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Traveling Away from Culture

The Dominance of Consumerism on the Travel Channel

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ABSTRACT

Certain media observers posit that the vast number of channels arising from commercial cable television provides diversity of programming unlike at any time before. However, the simple existence of more channels does not necessarily guarantee adequate programming in every area. Commercial pressures may dominate programming agendas and interfere with the general substance of those programs. Cultural programming may be one such genre vulnerable to commercial pressure, and the Travel Channel, chosen as a representative commercial cable channel was examined to determine the levels of interference from consumerism. Through triangulation involving quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis, this study concludes that programming on the Travel Channel places extensive focus on consumerism while almost entirely ignoring issues of culture. Furthermore, the vast majority

of programming on this channel centers on the most commercially developed regions of the world, primarily the U.S., and secondarily, Europe while neglecting the rest of the world. Much of the programming not only advocates general consumerism, but also conscious over-indulgence, including the purchasing of ultra-expensive items and the consumption of highly unhealthy food in unreasonable quantities. Thus, the Travel Channel is one example of the possible inadequacy of commercial television for cultural programming.

INTRODUCTION

Given the expanding international media structure (Mattar, 2002) and the inherent interconnected nature of cultures in constant flux and contact with each other (Morris, 2002), individual cultures have decreasing ability to remain in an isolated bubble. As a result, intercultural perception is of paramount concern to the global community as a whole. While a multitude of factors may influence such perceptions, television programming may play a particularly vital role in shaping cross-cultural perceptions because it is a prevalent, pervasive source of information about the world beyond one's locality.

Therefore, it warrants examination within this context.

With a multitude of channels on cable television and more coming regularly, some media observers have suggested that there is no longer a need for public television, that viewers have diversity of choice unlike they've ever had before (Mecia, 2002). Within this conceptual framework lies the idea that multi-cultural programming, as with other types of programming of potential use and interest

to diverse populations, is also widely available on commercial television.

However, the availability of more channels itself may not necessarily guarantee the existence of a specific type of programming such as that related to culture, at least, not to the degree and in the nature that might be desired by audiences. Specifically, there lies the possibility that the forces shaping commercial programming may impinge on the fundamental nature of programming and detract from the delivery of substantive information. Furthermore, many of the available channels operate under an umbrella of ownership and must conform to the broad mission of the overarching authority. This is most evident in the ownership structure of the Discovery Communications network of channels in which the parent company operates Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, Travel Channel, and Animal Planet, among other channels worldwide (Mermigas, 2001).

Of these channels, perhaps the most synonymous with cultural exploration, is the Travel Channel. By virtue of the fact that increased exposure to different geographic regions increases the likelihood of encountering various indigenous cultures, this channel carries with it the inherent message that it is a source of cultural information for interested television audiences. As such, the Travel Channel is a reasonable place to begin an exploration of the nature of multi-cultural programming on commercial television and serves as the focus of this study.

While the Travel Channel brings with it a history of programming that highlights various cultures throughout the world, the reputation formed from such a history may not match the current state of programming or the future aims of the channel. With recent changes in top management, the Travel Channel has instituted a shift in its programming paradigm, focusing more explicitly on entertainment, as opposed to information, and partnerships with advertisers that bear direct influence on programming content such as the sponsorship of Beach Week 2003 by Holland America cruise line (Romano, 2003). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine whether multi-cultural content on the Travel Channel is overpowered by the element of commercialism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current body of scholarly research in culturally oriented programming is predominantly focused on public broadcasting as compared with commercial cable or broadcast television, but even public broadcasting has historically been under-represented in the realm of communication research, seeing a major increase in scholarly inquiry only as recently as the 1990's (Avery, 2001). Nonetheless, background information from the existing studies of public television as well as from the study of commercialism in general on broadcast and cable television is useful in determining the overall climate of multi-cultural television programming and, in turn, the adequacy of cultural programming currently available.

When public and commercial television are examined side by side, audiences indicate positive feelings for the public “brand” and see it as important despite the presence of the various cable channels (Chan-Olmsted & Yungwook, 2002). However, the programming approaches of non-commercial stations have not always produced ideal results because a lack of commercial pressure leaves many program directors to operate with myopic, often self-serving strategies (Levi, 2002). This leaves a degree of uncertainty about which structure might be more effective for the broadcasting of cultural programming, but some critics have argued that public television itself has seen a continuous rise in levels of commercialism (Barsamian, 2001), thus blurring the distinction between public and commercial television.

This increased commercialization is of concern, not only for its potential effect on media content, but also for its effect on audiences that receive such content. An article by Marsha Richins (1995) concludes that advertising has spread discontent among viewers due to its promulgation of social comparison as well as the constant desire for goods and services. Though the article does not directly address the reception of cultural programming, its principles still clearly apply. One can easily see that this type of materialism might lead to the promotion of culture as a means for consumerist satisfaction and social comparison rather than something of value in and of itself. This, in turn, may increase the likelihood that those cultures that provide the most consumerist

satisfaction, i.e. those associated with the most commercially developed regions of the world, are seen as more valuable than other cultures.

Though such studies peripherally address the issue of cultural programming within the context of a consumerist climate, one article in particular, “Packaging culture: the potential and limitations of travel programs on global television” (Fursich, 2002), addresses this matter more precisely than the rest and merits closer examination. In this study, Elfriede Fursich examines three television travel shows, Lonely Planet, Travelers, and Rough Guide, all aired in the U.S. on The Travel Channel, in terms of their representations of travel, global media, and modern and postmodern depictions of the Other. The study reveals that “the shows’ narratives tend to stress individual pleasure within untourist, post-tourist or multicultural frameworks, but neglect broader political, social and economic problems of contemporary tourism and international relations in general” (author’s abstract). As a result, Fursich concludes that this “demonstrates the inadequacy of commercial nonfiction entertainment as a global television genre to address the difficult issue of cross-cultural contact or to develop nonessentialized strategies for representing the Other” (author’s abstract).

While the study uses an effective approach, what Fursich refers to as “textualization analysis” (5), that of combining information about the production process with a qualitative analysis of the program text, it does not quantify any specific dimensions of the content. The findings, though

enlightening, remain largely subjective. A study involving quantitative content analysis is needed to add an essential element to this study and help in the overall understanding of multi-cultural commercial programming. In addition, the fact that Fursich's study is based on only three shows leaves much of the programming landscape of the Travel Channel unexplored. Certainly, a broader analysis covering more of the shows on this channel would help to create a higher degree of understanding and certainty about the levels of culture and commercialism on the Travel Channel as a whole. Finally, and perhaps most simply, the passage of time since the study necessitates an updated analysis due to the ever-changing nature of program lineups and general channel strategies (Head, Spann, & McGregor, 2001).

Given these reasons, a current study of the broad spectrum of programming on the Travel Channel, including a substantial quantitative component in addition to qualitative perspectives, builds on the work of Fursich and serves a useful purpose in determining the effect of consumerism on cultural programming.

HYPOTHESES

H1: The percentage of Travel Channel programming focused on consumerism will be greater than the percentage of programming focused on culture.

H2: The percentage of Travel Channel programming focused on the most commercially developed geographic regions will be greater than the percentage of programming focused on other regions of the world.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

RQ1: Is there a relationship between the time of day and the level of culture and consumerism on Travel Channel programming?

RQ2: What themes, if any, emerge from a qualitative examination of Travel Channel programming?

RESEARCH METHODS

Quantitative content analysis is perhaps the simplest and most direct technique for examining the presence of culture and consumerism on televised programming. It provides a systematic approach for the precise measurement of these elements and can provide objective support for subjective perceptions. However, supplementary qualitative data is also necessary for adding depth and richness to the findings. The two methods, when combined, support each other and provide a more complete account of a phenomenon. In addition, triangulation helps address potential weakness inherent to any one particular method when that method stands alone (Creswell, 2003). Thus, the mixed-methods approach was adopted as the methodological framework of this study.

The sample was determined using a systematic approach that effectively provided information across the specific dimensions examined in this study. The segments of programming were selected for analysis from different parts of the day over a six-day period in April of 2004 in order to obtain a broad, generalized sample of the channel's content. The six-day period overlapped

between two weeks (two days of one week, the weekend, and two days from the following week), and this was done simply to reduce the chance that sampling was taken only from a certain week with specialized or themed programming that might not be the most representative of Travel Channel programming during a typical week. An alternative might have been to do a full two-week study, but the six-day method achieved the same goal more efficiently and elegantly, placing equal weight on each week as well the weekend in between.

Each day, there were five ten-minute recordings separated by 4 hours and 48 minutes from the end of one recording to the beginning of the next. This division of the 24-hour cycle by 5 made it possible to avoid recording programs only during one part of the hourly program cycle and was based on the thought that programming and advertisement patterns might differ depending on the part of the hourly cycle. For example, not every recording began at the top of the hour and ended ten minutes into the hour. The division of the 24-hour cycle into five even parts also made certain that recordings would occur during different parts of the day rather than being weighted toward only one or two parts. Furthermore, the recordings were done using a progressively staggered schedule. In other words, after the first day, recordings for the subsequent days started one hour later than the times for the previous day for each of the five times of recording. This rotation allowed for greater breadth of coverage and the resulting diversity that might accompany the various time slots across the six-day period. That is to say, it avoided the pattern of recording the same

program that airs at the same time each day, a situation that could possibly have occurred to a certain degree had a simple random sample been used instead (see Appendix B for recording schedule).

The final total was 300 minutes of recording (including commercials). The commercials were not examined using content analysis, but were noted for their duration within the ten-minute segments. This was done to avoid the obvious bias it would present in the analysis of the actual programming content, whereby commercial television, by definition, would be incapable of being anything but consumerist in most cases. For this reason, a better approach was to acknowledge the percentage of commercial time in the ten-minute segments but not include it in the program content analysis itself. Also, commercials did not factor into the regional analysis because they would be inherently aimed at the U.S. market. One might argue that the commercials are indeed part of the programming, but the distinction was warranted because audiences generally watch the broadcast, not for the commercials, but for the content of the specific show itself.

After the recording of all 300 minutes of programming, the content analysis was carried out using the following operational definitions for the areas of measurement. Each ten-minute recording had a corresponding sheet for the information to be entered (see appendix C).

Culture:

1. Geographic site or architecture that is very unique to a place (rain forests, a specific river, Taj Mahal, Pyramids, etc.).
2. Historical or current facts about a culture.
3. Items, activities, and rituals significant to a culture (types of music, dance, literature, food preparation, etc.).

Consumerism:

1. Suggestions of how to spend money.
2. Focused mention or display of products, services, or consumption.
3. Mention of monetary value.

Region of Focus:

1. Most commercially developed areas (U.S., Canada, Western Europe, and Australia).
2. Rest of the world.

Duration of Advertising:

1. Measurement of total time used for paid advertising, either spot ads or infomercials, during the ten-minute segment.

Daypart:

1. Morning: 6am-11:59am
2. Afternoon: 12pm-5:59pm
3. Evening: 6pm-11:59pm
4. Overnight: 12am-5:59am

Inter-coder reliability testing was employed in order to attain dependable results, with the target being 80% and above. For example, if one coder measured 20 references to culture in a sample, the other had to get a measurement that fell within the range of 16-25. This number range was arrived at by dividing the smaller measurement by the larger measurement which yielded a percentage, the barometer for inter-coder reliability. This test

was applied to 10% of the overall material (3 out of the 30 segments), and this sample was selected randomly by a blind drawing. Segments in which the standard for inter-coder reliability was not met would be categorized as “undetermined” rather than being accepted as either cultural or consumerist.

The qualitative data was collected on the same sheet as the quantitative measurements in the “Qualitative Observations” section (see appendix C). This information was written down immediately in order to preserve the qualitative essence of the observation rather than let the passage of time evaporate original perceptions. A textual analysis of the written text was then conducted using the three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding. The analytical framework for the qualitative portion of this study simply involved the emergence of prominent “themes and topics” from the examined text as discussed by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). This ensured flexibility and the opportunity to capture the most essential information, the data that would most effectively supplement the quantitative findings.

Strengths and Limitations

One may contend that this strategy of using a single channel was unrealistic in terms of audience behavior and the overall availability of multi-cultural programming. Nonetheless, it had the advantage of efficiency while still examining a channel associated with this type of programming. Given enough time and resources, however, one may move on to the broader landscape of

commercial cultural programming on multiple channels to determine the level of multi-cultural adequacy of commercial television.

The content analysis portion of this study was fairly simple in design, and, as a result, the final analysis was rather straightforward. The qualitative analysis, on the other hand, was more subject to researcher bias and interpretation. For this reason, it is necessary to elucidate the researcher's personal background.

The Researcher's Role

I entered into this study with certain preconceptions that had the potential to come into play. I believe I have observed, over the past five years, a gradual shift toward consumerism and away from culture on the Travel Channel. This perception was, in fact, the impetus for the study.

I am a foreign-born U.S. citizen originally from Bangladesh (genetically as well as culturally for a significant portion of my life). However, I do not identify deeply with any specific culture (including religion) and view myself more as a citizen of the world rather than of any specific country. I consider myself a political independent, but the majority of my beliefs may be categorized as highly liberal (as it is currently defined by American society). I have significant motivation for cross-cultural exploration and understanding, and I am an advocate of programming that advances this aim on a large scale for others who, like myself, are interested in such matters. I believe that either the public

or private sector must address this area adequately. Therefore, my aim was to use this study to set the foundation for further research in this area.

From this, one may conclude that I am operating with an activist perspective, and that is perfectly acceptable for an understanding of my long-term goals. However, fundamentally, the theoretical perspective I bring to my research is that of pragmatism, knowing the inherent problems of trying to capture and define reality, but pursuing information, regardless, with the hope that it can be used to understand and affect the communication process. This allows for the incorporation of separate theoretical perspectives depending on their appropriateness and effectiveness in dealing with specific research questions. Thus, a more precise understanding of this specific study is that it operates with a critical-cultural perspective within a long-term frame of activism, both of which function as subsets of pragmatism.

Having given this background, I remain confident that the subjective qualitative portion of this study served to enrich the objective quantitative findings rather than detract from them.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

The Travel Channel made extensive use of its airtime to broadcast paid advertisements in the form of spot ads and infomercials. Of the 300 minutes examined, 144 minutes were paid advertising. This means that, when turning

on the television and tuning in to the Travel Channel, viewers can expect roughly a 48% chance of seeing a paid advertisement. This is due primarily to the frequency of infomercials which constituted 10 out of the 30 segments (33%).

Infomercials dominated the overnight hours of 12am-5:59am, with 6 of the 10 infomercial segments occurring during this time, and the others occurring just outside of this six-hour period. Of these outside periods, three were classified as morning (6:00am-11:59am), and one was evening (6pm-11:59pm). In all, the distribution of the total paid advertisement load (infomercials plus traditional spot ads) during different parts of the day were as follows (see first figure in Appendix A): 63.22 minutes (84% of programming) during the overnight period, 37.37 minutes (50% of programming) during the morning, 17.58 minutes (23% of programming) during the afternoon, and 25.53 minutes (34% of programming) during the evening.

Of the 20 non-infomercial segments measured, only two (10%) contained a heavier balance of culture. Inter-coder reliability for all segments met the 80% standard, with the average reliability being 86.3%. Therefore, the first hypothesis, that the percentage of Travel Channel programming focused on consumerism would be greater than the percentage of programming focused on culture, was supported.

The regional focus of the segments revolved extensively around North America with only 8 of the 20 non-infomercial segments (40%) pertaining to other areas. Of these 12 segments related to North American, 10 focused on the United States, one focused on an area on the border of the U.S. and Canada, and one on Mexico. Moreover, of the 8 segments that focused on areas beyond North America, only 2 related to areas outside of Western Europe (Africa, and Hong Kong). Thus, 17 of the 20 segments (85%) focused on the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe (see second figure in Appendix A), and the second hypothesis, that a greater percentage of Travel Channel programming would be focused on the most commercially developed geographic regions (U.S., Canada, Western Europe, and Australia) than on other regions of the world, also was supported. It should be noted that this would have almost been the case even if no territories beyond the U.S. were included in the definitional criterion.

Qualitative Interpretations

Further clarification of the nature of Travel Channel content comes from rather conspicuous qualitative patterns in the programming itself. In analyzing the qualitative data, three prominent themes emerged beyond all others.

The Blurring of Programming and Commercials:

What might one conclude about a ten-minute segment focusing solely on the Disney line of cruise ships or segments prominently featuring amusement parks, restaurants, hotels, and casinos? Though such segments avoided being

labeled as paid advertisement, in many cases, they could have easily qualified as such had it not been for the Travel Channel logo at the bottom of the screen indicating that they were actual programs. In reality, such programming did as much service to the featured companies as any “commercial” could, and, in one sense, perhaps the legitimacy associated with program content among unsuspecting viewers even heightened the effectiveness and credibility of the corporate profiles.

In other instances, infomercial segments mimicked actual programming and were distinguishable only because of the Travel Channel’s formal written declaration that they were paid advertisements. A segment about a gourmet chef, in particular, bore no abnormal signs that would indicate it as anything but a cooking program. This was further complicated by the fact that a few other segments examined actually were cooking programs carried by the Travel Channel.

In a strange twist, one paid advertisement about vacationing in Puerto Rico actually contained a greater emphasis on culture than many of the Travel Channel’s programming, though it still focused primarily on consumerism. In fact, its blurred nature was enough to confuse both coders initially. The use of lush, scenic imagery and authentic sounding music created the feeling that this might have been a documentary celebrating the best of Puerto Rican culture rather than an advertisement attempting to lure vacationers.

Overt Overindulgence:

In watching the Travel Channel, one could easily get the impression that the most crucial ingredient for personal satisfaction is the consumption of food, and unhealthy food, at that. Tours of places connected with food items seemed to be commonplace on the Travel Channel, and went out of their way to promote indulgence. A perfect example of this occurred on a segment in which the town of Hershey, Pennsylvania, the home of Hershey's candies, was featured in depth. Viewers received information about the town's chocolate industry and the accompanying tourist attractions having to do with chocolate including the production factory, a bar that puts chocolate in its beverages, and a restaurant in which the chef puts chocolate in every single menu item. This last attraction, in particular, strongly advocated over-indulgence as it followed a vacationing family around. As the parents and children eagerly consumed various chocolate items, a meter measuring the caloric value of each item was displayed on the screen. As expected, the number on the meter quickly rose with each passing item, but when it was apparent that the numbers were clearly beyond reason, the off-screen narrator lightly commented that the calories didn't really count anyway. The meter then vanished from the screen. To end things off, once the children had eaten all they could, one commented (quite sincerely) that he was done with chocolate for a while and "could really go for a Big Mac and fries."

Similar tours were given for factories that produced Peeps marsh-mellow candies and for a brand of cheese-puff chips. In the case of the latter, the

narrator went so far as to comment that “at only five grams of fat per serving,” the cheesy snack was an excellent option. Common sense says that cheese-puffs are, by no means, a healthy snack, but using the word “only” to describe five grams of fat per serving may be misleading to consumers who are not familiar with diet and nutrition. It may lead them to think that cheese-puffs, though not particularly healthy, still qualify as a reasonable snack.

In addition to the emphasis on food, the Travel Channel unabashedly encouraged the active spending of money. One program entitled, “Top 10 Places to Spend a Fortune,” repeatedly gave monetary values for items such as designer dinnerware and glass cups from a store frequented by celebrities, royalty, and the rich in general. The narrator made suggestions of what to buy with obvious enthusiasm in direct proportion to the cost of the items. At one point, within the same 10-minute segment, the scene shifted to a focus on precious gems, showing a particular place where one could find the most prized, most expensive diamonds, portraying this type of materialism as completely acceptable and even highly sophisticated.

Incidental Culture:

Many of the segments, when mentioning anything related to culture, did so rather incidentally. Italy was simply the backdrop for expensive shops. Africa was the backdrop for an excellent hotel and casino. France was the location of a world-class restaurant and an international poker tournament. A story about a possibly haunted hotel happened to be in an English town.

A common pattern used by the Travel Channel was the introduction to a scene with a few seconds of visual imagery or information about a culture followed by a shift to a scene serving as the focal point of the segment that was indistinguishable as being part of any specific culture. For instance, one segment began by mentioning the opportunity to visit a historical cultural museum, but only if one had the energy left over from accomplishing the real purpose of the vacation, that of visiting an amusement park. After a momentary shot of the exterior of the museum with little exploration of what was inside, the scene quickly changed to the site of the amusement park and explored it in detail throughout the remainder of the programming segment.

DISCUSSION

Given the finding that nearly half of all content examined was paid advertising, it seems very natural that only 2 of those segments had more mentions of culture than consumerism. Moreover, of the two that contained greater mention of culture, one made very little mention of either element. That is, it made only one consumerist reference, but provided only a small number of references to a particular culture, resulting in somewhat meaningless “culture” categorization. The bulk of the program revolved around a narrative having nothing to do with either category. So, in actuality, only 1 of segments contained substantial cultural information, but the official measurement remains at 2 because the second clip did meet the technical definitional criteria. Given this data, one cannot help but be astonished by the enormity of consumerism on the Travel

Channel. The notion of this channel as a source of culture is highly erroneous, unless, of course, one defines American consumerism as a culture in and of itself. Even then, viewers are left with this singular American consumerist culture rather than a diverse array of cultures.

This marks a significant change from the period of study by Fursich. Though the prior study indicates the precedence of self-centered pleasure over cultural awareness, the fact remains that there was at least a modicum of culture to analyze and discuss during that period of programming. Currently, culture, if presented at all on the Travel Channel, is merely incidental and serves only to promote related consumerism. Certainly, if the Travel Channel is the best commercial television has to offer in the area of multi-cultural programming, the current broadcast landscape is thoroughly inadequate to meet this need, and based on the enormous imbalance in favor of consumerism over culture on the Travel Channel, it seems unlikely that other commercial channels associated with cultural programming, particularly if owned by the same parent company, will display culture as a priority over consumption.

Thus, this study is of relevance to the overall understanding to commercial television's fitness, or lack thereof, for delivering multi-cultural programming. It builds on Fursich's study and sets the stage for further research in this area. It demonstrates why the mere existence of numerous cable channels does not necessarily ensure adequate program content in every area, including the area of multi-culturalism.

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