mostly because they had not seen enough educational television), and six refused to comment. Only four people asserted that educational television was not a good thing. Such unanimity only suggests that the question falls in the same category with one asking whether the respondents approved of democracy, God, apple pie, mothers, or—more relevant—education. What they approved of, it seems, was not so much educational television, with which few of them had any real contact, but rather, an idealized image of educational television.

To test this assumption, another question was asked which presented respondents with a hypothetical choice between an educational television and an entertainment television program. The question read: "Suppose that you have a television set that can get both an educational and commercial station. Tomorrow night at 9 o'clock you can either tune in Professor John B. Baxter for a discussion of 'Smoking and Cancer' or you can watch 'The General Motors Annual Variety Cavalcade.' You can watch one. Which would you choose? Why?" Both alternatives were deliberately made as attractive as possible, health ranking high in public interest, and variety shows representing favorite television fare.

Out of the 143 respondents, 76 indicated that they would choose Professor Baxter's cancer program, 54 selected the GM variety show, 11 evaded the issue by indicating that they would decide on the basis of merit or that their choice would depend on their mood. Two asserted that they would watch neither program.

Table 4 breaks down the two principal groups in terms of their stated attitude toward educational television. Although proportionately more of those who chose the educational program indicated unqualified approval of educational television, the same approval was voiced by the 37 percent (20 out of 54) who indicated that they would watch the entertainment program. And a larger proportion of those choosing the cancer talk approved of educational television with reservations. That such reservations tend to represent sophisticated approval rather than cautious disapproval is suggested by the



TABLE 4—ATTITUDE TOWARD EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION OF RESPONDENTS WHO INDICATED PREFERENCE FOR CANCER TALK OR VARIETY SHOW

<i>Proportion of Respondents Who Would Tune In</i>		
	<i>Educational Television Program (Cancer Talk) N=76</i>	<i>Entertainment Program (GM Cavalcade) N=54</i>
Approval of Educational Television	49%	37%
Qualified Approval (suggested improvements)	38	22
Disapproval of Educational Television	1	7
Don't Know (not enough information)	8	34
No answer	4	0
	100%	100%

fact that nine out of 25 respondents who said that they had watched educational television recently did express such qualified approval.

The most pronounced difference between the two groups exists between the relatively small proportion of educational television choices and the large proportion of entertainment choices by people who said that they didn't know whether they approved of educational television. These "Don't Knows," it appears, are a group who—when it comes to educational television—couldn't care less one way or the other. They have nothing against educational television, to be sure, but no predispositions to explore it either. This group is not now a potential audience. Those who indicate approval of educational television but choose an entertainment program when faced with a choice can probably by and large be added to the group of nonprospects; these people seem to feel that educational television is a fine thing—but for someone else.

The two main reasons given for the choice of the entertainment program were (a) a desire for relaxation and entertainment ("by that time of day I want pure entertainment"; "a variety show would be more relaxing"; "when I watch television I like to relax and not worry about what might happen to us"; "I spend a great deal of time in educating myself and like television for relaxing") and (b) a lack of interest in the content of the cancer program or positive interest in the variety show. By far the reason most frequently given for choosing the cancer talk was a desire for information about cancer or health.

A sizable minority of respondents said that they would choose the cancer program because of their dislike for commercial television.

At least one factor of commercial television—the commercial—was explored in the questionnaire as a possible determinant of a favorable attitude toward educational television. This line of exploration did not prove promising because, although most viewers had some “gripe” about commercials (too many, too long, of uneven quality, and so on), only 20 out of 146 respondents expressed disapproval of commercials as such, and, on the other hand, only 17 respondents declared that they like commercials. There was no apparent relationship between these feelings about commercials and the expressed attitude toward educational television.

### *A Stereotype of the Stereotypes*

The picture that seems to emerge from the data summarized above is of an audience composed of essentially three groups. By far the largest one of these groups includes people who have a favorable image of educational television. In most cases, this image is based in part on selective experiences with commercial programs of considerable interest to the public, and in part on wishful thinking. These people are *favorably disposed to their image* of educational television, but their image is unrealistic.

The logical prognosis in these cases would be disappointment in the event of contact. Contact, however, may never occur, since programs could be selected (as was the Baxter talk) on the basis of their interest; moreover, there is always the ready rationalization that “this program may not be of value to me, but it is good for some people.” There are always the uneducated, the young, the Great Other—comprising all those in the population who do the things that are good for them, like eating spinach and reading good books.

A second (small) group in the sample comprise the relatively sophisticated admirers of educational television who can see its value, while aware of imperfections and needs for improvement. It is this group, with its attitude of benign tolerance and curiosity (as opposed to the enthusiasm and lack of realism displayed by the majority), which likely constitutes the immediate audience of the medium. Some of its members already have gone to considerable trouble to gain access to educational television programs.

The third group in the sample has a vague image of what educational television is, but this image is more in the nature of a remote, evanescent mirage than something concrete and of personal import. By and large this group sees educational television as educational, and education as something of little concern to themselves. They have no information about educational television, and seek none. Education is irrelevant, television is for entertainment, and never the twain shall meet.

### *An Operational Implication*

It is customary in papers of this kind to end with a word of advice to the practitioner. Unfortunately we cannot conclude much from an investigation as modest in scope as the one reported here. Even if the picture we have drawn of the responses given by a few people to a few questions should hold for other people and other questions, it is only one aspect of the problem. All kinds of considerations loom larger in practice than the public image of educational television.

However, a dangerous discrepancy does seem to exist between what is perceived as educational television by at least some people, and what is produced and disseminated under that heading. At the risk of stating the obvious, we can draw two alternative suggestions from this. The first calls for some measures designed to change the public image. An information campaign—explaining educational television to the public, describing offerings, making explicit the audiences for which they are designed and the purposes they are intended to serve—might achieve this end. It might lower the expectations of some, thus forestalling disappointments; it might reach the potential audience among others who presently neither know nor care about educational television. It would provide a more reliable source of information about educational television than commercial programs and the individual's own interests and needs.

On the other hand, there is no *a priori* reason why those engaged in producing and disseminating educational television programs should not be governed (insofar as this may be compatible with their perceived aims) by the interests of their audience. Emphasis could be placed on subject-matter areas of greatest interest to the public, and possibly some measure of audience interest could also govern choices of format and methods of presentation. If educational television is seen by people as comprising programs of interest to them, there

should be some measure of transfer to programs which might otherwise be less popular. If, for instance, educational television offers programs in which people see immediate applications to their lives and pursuits, they may look for such applications in other programs where they are less apparent.

What we have suggested is that the two alternatives open to the practitioner are: (a) to bring the public image of educational television closer to educational television offerings and (b) to bring educational television offerings closer to the public image. Either course of action presupposes further exploration of popular stereotypes of educational television. Groups holding different images, such as those discussed above, not only have to be sorted out, but identified, so that they can be most appropriately reached. Mohammed cannot move to the mountain nor can the mountain be transported to Mohammed, without a topographic map of the intervening terrain. The above is intended as a rough, two-dimensional outline of such a map.