

NATIONWIDE TELEVISION IN SRI LANKA
A SURVEY OF ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Grant Noble

University of New England, Australia

and

Abey Bandaranayaka

University of Sri Jayewardenepura

Why the Study was Done

Various surveys of Sri Lankan media habits have been conducted over the years. Such surveys, however, have mainly focused on the abilities of various media to reach target audiences. Thus the survey conducted by the Ministry for Plan Implementation found that radio remained the most cost-effective media in Sri Lanka. The objectives of the present study were somewhat different. Because nationwide TV is a somewhat recent event in Sri Lanka the goals of the present survey were to examine firstly what were the characteristics of those who frequently watched television and secondly to examine any of the possible consequences.

The Urban and Rural Samples

With these objectives in mind 200 individuals were surveyed about their media habits and their opinions on various issues in both the Gangodawila, Nugegoda district of Colombo and in the more rural areas around Galle in February 1984. The sample was then divided between those who watched television every day and those who watched less frequently. In the event because not all respondents answered all the questions comparisons were made between the sixty nine people who watched television daily and the sixty people who watched less often. Moreover both frequent and less frequent TV viewers were relatively evenly divided between the urban and rural area sampled. It must be remembered though that Colombo residents have access to two TV channels whereas rural viewers can only see the one station. Differences between more urban and more rural viewers will be the subject of subsequent analyses.

So who are the Regular TV viewers in Sri Lanka?

In terms of the question "what are the characteristics of those who frequently watch television?", a number of features discriminated between the frequent and less frequent viewers. The former had been to school significantly longer than the latter—11.8 and 9.4 years respectively. Statistical analysis, in this case, as in all results reported herein by analysis of variance, indicated

that such a difference would only occur by chance less than once in 10,000 times ($F = 18.54$, $p = 0.0000$). Not surprisingly, given longer periods of education, frequent TV viewers reported that they could write more languages (an average of 1.64) than less frequent viewers (average of 1.35, $F = 6.80$, $p = 0.01$). Given greater length of education reflected in the abilities to write, but not speak, more of the languages in current use in Sri Lanka, it was not surprising to find that more frequent television viewers had had both more frequent contact with tourists and visited markets more often than less frequent viewers. On average daily TV viewers had talked to tourists between 10—24 times whereas less frequent TV viewers had talked to tourists between 1—9 times ($F = 12.82$, $p = 0.0005$). Similarly frequent TV viewers visited markets and market towns more than once a week whereas less frequent viewers did so only once per week ($F = 7.02$, $p = 0.009$). In some therefore the picture which emerges from this analysis is one where those who watch TV every day in Sri Lanka are more mobile, more educated and have greater contact with tourists than less frequent viewers. While separate analysis of these data has indicated that the frequent TV viewers was more likely to both listen to and own a radio than less frequent viewers, a result not replicated in this particular analysis, it was found that the daily TV viewers also read newspapers more often than less frequent viewers (daily TV viewers read newspapers each day while less frequent viewers read newspapers 2—3 times a week, $F = 10.95$, $p = 0.001$). In addition to more advanced education and mobility the frequent TV viewer is also a greater print and radio media consumer than the less frequent TV viewer.

Even though those who watch TV daily were those who previously owned and frequently listened to radio, there was some evidence that television had supplanted radio as most favoured medium. Respondents were asked "From which of the sources below do you learn most about the problems, facing the world today?" They were given radio, newspapers, family and shops as potential sources and were asked to rank these sources. Not surprisingly, frequent TV viewers gave a lower ranking to radio than did less frequent TV viewers (1.73 and 1.35 respectively, $F = 9.96$, $p = 0.002$).

The Appeal of Television

The present study also enables analysis of what the frequent viewer find attractive about television. All respondents were asked "which of the programmes on television listed below do you most want to watch?" and provided with a rating scale very much (scored as 1), much (2), not so much (3) and not at all (4). A desire to watch news yielded the most significant difference or any variable surveyed in the present analysis with daily TV viewers indicating a stronger desire to watch news than less frequent viewers ($\bar{X} = 1.23$ and 1.73 respectively, $F = 21.34$, $p = 0.0000$). Similarly daily TV viewers had greater desires to watch educational ($\bar{X} = 1.67$, 2.18) $F = 10.23$, $p = 0.002$), and sports

programmes ($X = 1.91, 2.33$ $F = 8.69$ $p = 0.004$) than less frequent viewers. Since there were no differences of any significance between the frequent and less frequent TV viewers for any of other programme categories—such as cinema films, drama series, politics, current affairs and religious programmes, it may be deduced that the real appeal of television as a medium was perceived in terms of news, sport and educational coverage.

So far only differences between groups in terms of the appeal of television and background characteristics have been considered. Even so it is worth noting at this juncture that some of these results do accord with previous studies. While nothing can be said here about “chicken and egg.” relationships, Lerner (1958) in his book *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* maintained that access to mass media resulted in “characterological change” whereby people’s limited horizons were considerably broadened. As a consequence media consumers were likely to become more mobile. In the present study it seems true that those with frequent access to television are also those who have relatively frequent contact with tourists and who are mobile in terms of visiting markets.

The Consequences of Watching Television

(a) *Views of the U.S.A.*—The present study set out to explore some of the consequences of frequent TV viewing. According to Gerbner and his colleagues (1976) writing about the cultivation effect of TV in the *Journal of Communications*, television cultivates a particular view of reality amongst its frequent viewers in terms that such viewers expect the real world to be like the world as portrayed on television. This hypothesis was examined by means of asking respondents about their views of the United States. They were asked “How true do you think the following statements are about the country called the United States of America?” Answers were simply scored in terms of very true (1), true (2), false (3) and don’t know (4). Frequent TV viewers (2.13) more often maintained that husbands and wives often separate in the U.S.A. than less frequent viewers (2.68, $F = 8.05$, $p = 0.005$). Similarly frequent TV viewers more often agreed (3.10) that the U.S.A. is a very religious country than less frequent viewers (3.38, $F = 8.42$, $p = 0.004$). Equally, frequent TV viewers more often agreed that there are lots of murders in the U.S.A. (2.26) than less frequent viewers (2.65), $F = 4.04$, $p = 0.047$. While there were no differences with regard to statements such as “There is a lot of crime in the U.S.A.”, “Americans are very aggressive people”, and “Americans stir up trouble all around the world,” nevertheless obtained results do support Gerbner’s cultivation hypothesis. It seems that respondents views of America are highly coloured by exposure to American television programmes. It may be presumed that Sri Lankan television programmes have many such cultivation effects in other areas which this survey did not address.

(b) *Knowledge of political processes.*—Yet another area of concern related to respondents' knowledge of Sri Lankan political processes. Frequent and less frequent TV viewers alike were aware of the names of political parties in government in Sri Lanka. However in spite of being more educated, more frequently reading newspapers and a greater desire to watch TV news, frequent TV viewers were significantly less aware ($\bar{X} = 1.087$) of the names of political parties in opposition in Sri Lanka than were less frequent viewers ($\bar{X} = 1.000$, $F = 5.63$, $p = 0.02$; where correct names were scored as 1 and incorrect as 2). Without systematic content analysis of Sri Lankan TV news there is no way of knowing whether news broadcasts unduly focus on governing parties. It is however a possible cause for concern that Sri Lanka's newest, and possibly most powerful, media has not resulted in a more informed electorate. In fact the reverse seems true.

(c) *Contentedness with Lifestyle.*—Nor it would seem from the present analysis are those with daily access to television any more contented with their lot than are those without such access. A number of questions concerning perceived living standards were asked. There were no significant difference between samples as regards their perception of their own living standards relative to Americans, tourists or Indians. However a significant difference was observed in responses to the question "How happy are you with the way you live now?" where answers were very happy (scored as 1), happy (2), not so happy (3) and very unhappy (4). Daily TV viewers ($\bar{X} = 1.73$) were not so happy as less frequent viewers ($\bar{X} = 1.43$, $F = 4.09$, $p = 0.045$). Again there is no way one can be certain that such differences are due solely to television, but nevertheless, it remains possible that exposure to programming from the more affluent countries of the world both broadens horizons and in so doing induces a feeling of relative deprivation.

Validity of the Survey

Amongst results there was evidence that respondents had answered questions in a reliable and systematic way. Frequent TV watchers reported in answer to a separate question that they had seen TV more than did less frequent viewers ($F = 7.02$, $p = 0.009$). This finding coupled with the fact that there were no significant differences between the two samples in terms of living in Colombo or Galle, age and number of children, suggest that TV viewing as a variable is at least partly responsible for obtained results. However it should not be forgotten that there were many areas where the samples did not differ. Included amongst those were the perceived effects of TV on young people (i.e. read less, learn poor behaviours), perceptions of living standards as previously reported and aspirations for children. The influence of TV in Sri Lanka is not therefore ubiquitous but seems highly selective, and, from results reported therein, somewhat disturbing.

Summary of Findings

In summary it appears that the daily TV viewer in Sri Lanka is more educated and able to write in more languages than the less frequent viewer. Daily viewers are more mobile, read newspapers more often and have had more contact with tourists than less frequent viewers. They mainly orientate to news, sports and educational shows on television. While it is debatable whether these broader horizons have resulted from frequent TV watching or are the cause of such viewing, it does seem that frequent exposure to television does result in particularistic views of the United States not shared by less frequent viewers. Moreover frequent TV watchers appear to be less happy with the way they now live than their less frequent watching counterparts and worse, somewhat less well politically informed.