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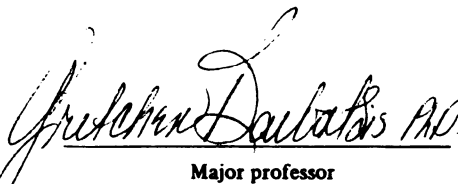
FOX AND THE TRADITIONAL NETWORKS: A COMPARISON
OF DOMESTIC COMEDY AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE

presented by

Mohammad Mehdi Semati

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

MASTER OF ARTS degree in TELECOMMUNICATION



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**FOX AND THE TRADITIONAL NETWORKS:
A COMPARISON OF DOMESTIC COMEDY AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE**

**By
Mohammad Mehdi Semati**

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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**College of Communication Arts and Sciences
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ABSTRACT

FOX AND THE TRADITIONAL NETWORKS:
A COMPARISON OF DOMESTIC COMEDY AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE

By

Mohammad Mehdi Semati

To investigate the claim that Fox is offering programs alternative to those offered by the traditional networks, this study compared Domestic comedies. The analytical instrument employed in this investigation, classified each domestic comedy as one of five communication systems. A system was one category of a typology that classified a program based on the characteristics of its central character and its dramatic structure. Domestic comedy, television's oldest familial allegory, was interpreted as cultural discourse on family and the nature of parental authority. This investigation found that for the traditional television, the majority of parental roles conceptualized parents as the learners. In contrast, the variation in conceptualizations of parents in Fox programs, along with a stronger concentration on parents as the problem causers, was found to be a distinctive feature of Fox programs.

For my parents, Leyla and Haji Agha Semati

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I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Gretchen Barbatsis for her invaluable assistance throughout every step of the project. My appreciations also go to Dr. Joseph Straubhaar and Dr. Charles Atkin for their suggestions.

I thank my family for making it worthwhile, and my brother and his family for their loving support.

As I started writing these last few words my thoughts drifted away. I remembered many faces across a crowded cafeteria, voices in the hallway, and others few miles down the road. They are now memories, as I will be, for the winds of time leaves us nothing but memories. ...David, Rick and Melissa, Catherine, Joe and Sheila, Marie Pierre, Peter and Karen along with Peter Louis, and of course and foremost Philippe Ohanian...

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The airing of THE LATE SHOW STARRING JOAN RIVERS (October 9, 1986) launched Fox Broadcasting Company (FBC) as America's fourth television network. Since its inception, Fox has created popular shows such as AMERICA'S MOST WANTED, 21 JUMP STREET, THE TRACY ULLMAN SHOW, ALIEN NATION, THE SIMPSONS, TOTALLY HIDDEN VIDEO, MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN, and recently the critically acclaimed IN LIVING COLOR.

THE SIMPSONS, after only two months of its premiere in January of 1989, was among the Nielsen's top fifteen shows. This was "an astonishing performance considering that Fox network reaches only four-fifths of the country" (Waters, 1990, p 68). Waters predicted that THE SIMPSONS "would be nudging the Huxtables and Roseanne." Currently, THE SIMPSONS is competing with THE COSBY SHOW on Thursday nights, and, it is among the highest rated shows on prime time.

Hammer and Reese (1989) report that, in its second week, AMERICA'S MOST WANTED gained the highest rating ever for a Fox show. Hammer and Reese also report that, as the three major networks' audiences decline (down to 69 percent of prime time

viewers in 1989), Fox's has grown 56 percent since the 1987-88 season. Fox now enjoys 14 percent of television viewers on Sunday nights. Hammer and Reese point out that last summer an episode of MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN broke into the top 20, winning its time slot against its rivals on ABC, CBS, and NBC. Hammer and Reese quote Larry Gerbrandt, Vice-President of Paul Kagan & Associates, a media analysis firm, as saying "They (Fox network) are definitely the fourth force. They are there" (p. 68).

According to Broadcasting (May 14, 1990), Columbia Pictures Television made its first deal with WWOR-TV in New York for syndication of MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN for an unknown price. In a related development, Broadcasting reports that Columbia Pictures Television would not comment on a Los Angeles Times report that MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN co-executive producers were negotiating a contract renewal offer of \$32 million over three years, which included a percentage of the profits Columbia Pictures Television gains for the show in syndication. The Los Angeles Times story said "The deal, if accepted, would be the largest studio deal for a television comedy team in history" (p. 30).

Fox has managed to establish itself as America's fourth network. It has expanded its programming to five nights a week and currently has plans for children's programs and a daily news broadcast (Block, 1990). Simply by browsing through pages of TV Guide or checking Nielsen's rating chart

in Broadcasting, one finds a fourth network listed. In the face of competition with established major networks and other sources of programming, Fox has succeeded in creating a new network.

How does one account for such success? How has it been possible to successfully challenge the competition? Block (1990) articulates that in less than three years, all parties involved in broadcasting had to take Fox into account when making their own decisions. He further adds that, "Changes in technology and the political climate may have made the birth of the Fox network possible, but it was attractive programming that made it viable" (p. 289).

It seems that it is this notion of "attractive programming" that has made the success of Fox possible. The primary implication of this notion is that Fox has distinguished itself from other networks, as well as other sources of programming, through its program design. It is this alleged distinction in programming that is investigated in this study.

Summary

Fox Broadcasting Company has managed to establish itself as America's fourth network in the face of competition with other established networks. Its success is particularly significant in a context where broadcasters are losing audiences to other sources of programming. It has been

suggested that, among other factors, "attractive programming" has made such success possible. While there has been little academic research investigating Fox's programming, the popular press has given it considerable attention. It is the intention of this research to investigate the allegedly distinct programming of Fox.

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CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With its Emmy Award winning THE TRACY ULLMAN SHOW, a national controversy surrounding the content of MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN and the rave reviews of IN LIVING COLOR, Fox has generated considerable publicity in the popular press. This research now focuses on the treatment that the press has given Fox's programming, searching for recognizable pattern(s) of impressions.

Terry Rakolta of Bloomfield, a suburb of Detroit, started a campaign against MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN claiming that it exploits women, stereotypes poor people, is anti-family and consistently offensive (Broadcasting, March 6, 1989). The campaign led to the withdrawal of advertisements from the show by companies such as McDonalds and Tambrands. With regard to the same story, the New York Times (March 6, 1989) published an article with the headline "Television That Makes Advertisers Dive For Cover". Many other publications including The Economist, Variety, and Time ran similar articles covering the same story. Terry Rakolta even appeared on ABCs' NIGHTLINE and GOOD MORNING AMERICA.

Fox According to Critics

Zoglin (Time, August 27, 1990) sees THE SIMPSONS as an "attack on the very symbol of the network establishment," for Fox has scheduled it against THE COSBY SHOW of NBC. Whatever the outcome of this battle, he adds, "Notice has been served: where once there were three contenders on the network battlefield, now there are four" (p. 64). He also reports that even the lower-rated Fox shows are enjoyed by advertisers for their youth-oriented appeal.

On MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN he quotes Howard Stringer, CBS/ Broadcast Group President, as saying: "Fox, with such taboo-busting shows as MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN has opened new boundaries for all TV." Zoglin also explains that from the beginning, Fox had two main tactics: take more risks and appeal to younger viewers. Writing on IN LIVING COLOR, he adds that Fox "has brought the spirit of the original SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE back into prime time." Zoglin notes that Fox, by experimentation, counterprogramming, and luck, has made its mark. He quotes Garth Ancier, Fox's first programming chief as saying: "Typical network programming would not work on Fox. We had to do shows that demanded your attention, that yanked you by the throat to get you to change the channel" (p 66). Zoglin describes Fox as "a try-anything underdog," a network that has "cultivated a reputation as the network most receptive to new ideas." Fox remains, he adds, more inclined

than the Big Three "to test the boundaries of permissible content." In the same article, Tamara Rawitt , one of the producers of IN LIVING COLORS, is quoted as saying: "there is a real Wild West feeling at Fox."

Zoglin (The Time, April 16, 1990) discusses TV's "anti-family" sitcoms, in which domestic life takes a drubbing. He adds that "the anti-family shows aren't against the family, exactly, just scornful of the romantic picture TV has often painted of it" (p. 85). In his analysis, Zoglin claims that other grumbling working class television households of the past, such as THE HONEYMOONERS and ALL IN THE FAMILY, used "domestic discord and jokey put-downs" for humor. However, "their barbs were rarely aimed at the institution of the family". In short, he recognizes THE SIMPSONS and MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN as sitcoms that do not represent traditional domestic life even by television's standards.

Hammer and Reese (Newsweek, December 25, 1989) report that Fox's parent company had predicted that Murdoch, the owner of Fox, would terminate the project in six months. To date, however, that prediction has not been realized. They add, Fox's "quirky program mix, ranging from 'tabloid television' to hip, irreverent comedies, has attracted a new generation of young viewers unencumbered by loyalties to the Big Three networks" (p. 68). Additionally, they claim, Fox's appeal among young adults and teenagers has made it a "must buy" among the advertisers.

Hammer and Reese quote Betsy Frank, Senior Vice-President of Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising, as saying: "The three networks have been losing audiences, mostly from kids looking for alternatives" (p. 68). The authors also provide a detailed account of Fox's economic structure and its operational procedures, concluding that Fox "does what the Big Three do." They also claim that Fox has been rethinking its "anything goes creative policy" due to concern over controversial content from both the public (e.g., Terry Rakolta's campaign) and the advertisers.

Waters (Newsweek, April 23, 1990) writes Fox's THE SIMPSONS is "...a breakaway rating hit, an industry trendsetter, a merchandising phenomenon, a cultural template..." (p. 58). In his analysis of THE SIMPSONS, he recognizes its characters as embodiment of a "genuine sociological force", in that "we are beginning to revolt against the idealized images of domestic life, and, at the same time, lovingly embracing messed-up families with collars of blue." In the same article, Jack Nachbar, a professor of popular culture at Bowling Green State University, is quoted as saying: THE SIMPSONS "is a joke on traditional sitcoms because its characters are so far removed from what's always been depicted as the norm." But in reality, Nachbar adds, "they are closer to the real norm than anything we've ever seen."

Broadcasting (November 21, 1989) published an article

titled "Producers of Fox's MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN Push Barriers With Their Slobcom." In it, the producers of the show are named the "bad boys of the sitcom circuit, with a mandate from Fox to stretch the bounds of what's acceptable to put on the airwaves each Sunday night in prime time" (p. 29). The article reports occasions in which Fox had censored the show. However, it quotes Moye, one of the producers of the show as saying: "Usually Fox is fantastic about letting racy, raunchy, and generally tasteless material get by." With MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN, the article continues, the producers like to think they are giving the public a "badly needed dose of realism," something that has been missing from "boring, one-dimensional stories about families simply too good to be true" on the airwaves. Moye, who has done shows for the "Big Three," adds "... we just got tired of having to do shows ...(which) in the last scene every body has to stop and say: Gee, honey, I am sorry for what I did a minute and half ago, and I really do love you and the kids are wonderful and let's sit here and hold each other" (p. 29). The article also describes the show's demographics as having the strongest appeal for males 18-34.

Simms (1989) points out that MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN is Fox's top-rated sitcom and it attracts more eighteen to thirty four year-old viewers than any other show in its time slot. He conducted an interview with the producers of the show during which different topics from censorship by Fox to a

comparison of their show to those of the Big Three are discussed. Once again it is stressed that their show is more "realistic" than the shows of other networks. Variety (April 8, 1987) describes the humor of the show as "blue-collar humor" and adds "By any standard, MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN is a good start for Fox's avowed purpose of providing an alternative service to network offerings" (p. 64).

Ressner (1991) calls GET A LIFE, a new Fox show, "a quirky sitcom" and points out that the show was the network's highest-rated new series. After a brief biography of the creator of the show, Ressner speaks of his sense of humor as "offbeat" and it is suggested that GET A LIFE is reflective of such humor. In an interview with Ressner, Chris Elliot, the star and creator of the show, emphasizes that he refuses to make his character "a standard sitcom type." In an October 1, 1990 review, Variety describes it as a "shabbily-made" show. However, the review acknowledges that the show could be "lamprooning the sitcom genre."

GOOD GRIEF, another sitcom by Fox, revolves around the everyday life of an undertaker. Variety (October 15, 1990) reviews the show under the title "Sick humor has a place in society, as Fox demonstrates with the aptly named GOOD GRIEF." The review adds that "the Big Three networks apparently were afraid to air a comedy about a mortuary business. But not Fox, home of low-brow humor, which perfected the art of far-from-subtle sexual innuendo and dark humor with MARRIED...WITH

CHILDREN" (p. 80).

Newsweek (September 3, 1990) in its review of TRUE COLORS, another Fox sitcom, writes "Leave it to Fox to offer TV's first sitcom about an interracial marriage." Leonard (1987), in his review of THE TRACY ULLMAN SHOW, a half-hour variety program of Fox, claims that the show "is worth a fourth network" in itself. Udovitch (1990) calls Fox "the greatest redemptive cultural institution of our time." He adds that where most television functions to preserve the status quo, "Fox programs attest to its subversion with an almost delirious disregard for ideological inconsistencies, from the red white and blue melting-pot liberalism of ALIEN NATION to the knee-jerk conservatism of AMERICA'S MOST WANTED" (p 50). He points out that Fox programs, regardless of their individual merits, "have had some little saving grace of an innovation." Udovitch concludes his remarks where he writes, "leave it to the nouveau traditionalists at Fox to come up with a new twist on an old theme."

American television will not be the same, for "Fox is working to change the face of American television. They embrace the dangerous, the avant-garde, and the untested" (Endres, 1990, p. 2). From the start Fox had the blessing of Barry Diller, Chair of Fox Inc., to "take more risks and push the cultural barriers in terms of language and content" (Block, 1990, p. 286). Kellner, Fox's Broadcasting President, claims that from viewers across the country to the advertisers

and the creative community, all "have been offered and have taken advantage of a new choice" (Block, 1990, p. 244).

The Patterns of Impressions

The dialogue on Fox and its impacts seems to suggest:

- A. Fox is positioning itself, and is being positioned by the parties involved, as a Network. (Fox's economic structure, financial management, and much of its programming strategies, block programming of sitcoms for instance, have been modeled after the "Big Three" networks).
- B. Fox is appealing to "Young America." (The literature clearly indicates that Fox is indeed targeting the audience that is the most appealing to the advertisers).
- C. Fox's programming is an "Alternative TO" the offerings of other networks. (It is suggested, and even emphasized at times, that Fox is providing the audience with programs that are "different" from what the other networks have to offer. Fox programs are described as avant-garde, low-brow, subversive, blue-collar, anti-television, anti-family, quirky, and realistic).

These patterns seem to imply that there exist "mainstream" networks along with an "alternative" which is Fox. The distinction is alleged to be in programming. This research investigates the "difference" that is claimed to

exist between Fox programs and the programs of other networks.

A Framework for the Research Question

To investigate the "difference" between television programs, a larger context in which such difference could occur is needed. One such context is that which addresses television programs as cultural discourse on family.

Feuer (1985) argues that fictional and even nonfictional forms of television are based on some sort of family structure. Taylor (1989) observes that despite important structural differences between different genres, "their common reliance on family allegory is striking" (p. 18). Newcomb (1974) suggests that fictional forms of television operate within the paradigm of sitcom, including its dependence on some type of family structure. As Barbatsis points out, the construction of viewers as "a Nielsen family" and "family viewing time," as well as first name interaction characteristic of news and sports programming reflect a domestic and familial essence (1989). At the center of the allegory, she adds, is the domestic comedy with its families and family controlled problems.

Domestic Comedy and Parental Authority

Newcomb argues that in domestic comedy, families are constructions of well defined interdependent roles (1974). He further defines the parental roles in domestic comedy in terms

of authority. Barbatsis (1989) suggests that the interactions among family members reflect patterns of interdependence. These patterns can be read as an exploration of the nature of parental authority. While in all domestic comedies there is a resolution, the way in which this end is achieved reflect different constructions of the parental roles. In such constructions, the parent is conceptualized differently. Barbatsis (1989) suggests four different types of conceptualization of parental roles. These four conceptualizations recognize parent as learner, manager or facilitator, paragon, and problem causer. It is in this context of television programs as cultural discourse¹ on family that this research investigates the distinction between Fox programs and those of the traditional networks. There has been no prior research that would address this issue; therefore, the research question is formulated as:

Do the shows on Fox offer an alternative cultural discourse on family to those presented by the traditional networks?

While recognizing that this end could be achieved through many different perspectives, this research focuses on the "communication systems" represented by individual programs.

SUMMARY

Fox Broadcasting Company has received considerable publicity by the popular press. The literature review

suggests: A) Fox is positioning itself, and is being positioned by the parties involved, as a network. B) Fox is appealing to "young America." C) Fox programming is an "alternative to" the offerings of other networks. It is implied that there exist "mainstream" networks along with an "alternative" which is Fox. The present research investigates the alleged distinction between Fox programs and the programs of other networks in a context which addresses television programs as cultural discourse.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. The pervasiveness of family imagery in the television text, therefore, suggests that this particular forum has provided a convivial arena for negotiating, sharing, and even transforming our cultural idea of "family." The popularity of this imagery at both ends, production and consumption, is that which recognizes and defines it as cultural discourse.

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CHAPTER 3

METHOD

To compare Fox and the traditional networks, a larger context in which such comparison could be made is needed. The alleged distinction in programming is the focus of this investigation, and the context is that which addresses television programs as cultural discourse on family. Systematic identification and classification of interactions among family members in television programs, as the reflection of different conceptualizations of parental roles, provides the operationalization of the comparison of Fox to the traditional networks.

In order to create a systematic framework within which to compare the shows on Fox to those of other networks, there were two requirements to be met:

- A. A program format had to be selected that had the most appeal to both the audiences and the television producers across all the networks, including Fox.
- B. An analytical instrument was needed to allow the

researcher to compare the programs within the context of a systematic framework.

Sample

Sitcom was chosen to meet the first requirement. A composite Nielsen rating chart of primetime for the months of September, 1990 through April, 1991 reflected that sitcom was the most popular program format (Electronic Media, April 15, 1991). Of the top 5 shows, four out of five were sitcoms. Table 1 indicates the popularity of sitcom.

Table 1 : Sitcom Popularity

# of Shows at Top of the Chart	# of Sitcom Among Them	Sitcom %
TOP 5	4	80%
TOP 10	8	61%
TOP 20	12	57%
TOP 30	20	67%

Table 1 clearly indicates that the sitcom is the most popular program format. Additionally, Fox has concentrated much of its primetime efforts on sitcom. More importantly, this popularity at both production and consumption levels qualifies this particular program format as that which is a convivial arena for sharing and negotiating the cultural idea of "family."

To compare mainstream television to Fox, the top 10 sitcoms taken from the Nielsen rating chart (Electronic Media,

April 15, 1991), which coincidentally did not include any sitcom from Fox, were chosen for the analyses. The sample includes: CHEERS, ROSEANNE, A DIFFERENT WORLD, THE COSBY SHOW, MURPHY BROWN, EMPTY NEST, DESIGNING WOMEN, GOLDEN GIRLS, FULL HOUSE, and FAMILY MATTERS.

The sample to represent Fox was its universe, that is, all of the Fox-originated sitcoms. These sitcoms are: MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN, THE SIMPSONS, BABES, TOP OF THE HEAP, GOOD GRIEF, GET A LIFE, PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE, and TRUE COLORS.

Instrumentation

To meet the second requirement, that is, providing a systematic framework for comparing television programs, this study used an analytical instrument developed by Chesebro (1978) for classifying "communication systems" used by individual sitcoms. Chesebro's analytical instrument was chosen, for it provides standardized set of categories for analyzing the narrative of television. More importantly, this instrument was developed to avoid the methodological criticism frequently leveled at content analyses, for it attempts to reflect the subtle behaviors and context which unfold on the popular television series as well as the motives controlling the central characters. His classifying system identifies any television program as one of five communication systems. Once an episode of a given television series is analyzed and

classified as one of the five communication systems, that particular television series is argued to remain as the same communication system over time. The assumption is that there is a constancy in the premise of a program, reflected as a communication system, from episode to episode and over time. An overall reliability measure of 84% for this instrument was reported¹.

This classifying system allowed the researcher to identify any sitcom as one of five communication strategies².

A "communication system" or "communication strategy" is one of five categories of a typology that classifies a television program according to the characteristics of its central character³ and dramatic structure⁴. These communication systems include: ironic, mimetic, leader-centered, romantic, and mythical (see Figure 1).

Communication Systems: Central character

Characteristics of the central character in the drama are argued to distinguish and create different communication systems. First, central character's apparent intelligence compared to that of the other characters in the drama. Second, the central character's ability to control circumstances compared to that of the other characters in the drama. While these characteristics create different communication systems, the casting of the problem and the way it is framed distinguishes the central character.

FIGURE 1. Types of Communication Dramas

Dramatistic Stages	Ironie	Mimetic	Leader-centered	Romantic	Mythical
Pollution	The central character violates major rules of the system.	Rules violated are minor and the result of accidents, the best of intentions, and/or circumstances.	Values of the central character are violated by others.	The central character identifies the significance and scope of the problem (a problem of mind, body, and spirit).	Universal problems beyond human control-unreasonable, overwhelming, and often religious/ideological-set off the drama.
Guilt	The central character is explicitly recognized as the cause of the pollution: scapegoat.	Guilt is easily admitted by agents because pollution is both insignificant and unintentional.	The central actor assumes responsibility for correcting the pollution: self-mortification.	The central character is the primary, if only, agent who identifies all of the dimensions of blame in a way that allows for correction.	Blame cannot be attached to any particular and individual agent/forces are to fault.
Purification	Characters beside the central character initiate acts to correct the pollution.	The accidents and/or circumstances are explicitly recognized; intentions are explained; forcing a reinterpretation and/or forgiveness for the pollution.	The leader mobilizes others to achieve the original ends through selective means chosen by the leader.	More highly developed skills, intelligence, and sensitivity of the central character are combined in the unique fashion essential to produce the most desirable set or corrective acts.	Superhuman powers of the central character emerge during the corrective process.
Redemption	The central character is reestablished as the controlling force to reinstate pollution.	The previous system can be reestablished with all characters "wiser" for the experience.	The leader's values are reestablished and explicitly recognized as controlling.	The central character is recognized overtly as the embodiment of all that's right.	A new social system is established due to unique powers of central character.

Irony communication system: In this system, typified by the character of Archie Bunker in ALL IN THE FAMILY, other characters are intellectually superior and more able to control circumstances than is the central character. In this system, the central character assumes positions of ignorance in order to reveal false conceptions of others. The central character becomes ironic, knowingly or unknowingly, in order to inconspicuously force an answer to reveal false conceptions.

Mimetic communication system: In mimetic system, represented by Mary in THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW, the central character and the other characters are equally intelligent and able to control the circumstances. In this system, the central character is said to be "one of us" (in the drama). All the members of a mimetic system face and deal with similar problems with equal skill.

Leader-centered communication system: Hawkeye Pierce in M*A*S*H* represents a central character typical of a leader-centered communication system. In this system, the central character is superior to the other characters in degree. However, this superiority of the central character is by virtue of special training, or personality conditioning. It should be noted that in this system the central character faces the same kinds of problems as do the other characters.

Romantic communication system: June Cleaver in LEAVE IT TO BEAVER is a typical central character in a romantic

communication system. In this communication system, the central character is superior in degree both in terms of an ability to control circumstances and intelligence. In a romantic communication system, the central character has a "symbol system" which allows that character to account for more environmental variables in more incisive ways than other characters and to create more effective programs for action regarding those environmental forces.

Mythical communication system: Finally, Steve Austin in SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN typifies a central character in a mythical communication system. The central character in this system, is superior to others, both in intelligence and the ability to control circumstances. The central character in this system deals with universal problems beyond human control⁵.

Communication Systems: The Dramatic Process

In order to identify systematically and operationally the patterns of dramatic action (the plot, or the interactions among the family members with regard to the research question), Burke's "dramatistic Process" is employed. The identification of the dramatic process by the researcher allows categorization of the events, circumstances, and the behavior of the characters into four discrete stages. Burke (1970) argued that all dramas are carried out in four discrete stages. First is the pollution stage: what norms are violated

and cast as disruptive to the social system? Second is the guilt stage: who or what is held responsible for the pollution? Third is the purification stage: what acts are initiated to eliminate the pollution and the guilt? Fourth is the redemption stage: what social system is created as a result of pollution, guilt, and purification? These stages are characteristically distinct across different communication systems.

Central Character and the Dramatic Process

The central character in each communication system behaves differently in each stage of the dramatic process.

Pollution Stage: In an ironic communication system, the central character is the cause of the problem by violating a major rule of the social system. In a mimetic communication system, the pollution is minor and the result of an accident, the best of intentions, and/or circumstances. In this system, the central character's relation to all stages of the dramatic process is equal to that of the other characters. In a leader-centered communication system, the pollution is a violation of the central character's value system. In a romantic system, it is the central character who identifies the significance and scope of the pollution. In a mythical communication system, the pollution is universal in scope and beyond human control. In this system, only the central character, as superhuman, is capable of correcting the

pollution.

Guilt Stage: In an ironic communication system, the central character is explicitly identified as the cause of the problem. In a mimetic communication system, guilt is easily admitted, for the problem is both insignificant and unintentional. In a leader-centered communication system, the central character assumes the responsibility for correcting the pollution. In a romantic system, the central character is the primary character who identifies all of the dimensions of blame in a way that allows for correction. In mythical communication system, only forces beyond human control are at fault.

Purification Stage: In an ironic communication system, the central character is by no means capable of taking action to correct the pollution. In a mimetic system, the circumstances are explicitly recognized and explained, allowing reinterpretation and/or forgiveness for the pollution. In a leader-centered communication system, it is the central character who mobilizes others to achieve the original ends. In a romantic system, it is the intelligence, skills, and sensitivity of the central character that makes corrective acts possible. In a mythical system, superhuman powers of the central character emerge during the corrective act.

Redemption Stage: In an ironic communication system, the central character is reestablished as the problem causer. In

a mimetic system, the previous social system is reestablished with all characters "wiser." In a leader-centered system, the central character's values are reestablished as controlling. In a romantic system, the central character is explicitly recognized as the embodiment of all that is right. In a mythical communication system, a new social system is created as result of unique powers of the central character.

A Summary of Instrumentation

In order to compare sitcoms, this research used Chesebro's analytical instrument. Each sitcom was classified as one of five "communication systems" based on the characteristics of its central character and its dramatic structure. The dramatic action is systematically operationalized by identifying four discrete stages of the "dramatic process." The five communication systems include: ironic, mimetic, leader-centered, romantic, and mythical communication systems.

Procedure

The shows selected for the analyses were videotaped off the air over a two-month period by the researcher. Chesebro's analytical instrument was used for the analyses. For each sitcom in the sample, three episodes were analyzed (total of 54 episodes). A second coder analyzed a randomly selected sample of all the episodes videotaped for this project, and

the agreement between the researcher and the second coder was 100%.

Analysis

The analysis incorporates both qualitative and quantitative components. The following steps are taken:

Step 1: Qualitative Component

A) The narrative structure of each program was analyzed in relationship to the characteristics of five communication systems. Two examples of analyses for each communication systems, one from Fox and one from traditional network programming, are reported.

B) The results of analyses were used to classify all programs.

Step 2: Quantitative Component

For both the traditional networks and Fox, the raw numbers for each communication system are compared. Given the sample size, concentration on one communication system (instead of dispersion of programs across different communication systems) is interpreted as a distinguishing factor.

Summary

In order to investigate the alleged difference between Fox programs and those of the traditional networks, this research compared sitcoms of Fox to a sample of sitcoms representing the traditional networks. To compare sitcoms, Chesebro's analytical instrument was used. In this framework, each

sitcom is classified as one of five "communication systems" based on the characteristics of its central character and its dramatic structure. The dramatic action is systematically operationalized by identifying four discrete stages of the "dramatic process." The five communication systems include: ironic, mimetic, leader-centered, romantic, and mythical communication systems. The analysis incorporated both qualitative and quantitative components.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. This figure is based on reliability measures for individual communication systems reported by Chesebro. The reliability measure for individual communication systems was based on the analyses of a sample of programs conducted by groups of Ph.D. students.

2. Chesebro argues that television's most influential role is in the way it portrays certain values at the exclusion of others. It is implied that the content of television reflects cultural values. His concern with popular television series and values in the larger social, cultural context led him to conduct research to identify communication strategies used in television programs to convey and to reinforce selective values. He was interested in all popular television series and the changes they had gone through over a four-year period. Among the questions that shaped his methodology, three were modified to fit the purpose of this research:

A) What patterns, types, or kinds of human relationships are portrayed in sitcoms?

B) How are human problems and difficulties resolved in sitcoms?

C) What images or character references are portrayed in

sitcoms?

To answer these questions a system was needed for describing and interpreting sitcoms as communication systems. There had to be a classification system that would allow the researcher to explain "symbol-using" in sitcoms, and to classify a sitcom as one of five communication strategies.

In creating a matrix for classifying communicative acts (Figure 1), Chesebro followed certain methodological guidelines proposed by Simons (1975). Simons proposed that generic formulation must proceed along certain methodological lines:

First, there must be a class of genres into which a particular genre can be put....A second requirement for a generic identification is that a categorizer must have clear rules or criteria for identifying distinguishing characteristics of a genre....Third, the necessary and sufficient distinguishing features of a genre must not only be nameable but operationalizable; the categorizer must be able to tell the observer or critic how to know a distinguishing feature when he sees it. Finally, if items of discourse are to be consistently identified as fitting in one genre or another, it follows that those items should be internally homogeneous across salient characteristics and clearly distinguishable from items comprising an alternative genre.

These rules were followed for the formulation of the communication matrix. In creating the matrix, all communicative acts, Chesebro notes, should be analyzed on the same "level of abstraction" or members of one "class of genres." Any number of approaches or classes could be taken to meet the first methodological requirement. Communicative acts might be categorized as "manipulative" strategies where the matrix could categorize the communicative acts as

consensus, confrontation, apologia, or concession strategies. An agent- centered matrix was selected, for this approach reflects the "image-orientation" of our popular culture.

3. To meet the second methodological requirement, "rules for identifying distinguishing characteristics of a genre," Chesebro used a set of rules for identifying types of central characters in fiction proposed by Frye (1957). According to Frye, two variables distinguish and create different types of communication systems. First, the intelligence of the central character compared to that of the audience. Second, the abilities of the central characters to control circumstances compared to those of the audience. These two variables create the aforementioned five types of communication systems. Although Frye assumes universality in reading by all members of the audience, the present investigation avoids this assumption by comparing the central character to other characters in the drama.

4. These communication systems thus constitute the classification system required to distinguish sitcoms, however, how is one to determine the relationship between the central character and the audience? Chesebro saw Simon's third requirement as an answer to this question. In order to operationally and systematically identify the patterns of dramatic action that characterizes each communication system, Chesebro employed Burke's "dramatistic process" (1970). This framework was used to systematically identify the behavioral

differences in different communication systems at different stages of the drama. The dramatistic process, therefore, allowed the researcher to detect operational differences among the five communication systems.

5. Although theoretically possible, no sitcom was classified as a mythical communication system by Chesebro.

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CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The literature review suggests that the Fox Broadcast Company, as "America's fourth network," is offering programs that are "alternative to" programming of the traditional networks. To investigate such a claim, this research analyzed samples of sitcom representing Fox and the traditional networks. The findings reflect patterns that distinguish Fox from the traditional networks.

The analytical instrument employed by this research compared the sitcoms of Fox to those of the traditional networks with regard to the characteristics of central characters and dramatic structures. The analyses of these characteristics classified each program into one of five communication systems. These communication systems include: ironic, mimetic, leader-centered, romantic, and mythical.

Analysis: Quantitative Component

After defining the communication matrix, the sitcoms of all the networks were classified into this matrix. The results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: communication patterns of the networks

communication systems	Fox N	others N
romantic	1	1
leader- centered	2	0
mimetic	2	8
ironic	3	0
mythical	0	0
TOTAL	8	10

As indicated by Table 2, a mimetic communication system is the dominant structure of programs on the traditional networks. Chesebro (1978) found that the mimetic communication system had risen from 25% of all popular television series in the 1974-75 season to 48% in 1977-78 season, and it had become the prevailing communication system.

Figure 2 reports the classification of the sitcoms, included in the samples.

Communication System	Fox	Other Networks
romantic	MARRIED... WITH CHILDREN	THE COSBY SHOW
leader-centered	PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE GOOD GRIEF	-
mimetic	TRUE COLORS BABES	CHEERS ROSEANNE DESIGNING WOMEN GOLDEN GIRLS A DIFFERENT WORLD EMPTY NEST FULL HOUSE FAMILY MATTERS
ironic	THE SIMPSONS GET A LIFE TOP OF THE HEAP	MURPHY BROWN
mythical	-	-

Figure 2: Communication Systems of the Sitcoms

The findings reflect that:

- A. The majority (8 of 10) of the sitcoms offered by the traditional networks are classified as mimetic communication system.
- B. Unlike the traditional networks, the sitcoms of Fox are spread across the communication systems, with the largest number of programs (3 of 8) representing the ironic communication system.

The findings are consistent with the Chesebro's (1978) four-year analyses in that:

- a. In a four-year assessment, the pattern for all popular television series had reflected a movement toward a domination by the mimetic communication system (a rise from 28% to 48%). The present findings suggest that the movement is in the same direction, toward even more domination by this communication system.
- b. With regard to the traditional networks, the ironic communication system is the least dominant system. It should be noted that the present research, consistent with the prior research, did not find any sitcom classified as mythical communication system.

The most significant finding of this research with regard to the research question is that the largest number of sitcoms on Fox (3 of 8) are classified as ironic communication systems. This finding is important, for it distinguishes Fox from other networks not only in the present context but also in the past. Programs characterized as an ironic communication systems have always been a peripheral enterprise for the networks. In his four-year assessment, Chesebro reported that this communication system had fallen from 6% of all programs to 5% over that period. It is in this context that Fox's concentration on ironic communication system becomes a

significant distinguishing feature from the traditional television.

Analyses: Qualitative Component

In this section, for each communication system, the analysis of two sitcoms are reported. The two examples include one Fox program and one representing the traditional networks. Where a communication system had more than one representative, the analysis of the most popular sitcom was reported. (No program in the sample of the traditional network programs was classified as leader-centered communication system.)

Mimetic Communication Systems:

Fox: TRUE COLORS

In this episode, Dr. Freeman, the central character, and his wife face a problem that involves Lester. Lester, Dr. Freeman's son from his previous marriage, has not been performing too well in school.

Lester's refusal to do his homework initiates the dramatic process. In the opening sequence, almost every member of the family reminds him that he should do his homework "as your father said." In the next sequence we learn that Lester's teacher is dissatisfied with his participation, for he asks "antique questions." Lester gets caught drawing cartoon characters in the classroom while dreaming of being a successful boxer. Lester's parents are notified about the

incident and in a conversation his father points out that he hates to see Lester "wasting all his potential." Lester's mother, however, reminds her husband that he should "try to understand Lester's perspective."

Lester gets help from his mother to prepare a report on the Renaissance. He takes all his notes to his mother where we learn that much of his notes are in form of cartoon characters, something that his mother finds "wonderful." She concludes that he "has an exceptional instinct for caricature." As Lester is preparing the report, he dreams of being Galileo, learning the hardships that he had experienced as a scientist in a time when the establishment was not receptive of new ideas. During the last sequence we discover that Lester's parents are asked to come to school to have a talk with his teacher. It is revealed that Lester has done his report in the form of caricature, an act that has led the teacher to fail him. After an argument, the teacher and Lester's parents compromise on a C grade, for Lester's parents argue that "he has a very good grasp of the materials." The episode is ended when Lester's parents laughingly discover that they themselves are cartoon characters in Lesters' drawings.

TRUE COLORS is typical of the mimetic communication system. Pollution: The minor rule of the system that is violated is the result of misunderstanding, as Lester's mother admits that she "might have inadvertently encouraged him to do

the report in form of caricatures." Guilt: The guilt is easily admitted, as Lester asks " I am in trouble now, ha?" Purification: The circumstances are explicitly recognized and explained in the final interaction where the whole plot is recapped by Lester's mother. Redemption: All the characters are wiser for the experience, that is, everybody is now more "open to new ideas," for the teacher decides not to fail Lester, and Lester and his parents are seeing "a potential."

Traditional Network: ROSEANNE

In this episode, Roseanne Conner, the central character, and her husband, Dan, have to deal with a problem that involves Jackie. Jackie, Roseanne's sister, is a police officer and in this episode she experiences difficulties in her relationship with boyfriend, Gary. Darleene, Becky, and D.J. are the children of the Conner family.

As Roseanne and her husband prepare to go out for dinner, they receive a call from a hospital where Roseanne's sister, Jackie, is being treated. This sets the dramatic process in motion. They rush to the hospital and find out that Jackie had attacked a "naked guy" by mistake fearing that he "could have had a gun." Jackie's boyfriend, Gary, is tired of having a cop girlfriend and "can't handle it anymore." Jackie is taken to Roseanne's where she could be "nurtured." Gary asks Jackie to resign and assume a secretarial position. There is no point in arguing with Gary since she has already made it

clear about "how much being a cop means to me." Gary refuses to continue the relationship and admits "it's over." Jackie thinks it is selfish of Gary to ask her to "give up the force because he can't deal with it." Later, Jackie tells Roseanne that she knew all along that she was quitting the job because she had been assigned to a desk job. Roseanne claims that she does not understand why Jackie had not admitted that to Gary, for that was all that he was asking for. Jackie replies that Gary had given her an ultimatum and she feels that he "should love me for what I am." Roseanne tells her that she should have lied to Gary, and pretended that she was quitting the job because of him and leave him ignorant of it "because men love that," and besides, she would know the truth. Jackie finally adds that she is doing what Roseanne would have done, that is, "never let a man run your life." Roseanne argues that Jackie should put a few years on Gary just as she did with her husband because "he didn't come out of a box like that," then he will be the "perfect guy." Jackie replies perfect guy "for you so you won't have to worry about your flaky sister." Jackie's comment is indicative of Roseanne's treatment of her, that is, Jackie is growing up and she needs to be "nurtured."

While Jackie's accident is the main plot, the subplot deals with "kids growing up." While Darleene "has dirt on her sister," it is D.J. who the subplot is concerned with. D. J. has been beheading his sisters' dolls and keeping them under his bed. When his sisters are cleaning his room, they

discover the beheaded dolls. They run to Roseanne and report the incident. She tells them not to worry, for D. J. "is a boy" and boys do such things. After they leave, Roseanne asks Dan: "did you do things like that when you were D. J.'s age?"

ROSEANNE represents the mimetic communication system in which the problem is cast as another minor problem that Roseanne has to deal with in her everyday domestic life. Pollution: Jackie's accident initiates the dramatic process. Jackie's problem as well as those of the children are accepted as part of growing up. Guilt: Darleene "has dirt on" her sister and Roseanne's encounter with it is that of acceptance as a part of growing up. D. J. "has got himself a hobby" by beheading his sisters' dolls, however, this plot is casted as a part of growing up as well. Purification: In the interaction between Gary and Jackie, circumstances are explicitly recognized and explained. In this communication system, other characters besides the central character are equally capable of recognizing the circumstances and assessing reality. Dan points out to Roseanne that she "really enjoys this nurturing crap." Furthermore, Jackie protests that Roseanne should not "worry about her flaky sister" because she can take care of herself. Redemption: In the last interaction of the episode as Jackie is leaving, Roseanne's comment that she could be "a psychic," reflects that she had known what is best for her all along, and, recognizing that, they are all

wiser for the experience. Roseanne has also finally admitted to Jackie that "maybe you are right."

Romantic Communication Systems:

Fox: MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN

In this episode, Al Bundy, the central character, experiences a different life style. His wife, Peg, along with his children, Kelly and Bud, are concerned about the changes that Al goes through.

Al Bundy takes a day off and that initiates the dramatic process. As he sits down on the couch to "have me some fun," Peg walks in and asks "are you enjoying the day off?" He replies; "yes, and how are you going to ruin it for me?" Brenda, a neighbor who has just moved in, asks Al to help her move a couch. Having moved the couch, Al comes back home and tells Peg that Brenda had just told him that "I am cute, I think she likes me." Peg replies: "I tell you this as your wife and your friend. No one likes you." Later, their daughter Kelly, comes home and tells her mother that "she is going to tease her way up and down the block," because she has heard "there is a new stud in town. They have seen him move a couch across the street." Peg realizes that it is Al they are talking about and claims "it can't be happening." Kelly tells her mother that "it is all in the attitude. If you think you are hot, other people will too." Al is now perusing a different way of life in that "he takes a shower in the

morning, buys a new tooth brush," and wears new clothes. Peg is concerned about the state of affairs and seeks advice from another next door neighbor, Marcey, who is a regular character on the show. She tells Peg not to worry until Al "stops buying white underwear." Next, we see Al walking in with new colored underwear in his hands. During the last interaction as Al walks home, everybody realizes he is not too happy. He is asked "what is wrong?" He tells his family that he had just turned down an offer by a beautiful girl to go to a Greek island "as her love toy." His son Bud, asks him "why?" He replies: "I realize every thing I have been doing bathing, brushing, changing of the socks, being nice to people, trying to succeed it's all for nothing. All these things," he continues, "are designed to attract, why should I be attractive, I am married with children." As he finishes his lines we witness a match-dissolve to the same shot of Al showing him as before. Peg screams: "he is coming back, my Al is coming back." To affirm his return, Peg looks into his pants and says; "Haines, he is back."

MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN is an example the romantic communication system. Pollution: Al has become "the new stud in town." That has upset their social system. This point is underscored as Peg worries about Al to the extent that she contacts her mother for advice. Guilt: Al is the primary agent who identifies all the dimensions of blame. He explicitly articulates the contributing elements to the

pollution as he describes the changes in his lifestyle. His "bathing, changing of the socks, his efforts to succeed, being nice to people," are different dimensions of the blame. Purification: It is Al's intelligence that is essential in producing the desirable corrective act. He articulates the problem and all the dimensions of blame when he admits "why should I be attractive." By his refusal to continue the new lifestyle, he made the corrective act possible. Redemption: By returning to the previous social system, Al is explicitly recognized as the embodiment of all that is right, which Peg acknowledges when she says: "my Al is back."

Traditional Network: THE COSBY SHOW

In this episode, Dr. Huxtable, the central character, attempts to surprise his wife, Claire, on their anniversary. Their son, Theo, is delegated the responsibility to assist his father in the surprise.

As Theo asks his father: "have you and mom figured out what you are going to do for your anniversary," the dramatic process is set in motion. Dr. Huxtable tells Theo that on their honeymoon, they had gone to "a clean but shabby little restaurant." He would like to go there for the anniversary, however, that restaurant has been closed for a long time. Dr. Huxtable contacts the chef who had cooked at that restaurant and asks him to provide the same dish that they had "twenty seven years ago." He also invites a musical band to play

Caribbean music as the dinner is served. Theo insists that his father should let him assume the responsibility of redecorating the dinning room as "the anniversary gift for mom and dad." Dr. Huxtable faces a challenge when the chef tells him that he would not prepare the specific dish that the Huxtables had "twenty seven years ago," because, that dish "is no longer fashionable." They negotiate and finally "the breeze of compromise is felt." The band starts rehearsing and waiting for Dr. Huxtable's sign to hide in order to surprise Claire. The surprise is ruined when Claire arrives since Dr. Huxtable has not given the sign. Claire runs to the bedroom to find her husband and we learn he is ill, as we have seen all along the signs of his illness. Dr. Huxtable tells his wife that "he is sorry," and stays in bed while the show ends with Claire having dinner in the redecorated dinning room.

THE COSBY SHOW is representative of romantic communication system. Pollution: The central character, Dr. Huxtable, identifies the significance and scope of the problem. It is he who recognizes that "the restaurant closed long time ago," and he is now facing a challenge to recreate the past. The "twenty seven years" gone by, as we are reminded repeatedly throughout the show, is the past that is not retrievable. Guilt: Dr. Huxtable identifies the dimensions of the blame as he makes references to the pictures of his wife "when she was a baby," and his wife's age. Purification: His skills and intelligence, however, uniquely

produce the most desirable outcome, that is, an "authentic atmosphere" representing the past. Redemption: His absence at the dinner table has a twofold function. On one hand, it is accepted that no hero can bring back the past. On the other hand, by recreating the past authentically, he is recognized as the embodiment of all that is right.

Irony Communication Systems:

Fox: THE SIMPSONS

Homer Simpson, the central character, tries to take advantage of an automobile accident in which Bart, his son, is involved. Marge, Homer's wife, is also faced with the problems caused by the accident. Lisa and Maggie are the other children of the Simpson family.

An automobile accident initiates the dramatic process. Bart is run over by Mr. Burns who is Homer's boss. Bart wakes up in the hospital where every member of the family is gathered. He recognizes everybody except an unfamiliar face who Homer had seen chasing the ambulance that carried Bart to the hospital. It is Huntz, a lawyer, who tries to convince Homer that they should bring legal action against the driver. Homer tells him that the driver "is my boss, besides it is only a bump on the head." Huntz leaves a business card with Homer and tells him that "you could cash on this tragedy." In the next sequence Homer is called to Burns's office where he is offered one hundred dollars to wave his right of taking

legal action against Burns. Before he gets a chance to talk, Homer is accused of extortion by his boss. Next we find Homer in Huntz's office asking what he had meant by cash settlement. Huntz's reply is one million dollars. Homer is convinced and takes Bart to a clinic recommended by Huntz. There Bart is wrapped in bandages and instructed by Huntz how to pretend that he is in great pain. In the meantime Burns is notified of the one million dollar law suit. In order to rectify the situation, Burns decides to fire Homer, however, he is advised not do so fearing the negative publicity that might accompany such action. The first day of trial goes well for the Simpsons, for no jury could resist Bart's injured face giving his version of the story. Later, Burns invites "the big ape," Homer, and his wife to his house "to buy him off with a banana or two." The Simpsons are offered five hundred thousand dollars and left alone "to talk it over." Burns leaves the room and monitors the conversation from the adjacent room. Marge tells Homer that she thinks they should accept Burns's offer and "put all this ugliness behind us." Homer screams that Burns is taking him "for an idiot," since he thinks he will win the law suit. Marge is disgusted with Homer's display of anger over the matter and asks him "what is with all greediness, shifty lawyers, and phony doctors." Burns overhears the story and drops his offer. They go back to court and Marge is called to the witness stand. She has no convincing answer when asked why they did not take Bart to

their family doctor. They lose the case and Homer is disappointed. Later that night Homer is excused at the dinner table and goes to the local bar. Marge follows him to the bar realizing that Homer is holding her responsible for the loss. In a conversation in the local bar Homer, first doubts his love for her, given that she "blew my big chance," but concludes "who am I kidding, I love you more than ever."

THE SIMPSONS is structured by the characteristics of the ironic communication system. Pollution: Homer as the central character violates a major rule of the system. "What is all the greediness" is the line, uttered by Marge, that underscores the pollution. He is being dishonest. The pollution is recognized even by Lisa when she asks Huntz "are you a shyster?" Guilt: The central character in this communication system is explicitly recognized as the cause of the pollution. Marge tells Homer that "you had squabbled over money before but never this much." Purification: Other characters besides Homer take the initiative to correct the pollution. It is Marge who tells the jury that the doctor who examined Bart "was more concerned with wrapping up Bart with bandages than making him feel better." Redemption: During the last interaction Homer doubts his love for "my wife and the mother of my children" and Marge asks him to "look her in the eyes" and tell her how he feels about her. He is reestablished as the controlling force to reinitiate pollution. By saying "I love you more than ever," he finds a

way to let himself off the hook. He is not sorry for what he has done, but sorry for getting caught.

Traditional Network: MURPHY BROWN

In this episode, Murphy Brown, the central character, makes an attempt to help Corky, her colleague, who is having marital problems. Jim, Frank, and Miles are also colleagues of Murphy. Elden is another regular character on the show who is Murphy's housekeeper.

In the opening sequence Murphy recognizes a "tension" between Corky and her husband, the newly wed couple. She stops the meeting underway and literally drags Corky to her office to give her advice. After the conversation, Corky comes up with the idea of a dinner party hoping this would bring some "romance" to their lives. As the dinner party gets underway the tension between the couple is running high. Initially they make no efforts to communicate, however, it is Murphy who encourages them to work it out and sends them to the kitchen. Once the dinner is being served they discover that the couple had forgotten to defrost the roast before putting it in the oven and that initiates the final confrontation between the couple, each blaming the other as responsible for the act. The dinner party turns out to be a disaster, eventually leading Corky to leave her husband. We see her at Murphy's house with her pillow in her hands. She comes to Murphy for comfort, however, at this point Murphy

admits that when it comes to giving advice on relationships "she stinks." Corky with tears in her eyes tells Murphy that she has been wrong all along thinking that "she could have it all: career, children, perfect marriage. You can't have it all." As the conversation continues Elden, Murphy's housekeeper, overhears the "marital problem." He tells her a story about an artist who needs to hear how much he is loved implying that Corky's husband who is a writer could be that insecure starving artist. He says that "nobody talks anymore. You have to talk." Murphy asks her "not to give up trying to have it all" and pleads with her, "on the behalf of all us who tried to have it all" and did not make it, "don't give up." Corky finds Elden's story "beautiful" and is convinced that she should go home. The episode ends when Murphy invites Elden for a game of bowling.

MURPHY BROWN is representative of the ironic communication system. Pollution: It is Murphy who interrupts the system. Even though she admits that "she is no good at this," she gives advice about relationships. That is reflected in the way she tries to come up with a solution. She attempts to solve a romantic problem "analytically, unemotionally." She is denying the emotionality in herself. Guilt: She is recognized as the scapegoat, for she is told at the party by Jim's wife that "we understand that you had a lot to do with this party." Purification: Other characters besides her initiate act to correct the pollution. It is

Elden's story that accomplishes this end. Redemption: At the conclusion, Murphy is reestablished as the controlling force to reinitiate pollution. She leaves with Elden for the bowling alley, a metaphor that represents unknown territory, that Murphy would enter next.

Leader-centered Communication System:

Fox: PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE

In this episode, Parker Lewis, the central character, faces a challenge when his sister, Shelly, causes problems. His friends, Gerry and Mike, are regular characters on the show and come to his help as they always do. Larry and Mrs. Musso, the principal of the high school in which the show is set, are other regular characters on the show.

Shelly joins "a female gang, the Vogues" and that sets the dramatic process in motion. Parker tells her sister that she should stay away from the Vogues because they are "bad news." Shelly replies that Parker must be jealous since she is now "more popular" than he is. Meanwhile, Larry is on the wrestling team but he is "too heavy even for the heavyweight division." The principal provides evidence that Parker and his "buds" had skipped school the previous Friday and that their parents will be notified of that matter if they do not help Larry lose weight for the wrestling competition. "Not a problem," Parker declares as his usual signing-on remark, and "Operation low-fat Larry" gets underway. In the meantime, in

order to get back at Parker, the Vogues decide to sabotage his plan. They tell Larry that Gerry, one of Parker's buds and Shelly's childhood friend, has been giving him weight-gaining shakes instead of a weight-losing product. Gerry is in trouble and the only person that Parker can get to help him out is Shelly, a member of the Vogues. Parker sets out to play a home videotape of Shelly, along with Gerry and Annie, the childhood friends, in an attempt to make her realize who her "real friends are." In the next scene Gerry is cornered and about to be harmed by Larry. In the climax Shelly tells Larry that it has been a set-up by the Vogues and that Gerry is innocent.

As representative of leader-centered communication system, PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE casts the pollution as a violation of the value system of the central character. Pollution: Parker recognizes that Vogue "humiliation is too heinous even for my sister." Guilt: As the central character, he assumes responsibility for correcting the pollution where he warns that "I can't let this happen." Purification: He mobilizes others to show Shelly that she "has crossed the line," and that "it is time for me to cross it too." His "operation low-fat Larry" is the means by which the original end is achieved. Redemption: Shelly learns in competition and peer pressure where to draw the line and "not to go too far," where others could "get hurt." This is explicitly recognized when Shelly asks Gerry what would he do if Parker asked him to

do something that he knew it was wrong. Gerry replies that "Mr. Lewis would never put me in that situation. He is a friend, he watches out for me."

Summary

The analysis incorporated quantitative and qualitative components. Qualitatively, the programs were analyzed and classified into different communication systems. Quantitatively, the data reflected that the majority of programs offered by the traditional networks are classified as mimetic communication system. In contrast, the programs offered by Fox are spread across communication systems, with the largest number of programs (3 of 8) representing the ironic communication system. The findings are consistent with the prior research with regard to the traditional networks in that: A) the mimetic communication system is the prevailing system; B) Ironic communication system is the least dominant system. A significant finding of this investigation is that Fox's dispersion across communication systems, with the largest number of the ironic communication system is a distinguishing factor from the traditional networks.

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CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter attempts to contextualize the findings in light of the research question that was put forth at the outset. Suggestions for further research based on patterns observed during this investigation are also discussed.

The research question put forth at the outset asked: Do Fox programs offer a different cultural discourse on family? The present research focuses on the implications of the findings in this context, for it is argued that domestic comedy is a cultural discourse on family. As it was discussed earlier, Newcomb (1974) argues that all fictional forms of television operate within the paradigm of sitcom, including its dependence on some type of family structure. It is argued that even nonfictional forms of television are based on some sort of family structure (Feuer, 1985). Taylor (1989) observes that despite important structural differences between different genres, "their common reliance on family allegory is striking" (p. 18). As Barbatsis points out, the construction of viewers as a "Nielsen family" and "family viewing times," as well as the first name interaction characteristic of news

and sports programming reflect a domestic and familial essence (1989). At the center of the allegory, she points out, is the domestic comedy with its families and family controlled problems.

Domestic Comedy and Parental Authority

According to Newcomb, families in domestic comedies are constructions of well defined interdependent roles (1974). He further defines the parental roles in domestic comedy in terms of authority. Traditionally, the father, as the central character, is "the center of authority," who relates to others as the primary judge of action within the family. As the characteristics of the central character and the dramatic process which constitute different communication systems are operationalized in the judgement of actions by family members (their interactions), they reflect a pattern of interdependence.

Analysis of sitcoms representing four communication systems illustrate four different patterns of interdependence among family members. The patterns can be read as an exploration of the nature of parental authority in a family system. While in all communication systems there is a resolution, the ways in which this end is achieved reflect different constructions of the parental role. Across communication systems, parents are conceptualized differently (Barbatsis, 1989).

In a mimetic communication system, for example, the parent is conceptualized as a "learner." Dr. Freeman of TRUE COLORS, for instance, learns that one of the ways in which his son could "realize his potentials" is by "expressing himself," even through drawing caricature. In a romantic communication system, the parent is conceptualized as "paragon." Dr. Huxtable of THE COSBY SHOW is an example of such conceptualization, for his skills and intelligence provide the most desirable outcome, that is, recreation of the past. In a leader-centered communication system, the parent is conceptualized as the "manager." In PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE, Parker is the primary agent who mobilizes "his buds" and all the resources to correct the pollution. The parent of the ironic communication system is conceptualized as the "problem causer." Homer of THE SIMPSONS, for example, in an attempt "to cash in on a tragedy," causes all sorts of problems.

It is in the context of cultural discourse on family that the message of Fox is different from that of the traditional television programming. As the distribution of the communication systems indicate (see Table 2), the forms of parental authority are not distributed equally. The present findings indicate that:

- A. For traditional television, the most prevailing form of parental authority is the parent as the learner.
- B. Unlike the traditional television, for Fox, forms of

parental authority are varied, with the largest number of parents as the problem causers.

The latter is a significant finding with regard to our research question, for Fox is indeed offering a different cultural discourse on family. While for the traditional networks the parent as the learner is the norm, for Fox, the parent as problem causer is closer to the norm than other forms of parental authority.

Week after week the audience tunes in to find out how Homer "became a loser." Whether he is "stealing cable TV" or "cashing in on a tragedy," Homer is constantly recognized as the cause of the problem. In one episode he tries to give his daughter Lisa advice in a fatherly fashion, yet he is not capable of articulating his thoughts. Lisa recognizes her father's intellectual inferiority in articulating his thoughts and replies "that's O.K. dad, I know you mean well." Charley Verducci of TOP OF THE HEAP is yet another father who is constantly trying to "make it to the top" by finding a "rich mate" for his son. In the process, he causes all sorts of problems. The parents of GET A LIFE have never been seen out of their robes and the most common way of referring to their son is as a "horse's ass."

As the research by Chesebro reflects, the portrayal of parent as the problem causer has always been on the fringe of the discourse. His findings along with the findings of the

present research indicate that for traditional television, parents as learners dominate the portrayals of parental roles. Knowing that the parent as the learner provides the archetype of domestic comedy for the traditional networks, the variation in forms of parental authority and construction of parental authority as problem causer by Fox, is a different cultural discourse.

Some Observations

Much of the discussion of Fox in the popular press has emphasized that its shows are anti-family with a blue-collar appeal. What the critics and even the public have in mind while seeing the shows on Fox is a world that television itself has painted for us. It appears that Fox's creative community is making a statement to that effect, for it is targeting television itself. A common thread that seems to be cutting across much of the shows on Fox is an element of self-reflexivity.

In one episode of MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN, for example, Al Bundy meets his guardian angel who makes his wish that he had never been born come true. The guardian angel shows him what life would have been like had he not been born, a reference to the movie IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. Al goes to his house where he finds his totally domesticated wife and his children as middle class and well-behaved. A successful, professional, middle class husband is now married to his wife.

A brief interaction satirizes the world of situation comedy where at the end of the half hour all the characters have to hug each other and say "I love you." In one episode of PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE, characters are playing a game of "win, lose, or draw," during which a drawing of Bart Simpson is jokingly mistaken for a drawing of Bill Cosby. In another episode of the same show, Parker spends a short time in detention during which "a fourth network is born." In GOOD GRIEF, there are moment reminiscence of MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN. The characters, satirizing soap opera, reiterate the same topic repeatedly. Or to comment on the presence of those who are absent, the subject of the conversation that is taking place in the foreground, can be seen in the background.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Fox programs seems to be the treatment of the formal features of the medium. The formal elements of the medium are taken to both extremes. In PARKER LEWIS CAN'T LOSE, formal elements form much of its appeal. Unconventional camera angels, camera movements, transitions, and sound effects set this show apart even among Fox programs. In contrast, GET A LIFE seems to be unconcerned with such elements. A wipe, for example, the most distractive transitional devise, is carelessly used in many episodes.

Among others, a postmodernistic perspective could explain Fox's position and its distinctions from the other media. Such characteristics seem to form other dimensions in which

Fox seems to be alternative to other networks. Where Chesebro's framework classified two shows representing Fox and the traditional networks in the same category, other perspectives might have identified different levels of distinction. Two programs classified as romantic communication systems, representing Fox and the traditional networks might be quite different in other regards.

Observations on Thematic Elements:

THE COSBY SHOW representing the traditional networks and MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN representing Fox, for example, are both classified as romantic communication systems. However, these programs seem to be thematically different. Where THE COSBY SHOW seems to be promoting all that is "socially and morally desirable," (i.,e, to be educated, honest, caring, etc.) MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN seems to be less concerned with such values. Additionally, in THE COSBY SHOW, much of the comedy stems from the charisma of Bill Cosby. In contrast, the comedy in MARRIED...WITH CHILDREN revolves around the inadequacies of its characters.

Observations on Formal Elements:

In addition to thematic elements, formal characteristics of the medium might form a distinguishing factor in comparing Fox to the traditional networks. For example, Chesebro's framework identified THE SIMPSONS and GET A LIFE, representing

Fox, and MURPHY BROWN, representing the traditional networks, as ironic communication systems. Where THE SIMPSONS of Fox is an animation, MURPHY BROWN is not. While MURPHY BROWN seems formally polished and sophisticated, GET A LIFE seems to be unconcerned with the formal conventional aesthetic standards of television production.

In short, further research might identify additional levels of distinctions between the programs of Fox and those of the traditional networks.

Summary

The findings of the present research suggest that Fox is offering a different cultural discourse from the traditional networks. The cultural discourse is on family. The traditional networks seem to minimize any form of parental role except that which sees the parent as a learner. In contrast, Fox programs are offering a different discourse in that the parental role is that of the problem causer. The most significant finding of this research is that Fox has brought portrayal of parental authority, in form of parent as the problem causer, from the fringe of the discourse to center stage.

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