Resolving Conflicts of Worldviews: LDS Women and Television

Daniel A. Stout

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol20/iss1/5
Resolving Conflicts of Worldviews: LDS Women and Television

Daniel A. Stout, PhD

Abstract

While disagreement exists about the impact of television viewing on LDS family life, this research takes an audience-focused approach to the question of "media effects" by examining how a sample of LDS women describe experiences with television in their own words. Three "interpretive communities" reflecting different strategies for resolving television-related conflicts in the home are identified. These diverse perspectives about the role of television in LDS family life provide a useful point of departure for counselors and other professionals seeking to understand the relationship between television viewing and family conflicts.

This article looks at how a sample of LDS women define and resolve conflicts associated with television viewing. It argues that both attitudes about appropriate uses of television as well as "styles of talking" about the medium can be remarkably different. There is considerable disagreement about whether television can play a prosocial role in the home. A number of LDS women identify television viewing as a major area of contention, while others claim the activity is a positive source of family experiences. The differences described here may be useful to parents, church leaders, and professional counselors as they seek a broader understanding of the relationship between television viewing and family-related conflicts.

Religious audiences are often neglected by researchers of mass communication and consequently there are few studies of media-
related conflict among church members. Relevant work in this area has been confined to studies of television viewing habits of various religious audiences (Roberts, 1983; Gaddy & Prichard, 1985; Hamilton & Rubin, 1992), analysis of religious television programming (Abelman & Neuendorf, 1985; Abelman & Hoover, 1990; Simpson, 1993) and ethnographic investigations of television’s role in the everyday lives of church members (Bourgault, 1985; Iorio, 1991).

The question of how LDS audiences define and resolve conflicts related to television, however, is only beginning to be explored by media researchers.

**Television and the “Conflict of Worldviews”**

Historically, church leaders in a number of Catholic and Protestant denominations have suggested that many television programs and movies conflict with religious teachings. In the 1950s, for example, organizations such as the National Council of Catholic Women, The Legion of Decency, and the National Council of Catholic Men criticized television for its opposition to Christian values (see Spigel, 1992). In recent years, the “Christian Leaders for Responsible Television” (See Hamilton & Rubin, 1992) and the “Christian Film and Television Commission” (See Medved, 1992), for example, criticized media content thought to be inconsistent with mainstream “religious values.”

A number of popular writers and entertainment critics also define the relationship between “the media industry” and mainstream religious communities as one of tension and conflict. Michael Medved (1992), a syndicated film and television critic, argues that “tens of thousands of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children” (p. 3).

In other popular books in the mainstream press, Dobson & Bauer (1990) describe this situation in terms of “incompatible worldviews,” and Lewis (1977) contends there is a clear distinction between “television’s worldview” and those embraced by mainstream U. S. religious groups.
While public rhetoric tends to define the relationship between the media and religious communities in terms of a “conflict of worldviews,” little is known about how audience members themselves feel about these issues. In other words, by shifting the unit of analysis from media content to the audience, this article attempts to describe how television is experienced in the context of everyday life. How do audience members define and resolve conflicts that may arise when church leaders suggest a particular way of thinking about the effects of television? Given that content-centered analysis is restricted to an examination of the text, it is limited in its ability to say much about these types of questions. In order to explore the conflict issue from an audience perspective, the author examines how a sample of LDS women describe their experiences with television in the home. LDS women are an appropriate audience for the study in that the LDS Church advocates traditional roles and values (Campbell & Campbell, 1981; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1986; Wilcox, 1987) and has stated that many popular movies and television shows are inconsistent with LDS teachings. Examples of this include a Relief Society lesson on the effects of the media (“Come unto Me,” 1991) and an article in the Ensign encouraging women to give up soap operas (Strong-Thacker, 1990). In 1989, appropriate television viewing was the topic of a “General Conference” address (Ballard, 1989).

**LDS Women and Interpretive Community**

These warnings by church leaders serve to remind LDS women that television can be a site of value conflicts. The question of how women actually define and resolve such conflicts, however, cannot be fully addressed without careful attention to women’s interpretive communities. The concept of interpretive community suggests that audiences do not uniformly conceptualize the role of television in their lives but discursively make sense of their viewing within their everyday networks of social interaction. Briefly stated, an interpretive community is a group that shares certain strategies of interpreting texts (Fish, 1980). According to Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin (1988), the interpretive community phenomenon has been applied to “the problem of how media audiences produce meanings that are
variable, yet socially intelligible" (p. 3). In this way, interpretive community provides an alternative to predictions about media "effects" based on content analysis alone.

While the interpretive community concept has emerged in studies of female readers of romance novels (Radway, 1984), families and their use of VCRs (Lindlof & Schatzer, 1989), science fiction readers (Lindlof, Coyle, & Grodin, 1988), and women who use self-help books (Grodin, 1991), it has not been adequately applied to the study of religious television audiences. The main purpose of this research, therefore, is to extend the idea of interpretive community to audiences that deal with the problem of reconciling media content with institutional expectations and directives. With this goal in mind, three specific research questions are addressed:

1. Is it possible to create a general typology that describes the interpretive communities that exist among LDS women?

2. If so, how do LDS women in various interpretive communities differ in terms of their *style* of talking about television?

3. Is membership in an interpretive audience influenced by the social and demographic characteristics (e.g., age, marital status, family size, education, etc.) of LDS women?

At a practical level, responses to all three questions may illuminate parents, therapists, and others who seek a broader, deeper understanding of the role of television in family conflicts and how such conflicts are resolved. At a theoretical level, the results may have implications in a number of situations where organizations seek to influence their member’s attitudes about the media including political parties, health organizations, and even families. In other words, the types of interpretive communities identified here may stimulate new research questions relating to a number of different audiences.

**Method**

In order to learn more about the ways Mormon women describe their experiences with television, a triangulation of research methods was employed. Cluster analysis of survey questionnaire
data designed to assess both attitudes about television as well as demographics was conducted initially. This was followed by a qualitative sorting analysis of open-ended written statements obtained at the end of the questionnaire.

**Response Rate**

The data were obtained through purposive stratified random sampling. Of 702 questionnaires, 29 percent were mailed to Mormon women living in the Houston, Texas Area of Dominant Influence (ADI), 34 percent to women in the Salt Lake City, Utah ADI, and women in the Los Angeles ADI received 37 percent. The mailing yielded a response rate of 61 percent. Of the total questionnaires received, 37 percent were from Salt Lake City, 33 percent from Los Angeles, and 30 percent from Houston.

The women sampled were mailed a questionnaire with a cover letter requesting their participation in an important study of television viewing among LDS women. A statement assured respondents of anonymity. Along with the letter and questionnaire, a complimentary decorative bookmark was enclosed in the envelope.

**Demographics of the Sample**

When compared to the demographic research conducted by Goodman & Heaton (1986), the sample appears to be more representative of Mormon women who are married, highly educated, affluent, and religious, than it is of LDS women in general. The sample does, however, parallel the larger population of LDS women in terms of family size and employment outside the home.

**Cluster Analysis**

A total of 16 television-attitudinal questionnaire items were factored using principle component factor analysis with VARIMAX rotation (SASS) in order to identify which items would be used for a cluster analysis of respondents. Items were selected for the cluster analysis if they had a loading of .5 on a factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0. Using this method, seven items were selected.
The analysis yielded three clusters of respondents based on differences in mean scores on the seven questionnaire items identified by the factor analysis. Table 1 lists chi-square statistics indicating significant differences between clusters at the \( p < 0.01 \) level on all seven items.

These categories do not fully explain the complex processes at work when LDS women view television. That is, the clusters are not necessarily pure, isolated, or exclusive. Notwithstanding the methodological limitations, however, the clusters do identify three groups of women who have distinct responses to television and thus provide foundation data for further exploration of the various styles of television discourse of LDS women.

In addition to the survey data, open-ended written statements provided deeper descriptions of how women in the three clusters describe television in their own words. A total of 201 written statements were examined across the three clusters in order to uncover any patterns of response that might clarify or raise possible explanations of why Mormon women define the role of television differently.

Next, using a method similar to Browning (1978), the categories were shown to two readers not involved in the analysis who made comments about the strength of the categories and made suggestions regarding category labels.

**Results: Three Interpretive Audiences**

The analysis identified three types of television audiences among the Mormon women sampled: *Traditionals*, a young and affluent audience that tends to view television as a distraction from church-related activities, and, in discussing television places strong emphasis on what is considered undesirable or "immoral" content; *Independents*, who often describe television in individual, goal-oriented terms, and assess its value more from a personal, private point of view rather than an institutional perspective; and, *Contextuals*, who are highly religious, critical of television, and often feel guilty about their television viewing. Contextuals say they rarely enjoy television,
Table 1

Cluster Comparisons of Percentages of LDS Women who “Agree” with Statements Designed to Assess Various Attitudes about Television.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Traditionals</th>
<th>Contextuals</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Chi Sq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television viewing is something I look forward to each day.</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>239.85*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television is a consistent part of my daily routine.</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>222.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV is an important source of entertainment for me.</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>257.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV keeps me company when alone.</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>210.85*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I watch TV to get away from the ordinary cares and problems of the day.</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>134.51*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often feel guilty watching TV.</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>94.90*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV provides me with something to talk about with my friends.</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>58.9</td>
<td>154.47*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.01

(percentages listed; n=428)
but are willing to watch in various contexts (e.g., family viewing, as a passive activity, etc.).

Traditionals comprise the largest cluster (n=197). Contextuals are second (n=136), and Independents are third in size (n=95).

**Traditionals**

"Traditionals" tend to criticize much of television content for its perceived opposition to the traditional values taught by their religious institution. In addition, they often characterize television as a "distraction" from what they consider to be more important activities (i.e., church duties, reading, and family responsibilities). They are less likely to describe personal benefits or positive uses of television other than educational or religious programming, and rarely talk about what is on television with family, friends, and co-workers. For example, one respondent said:

I've found that . . . if "I hold to the iron rod" and really study the scriptures on a daily basis, my personal behavior improves, including a reduced desire to waste time with the TV.

As shown in Table 2, Traditionals tend to be younger than members of the other two clusters (Chi sq.= 22.746; df=8; p<0.01), are more likely to be married (Chi sq.= 18.002; df=4; p<0.01), have more children (Chi sq.= 133.995; df=8; p<0.01), and are more likely to be married in a Mormon temple (Chi sq.= 133.995; df=8; p<0.01).

As shown in Table 1, Traditionals are less likely to consider television a consistent part of their daily routine. Similarly, most deny that television fulfills needs related to entertainment, social interaction, escape, or companionship.

**Traditionals and Television Talk**

An analysis of 91 written statements identified three dominant themes in the ways Traditionals describe their television viewing. The first category of responses was labeled, *Distraction* (36 statements, 40 percent) which communicate a feeling that television always takes the place of something more important, especially church duties and responsibilities. Several of these comments reveal
Table 2
Demographics of the Three Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Traditionals (n=197)</th>
<th>Contextuals (n=136)</th>
<th>Independents (n=95)</th>
<th>Chi Sq</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean yrs.)</td>
<td>41.32</td>
<td>42.12</td>
<td>47.02</td>
<td>22.746*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>92.3</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>18.002*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (mean # of children)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>16.352*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple Marriage (%)</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>133.995*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed Outside Home (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 12 yrs.</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-15 yrs.</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+ yrs.</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; $9,000</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10K - 19,999</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20K - 29,999</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30K - 49,999</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50K +</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>17.694**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01  
** p < .05  
ns not significant
an intense concern about the value of time and how it is misused in watching television. For example, one respondent commented:

I consider TV on the whole, to be a terrible waste of human time and resources. I feel that anyone who watches it regularly is not contributing adequately to their home, community, or personal lives. There is almost always something more important to be doing than watching TV. The best years of our lives as a family were the two years that we did not have a TV in our home. In my opinion, the only reasons to keep the TV are to watch (1) family videos (home movies); (2) to entertain the children with a decent movie when we go out for the evening; (3) the news; (4) General Conference; (5) the viewing of church films for family home evening; and, (6) the occasional wonderful evening when we rented a great movie, popped popcorn and laid on the floor together as a family watching it. If it were not for these things I would not hesitate for even five seconds before throwing the TV in the garbage. I am not generally a radical in life, but I admit I am a radical in my disgust for TV!!

Some Traditionals ascribe an “addictive” power to television which robs the viewer of precious time:

There probably isn’t a way to tell how many people are addicted to TV in this survey, but it would be interesting to know. One woman I know couldn’t get anything done (housework, etc. shower even) because of TV.

The second theme characterizing Traditional’s talk about television has to do with negative effects of television content (34 statements, 37 percent). The majority of these statements condemn television for what is considered to be excessive portrayals of sex and violence that is assumed to have a negative effect on the audience. When talking about television, terms such as “garbage,” “pornographic,” and “corruption,” were often used to describe the potentially negative effects of the medium on one’s spirituality. One respondent asserted: “I do not clutter my mind with the pornography of movies or TV so I can have divine inspiration to what is truly happening.” Several respondents linked undesirable behaviors directly to television including sexual promiscuity, bad language, and disobedient children.
Another category of responses was labeled Control (14 statements, 15 percent) which related efforts to assure that rules regarding television viewing were enforced. Some of these statements describe arguments between husbands and wives while others talk about efforts to monitor their children’s viewing. “We have a lock which gives us control over the TV” commented one respondent, while others spoke of “screening” programs before allowing children to watch.

Independents

While Traditionals are primarily concerned with the undesirable effects of television, Independents tend to define the activity more as an expressive outlet that serves a number of functions in everyday life. Unlike Traditionals, this audience describes television as a “personal” and “private” experience, and is much less critical of television content. Typical metaphors used by Independents to describe television include “teacher,” “informer,” “escape,” and “link to the outside world.” An example of this perspective is provided by a women who tried to convince her husband that television was serving a positive or prosocial role in her life:

My husband thinks we should do away with the TV altogether because the children have disagreements over programs occasionally or don’t hear what we say because they are involved in a show. However, it is my only “link to the outside world” at this time. He feels better when I explain that it gives me entertainment while I do exercises, read and play with the kids, and do housework.

Unlike Traditionals, Independents list a variety of important uses of television in their everyday lives. Independents are also older, have fewer children, and, although highly religious, are less likely to marry in a Mormon temple than members of the other two clusters (Table 2).

Of the three clusters, Independents are least critical of television, both in terms of content and use of time. As shown in Table 1, the majority (75 percent) of this audience look forward to television everyday, and most agree that it has value in providing routine (93 percent), companionship (85 percent), entertainment (84 percent), and as a provider of something to talk about with friends (59
percent). Also, fewer Independents (22 percent) agree that children would be better off without television.

**Independents and Television Talk**

A total of 44 statements from this cluster was subjected to analysis, and three dominant themes emerged in the ways Independents talk about television: *Situational Uses* (17 statements, 40 percent), a series of comments where Mormon women explain how television assists them in dealing with particular problems and situations in their lives; *Assessments of Content* (14 statements, 33 percent), a pattern of statements evaluating various types of television programs; and, *Choice* (six statements, 14 percent), which are requests for a more significant role in program choices in the home.

While Traditionals speak in terms of potential “effects” of television, and describe the conflicts it *causes* in their lives, Independents say little about this. The medium is described in more personal terms and is often related to some event or situation they are experiencing at that moment. One respondent, for example, related her television viewing to a struggle she was having in balancing career and family:

> Basically, I enjoy anything (on TV) that shows women in the working world, even if she is a parent, that she is not having a wonderful time baking cookies all the time. That she is struggling, trying to find out who she is, if she is trying to stay home and why.

Some respondents stated that television helped them in dealing with the challenges and pressures of homemaking. For example, one said that television takes “my mind off a huge mountain of laundry and dishes.” Another explained that she watched television because the “eyes are too tired” to read. A mother of three children seemed to imply that television was necessary in coping with the challenges of child rearing: “I would go crazy if we didn’t have a TV in our home because my kids would be after me constantly to do things with them.”

Like Traditionals, Independents also criticize television for its excessive violence and sexually explicit content. However, Independents often praise many of the programs condemned by Tradi-
tionals. An interesting comment in this regard came from an active church-goer in her thirties who praised the cartoon comedy program, “The Simpsons:”

Sometimes we watch TV shows together such as the Simpsons and discuss the social messages. If there is something inappropriate that unexpectedly comes on, I use that as a teaching opportunity to explain why we don’t believe that way or do those things. I think it’s important to teach children to do their own self-monitoring of what they watch. Parents won’t always be around to turn off the TV as they get older and watch outside the home.

Comments like this are revealing in that they reflect a reliance on the personal as well as the institutional dimension of religiosity in resolving conflicts associated with television viewing. The above comment, while stating that elements of the program might be “inappropriate,” also recognizes personal interpretations of a program that may justify viewing if the family feels a show stimulates discussion, is educational, or teaches self-monitoring.

Additional comments about talk shows seem to suggest that despite institutional criticisms of these shows, some viewers feel they have a positive impact on personal religious values:

I like talk shows because it gives me an opportunity to see how others live [with] the choices they’ve made and how those choices affected their lives. More often than not, I reaffirm my own beliefs and choices in life as being wise. I feel grateful for the influence of the Church when I see others that don’t have it and how unfortunate their lives have turned out.

These statements indicate that while the women sampled may be active members of the LDS Church, not all criticize the medium in the same way. That is, a distinction between Traditionals and Independents is an ability to divergently interpret the nature of television’s “effect” despite common religious beliefs and behaviors.

**Contextuals**

Contextuals are much like Traditionals in terms of their criticisms of television, but, they are more like Independents in terms of their viewing habits. In other words, there is some inconsistency between their stated attitudes about television and
their willingness to watch (Table 1). Contextuals also feel guiltier than the other LDS women sampled when they watch television.

**Contextuals and Television Talk**

Written statements by Contextuals also lend support to the attitude-behavior discongruity. An analysis of 65 statements by Contextuals reveals both criticism of television as an activity, as well as a willingness to watch in a variety of contexts. Two of these include better *relationships* in the home and using television as *passive entertainment* while doing other things. Several women said they felt guilty if they weren't doing something else while the television was on.

The independent panel agreed that 17 statements (26 percent) from Contextuals stressed the importance of family relationships in their lives, and described television as a means of spending time together. Relationships, these women expressed, are more important than the act of watching television itself. One respondent comments:

> I sometimes watch television with my husband because of his work and church callings. TV takes no effort so it relaxes him. I'd rather be doing something better or different but I feel “holding hands” helps our relationship at times.

In a similar vein, one respondent remarked that “it is best not to watch,” but “if we watch as a family, we can all learn and discuss together.” Additional comments describe how women give in to other family members in order to avoid conflicts: “I mostly wind up watching *Current Affair* or *Inside Edition* because my husband puts it on—not necessarily my choice.”

As mentioned earlier, Contextuals feel the most guilt about television viewing. Implicit in several statements was an assurance that if they were not doing something else, they would not be watching. A total of 15 statements (23 percent) expressed this view. One respondent gave several justifications for watching TV:

> My husband works long hours. After my daughter’s bedtime, I will occasionally turn on the TV for company. If a program interests me I’ll do some project while watching it. I will frequently go days without watching any television.
Here it is clear that the respondent values other things more than television, and the act of viewing occurs only in the context of what are considered to be more important matters. In this example, the event occurs while waiting for her husband and while doing a project. Additional statements explain television as a secondary activity while making dinner, paying bills, crocheting, and cutting coupons.

**Summary and Discussion**

This research identifies and describes three interpretive communities among a sample of LDS women. Each employs a different strategy in defining and resolving conflicts related to watching television in the home. Some women refer to institutional standards and directives in describing the role of television while others conceptualize the media in more personal and private terms. Still other women do not think of television as an isolated event, and place it in the context of what they consider to be more important activities in their lives.

Striking differences in the ways Traditionals, Independents, and Contextuals talk about media is a compelling finding. It is apparent that respondents draw on multiple dimensions of their religiosity in making decisions about the media. For example, a Traditional might criticize a program on religious grounds, while an Independent might use a religious justification to praise it.

In addition to Church directives, the LDS women sampled cite peer influence, educational value, and personal uses of television content in describing their view of the media.

Simple descriptions of a television program's content is inadequate to an understanding of how television is experienced in the home. Television, it seems, may not only allow for, but may even encourage a number of strategies for resolving media-related conflicts (see Valenti & Stout, 1994). Parents, religious leaders, and counselors may benefit from this perspective as they contemplate the role of media in family life. These data suggest that church members may be more active in the viewing process than previously
thought, and that there are a number of complex uses of the media that individuals find compatible with their religious beliefs.

Psychological and Counseling Implications

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are offered to counselors and therapists when working with families that describe conflict situations related to the use of television in the home:

1. **Recognize that diverse uses of media may exist in the home.** One or two family members may make assumptions about the effects of television only to find that it is being used in unexpected ways. Several women, for example, expressed disappointment that their husbands were not aware of the many uses that they had for television (e.g., entertainment, information about world affairs, something to talk about with friends, etc.). Counselors may want to encourage parents to better understand how family members use television rather than assuming uniform effects in all situations.

2. **Discourage over-reliance on media as the singular cause of complex family problems.** How parents define the link between television and behavior is a private decision and reflects personal religious values. In some cases it may be an important factor in defining family conflicts. The data presented here, however, suggest that at least in some cases, television becomes a scapegoat in explaining a number of difficult family situations (e.g., teenage promiscuity, lack of respect for parents, etc.). Yet such problems are rarely the result of a single factor or event, and are better understood in terms of a complex interplay between a number of social, cultural, and psychological variables. When parents focus too heavily on media as a cause of family problems they may fail to consider other areas that need attention such as parent-child relationships and family communication.

3. **Anticipate that male dominance may be an issue in television-related conflicts.** A common theme expressed by the women sampled had to do with frustration about the fact that their husbands and other family members had control over what and how much was watched on television. This may be one of the reasons so many women in the sample expressed guilty feelings when viewing. Those
giving advice to families will want to recognize situations where women are watching television in order to please others and make recommendations for compromise. Gender-related conflicts involving television viewing may be a signal to counselors that additional problems in the family may exist and should be explored.

4. Make families aware of information available on media literacy. One’s ability to think critically about mass media is often referred to as “media literacy.” Although few schools have formal media literacy programs, parents can encourage analytical thinking by having family discussions and reading literature on the subject. Milton E. Ploghoft and James A. Anderson’s *Education for the Television Age* and *Mind over Media* by Barbara Lee and Masha Kabakow Rudman are examples of books that discuss ways that families can become better educated members of the television audience.

Daniel A. Stout is Assistant Professor, Department of Communications, Brigham Young University

The author would like to thank Marie Cornwall of the BYU Sociology Department for advice about methodology, and the BYU Women’s Research Institute for financial support.

References


Valcenti, J. & Stout, D. (in press). Diversity from within: An analysis of the impact of religious culture on media use and effective communication to women. In D. Stout