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TWO COMPARISONS OF RURAL PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS AND NON-VIEWERS IN NORTHERN MISSISSIPPI

By Will Norton Jr., John W. Windhauser and Susan Langdon Norton

A study of public television viewers in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1977 and 1989 found both consistency and differences in viewing patterns. In both periods, viewers watched television in general about six hours a day. But viewers of all education levels were much more likely to watch public television in 1989 than in 1977, when watchers tended to be those with higher levels of education. The amount of time spent watching public television inched up in 1989, and there is evidence that viewers assimilated public television more into their regular viewing. The study concludes that public television appeals to a broader and more heterogeneous audience than it did earlier.

Without commercial limitations, the public broadcasting system began as alternate television programming to change the lives of viewers.¹ This idea, broadly defined in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, meant that public television stations must provide appealing programs to both general and special-interest groups.² Since then, policy changes³ and FCC rulings⁴ have upheld and added to this programming concept by stressing that both public and commercial television stations may editorialize but must have periodic performance reviews.⁵ The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and many noncommercial television stations in 1970 formed the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).

Although people have the perception of public television as a medium oriented toward the higher status and more influential groups in society, Keirstead and Keirstead contend that it now commands significant attention from critics and audience members.⁶ Yet, studies are scarce and dated.⁷ For instance, Stevenson examined 1975 data to learn how public broadcasting stations in Mississippi and North Carolina met the needs of the black audience.⁸

Other than the PBS regular national and station reports,⁹ little is

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**Journalism
Quarterly
Vol. 69, No. 3
691-701
Fall 1992
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known about today's public television audiences and how they have changed. But several pivotal technological and other changes in the last 15 years could impact PBS viewership.

First, the heavy penetration of cable ended reception hardships that many PBS stations had experienced with the UHF-TV frequency. More access to and better reception of PBS programs on cable meant more opportunities for increased viewership.

Second, when PBS went to satellite transmission for program

¹Robert J. Blakely, *The People's Instrument*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1971); Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, *Public Television: A Program for Action* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Douglas Cater and Michael J. Nyhan (eds.), *The Future of Public Broadcasting*, (New York: Praeger, 1976); "Public Television and Adult Audiences," *Intellect*, November 1975, p. 143; Wilbur Schramm and Jack Nelson, *The Financing of Public Television*, Report for the Aspen Program on Communication and Society, October 1972.

²Les Brown, "A Bigger Picture of Public Television," *The New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1976, pp. 31-32; Meg Cox, "PBS Looking at Sitcoms, Game Shows and Promotions to Enliven Network," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 1990, pp. B1, B3; Fred Langan, "When Canadians Talk, PBS Stations Listen," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 10, 1990, pp. 10-11; Mark Lewyn, "Is PBS Really Worth It?" *Newsweek*, Dec. 24, 1990, p. 10; Lloyd N. Morrisett, "Rx for Public Television," *John and Mary R. Markle Foundation Annual Report, 1972-73*, also reprinted in Cater and Nyhan, *op. cit.*; "A Proposal to Extend and Strengthen Educational Television: A Summary of the Commission's Report," from *Public Television: A Program for Action*, Jan. 25, 1967; Frank J. Kahn (ed.), "President Johnson's Message to Congress," in *Documents of American Broadcasting* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), pp. 582-584; Newton N. Minow, "How Vast The Wasteland Now?" booklet, Gannett Foundation Media Center, May 9, 1991; "Public TV Comes of Age," *Newsweek*, March 8, 1976, p. 72; "Public Television Tries to Break into the 'Big Time'," *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 23, 1976, pp. 45-46; John Weisman, "Public TV in Crisis: Can It Survive?" *TV Guide*, Aug. 1, 1987, pp. 2-11; John Weisman, "Public TV in Crisis: How to Make It Better," *TV Guide*, Aug. 8, 1987, pp. 26-40; Douglas N. Wood, "The First Fifteen Years of the 'Fourth Network,'" *Journal of Broadcasting*, 13:131 (Spring 1969); Richard Zoglin, "The Wisdom of Ms. Solomon," *Time*, Dec. 10, 1990, p. 76.

³D. Cater, "The Politics of Public TV," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1972, pp. 8-20; E. Coleman, "Our Troubled Stations — San Francisco: Trials of an Innovator," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1972, pp. 31-40; Julious Duscha, "Public TV: Why Still a Stepchild?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1971, pp. 8-14; Fred W. Friendly, "The Campaign to Politicize Broadcasting," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1973, pp. 9-18; Neil Hickey, "Public TV in Turmoil," *TV Guide*, July 23-29, 1977, pp. 2-9; Neil Hickey, "Public TV: Why Reports of Its Death Seem Premature," *TV Guide*, Dec. 11, 1982, pp. 12-18; Bernard Krisher, "What Public TV Can Be: Japan's NHK," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1972, pp. 21-30; Jack Lyle, "The Future of Public Television as a Specialized Alternative," *Decline of the Global Village*, (New York: General Hall Inc., 1976), pp. 105-06; Steve Millard, "The Story of Public Broadcasting," *Broadcasting*, Nov. 8, 1971, pp. 30-36; Wilbur Schramm, *The Impact of Educational Television* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).

⁴Federal Communications Commission v. League of Women Voters of California, et al., 468 U.S. 364 (1984). Seldom is the performance of a station deemed unsatisfactory. The major incident occurred in 1975 when the FCC removed the Alabama Education Television (AET) license because of alleged discriminatory practices. The FCC ruled that AET excluded programming oriented toward black viewers.

⁵The FCC can revoke a station's license as it did in 1975 when the FCC removed the Alabama Education Television Commission license because of alleged discriminatory practices. The FCC ruled that Alabama's public broadcasting station excluded programming oriented toward black viewers. "Alabama ETVs Lose Licenses for Lack of Service to Black Audience," *Broadcasting*, Jan. 13, 1975, pp. 23-24; "Hooks Charges Failures by Public Broadcasting, Inaction by Minorities," *Broadcasting*, March 24, 1975, p. 25; John J. O'Connor, "Does WNET Cater Only to Rich, White Intellectuals?" *New York Times*, Sunday, March 30, 1975, p. 25.

distribution on March 1, 1978, PBS programming control became localized. With such a change, local PBS program directors could select more appealing programs for their viewers than the ones created nationally for everyone.

Third, the super stations (TBS-Atlanta and WGN-Chicago) and various satellite signals (HBO, LIFE, CBN and PBS) became available by cable and satellite. Direct-satellite systems (DBS) with backyard satellite dishes became prominent. The new microwave technology options allowed viewers to explore diverse programming, including PBS shows. Previously, people overlooked PBS when the only other choices were ABC, CBS and NBC. The new signals carried programs that varied between the networks' shows and PBS. Thus, viewers regularly found themselves with more than three choices.

Fourth, the publication of expanded television listings and features in newspapers, including *USA Today*, and specialized magazines such as *TV Guide* allowed potential PBS viewers to read about PBS shows. Videotape sales and rentals of PBS specialized programs, including high quality programs such as "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour," "Masterpiece Theater," "Wall Street Week" and "The Civil War," boosted PBS awareness.

As a result of the various changes and developments that could influence PBS viewership, we wanted to know whether PBS television in rural Mississippi could become a part of regular viewing.

We felt that rural PBS viewers would differ significantly from non-viewers along traditional demographic variables, including educational achievement, when PBS started in rural Mississippi, but that both groups would be similar a decade later.

⁶Phillip O. Keirstead and Sonia-Kay Keirstead, *The World of Telecommunication* (Stoneham, Mass.: Focal Press, Butterworth Publishers, 1990).

⁷Robert T. Bower, *Television and the Public* (New York: Holt, Rineholt, and Winston, 1973); Cohen Mitchell Evans, "The Public Television Audience: The Phantom Elite," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1981; Jack Lyle, *The Public Look at Public Broadcasting, 1974* (Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting), 1975; Jack Lyle and Donna Ellis, "A General Analysis of the Audience of WETA-TV, Washington, D.C.," (Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1974); John W. Macy Jr., *To Irrigate a Wasteland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Maxwell McCombs, "ETV Audience Preferences for Information and Culture," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 12:155-158 (Spring 1968); "Mississippi ETV Survey," Report, University of Mississippi, Summer 1975; "The PBS Audience," PBS Memo, March 1975; "The Audience of WDCN-TV," Nashville, Tenn., (Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1974); Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle and Ithiel de Sola Pool, *The People Look at Educational Television*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1963); *Progress: The Plan of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television*, (Jackson, Miss: The Mississippi Authority for Educational Television, 1970); Schramm, *The Impact of Educational Television*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Robert L. Stevenson, "Use of Public Television by Blacks," *Journalism Quarterly*, 56:141-147 (Spring 1979); Peter Spain, "An Analysis of the Audiences of WNET, Channel 13 in New York," (Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1974); "Survey Studies Public-TV Viewer," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1976, p. 46. Also, See Notes: 1,3.

⁸Stevenson, *op. cit.*

⁹*National Audience Report*, PBS Research, January 1989; *Station Audience Report*, PBS Research, January 1989; *National Audience Report*, PBS Research, January 1990; *Station Audience Report*, PBS Research, January 1991.

We therefore hypothesized:

1. Rural PBS viewers would differ significantly in the first period from non-viewers along traditional demographic variables but would be similar in the second decade.
2. PBS viewers with a higher level of educational achievement would differ significantly in the first period from non-viewers but would not vary in the second decade.
3. The PBS audience would change drastically in viewership from one decade to the next.
4. PBS viewers and non-viewers would differ significantly in the first period from non-viewers as to their use of commercial television but would not vary in the second decade.
5. Respondents with cable service would have a higher PBS viewership than non-subscribers.

Method

This case study looked at the television viewing patterns and characteristics of the PBS audience in the Oxford, Mississippi, area in two different time periods. We selected the area because the educational level of residents is considerably higher than that of state residents as a whole.¹⁰ Oxford is a rural community in northern Mississippi where residents, excluding the University of Mississippi faculty and families, seldom move or travel outside the Mid-South area.¹¹

One of Mississippi's major PBS broadcasting towers situated near Oxford eliminated technical reception difficulties. Therefore, reception problems were less likely to keep residents from watching public television programs,¹² though PBS is entirely UHF in the state.

Moreover, Oxford residents had access to cable programs since 1968 and to the Mississippi public television network since 1972. PBS programming is a part of the basic cable package. The cable penetration in both time periods remained about 50%.¹³ The national penetration for cable was about 15% in 1977 and at least 50% in 1989.¹⁴

The same questionnaire¹⁵ was used in both time periods. In the second survey, we added questions about race, cable subscriptions and residence. Of the 250 randomly selected respondents in 1977, 176 were non-viewers and 70 were viewers. Four persons without a television set were eliminated from the 1979 sample. In 1989, 343 randomly selected

¹⁰Ellen S. Bryant and Joanne Clarke, *Mississippi Counties: Some Social and Economic Aspects*, Department of Sociology, Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, 1977, Oxford, Miss.; and analysis reports of Mississippi population data from the 1970 Census, the 1980 Census and the 1990 Census, Center for Population Studies, University of Mississippi, Oxford, Miss.

¹¹Karen Crossno Streit, "A Lifestyle of Newspaper Usage of the Oxford Eagle in Oxford, Mississippi," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1982; John W. Windhauser, Mark Barden and Tim Viner, "How Mississippians Use Their Newspapers and Other Media," report presented before the Mississippi Press Association, Biloxi, Miss., June 1981.

¹²The PBS stations are WKNO-TV (Memphis), WMAA-TV and WMAV-TV, station affiliates of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television (Mississippi ETV) Network. WKNO is community-owned and operated by the Memphis Community Television Foundation. WMAA-TV and WMAV-TV are state owned and operated. All three stations have in-school programs during the day and broadcast adult-oriented evening programs. Also, see: Margaret Quincy Stone Tohill, "Mississippi Educational Television, 1952-1974," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1974.

people were surveyed, but only 283 completed the entire interview. In that group, only 90 respondents were coded as non-viewers, and 193 were viewers.

Results

We found that public television viewers from the first to the second period had assimilated that medium into their lives in such a way that selective viewing was a regular part of their television usage. PBS viewers watched just as much commercial television in general, daytime and evening, as did non-viewers.

More importantly, the proportions of viewers and non-viewers in the first study shifted emphasis more than a decade later. Public television in 1989 had become a regular part of television viewing patterns. Many non-viewers occasionally watched a program or a movie on public television.

Commercial Television. Contrary to expectations, results showed that public television viewers and non-viewers were similar in their television viewing patterns. For example, a significantly higher proportion of public television households in the 1977 survey (87.1%) watched television before 6 p.m. than did non-public television households (74.4%) but no real difference existed 12 years later.

Wide differences between PBS and commercial television audiences were minimized when the PBS audience shifted from 29% regular viewership to 70%. As a result, differences became blurred because only a few people watched only one kind of programming. Adults in both time periods watched more commercial television during the day and evening than did children or teen-agers.

An average viewing day in both surveys was about six hours. About 63% of the daytime viewers were adults, 17.1% were children and 15.6% were families viewing public television together. During the day, three hours or fewer for both groups was the average household viewing time. Adults watched more television during the day than did children.

¹³In 1977, about 2,020 of 4,000 homes in the city of Oxford subscribed to cable (*Broadcasting Yearbook 1977*), compared with 4,171 cable subscribers in 1989 (*Broadcasting Yearbook 1989*). However, in 1989, the possible cable households totaled almost 8,000 and included the rural areas surrounding Oxford. Heritage Cablevision started expanding its cable service in 1982 (Telephone interview with the manager of Heritage Cablevision, July 22, 1991). In both surveys, respondents were selected from the entire Oxford area, including the people who lived outside Oxford without cable service.

¹⁴D. Fanning, "Best Part of the Show Is Over," *Forbes*, Oct. 17, 1988, pp. 101-105; Dean M. Krugmann and Roland Rust, "Impact of Cable Penetration on Network Viewing," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 27:9-13 (October/November 1987). Jo Ann Tooley, "Database," *Newsweek*, March 18, 1991, p. 17. Also, see: *Ad Week's Marketers Guide to Media*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January-March 1989, p. 35, and *Ad Week's Marketers Guide to Media*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 1989. The Guide stated that cable television penetration of all TV households was 12% in 1975, 19% in 1980, 45% in 1985 and 56% in 1989. The A.C. Nielsen Television Index reported a 55.6% cable penetration of all TV households in May 1989 and 24.2% in November 1983.

¹⁵The questionnaire was patterned after the audience reports and questionnaires of the PBS and two public broadcasting stations (WETA-TV, Washington, D.C.; and WNET-TV, New York City). A similar approach was used by Stevenson (See: Note 7).

Overall, evening television viewing was high, 97.5% in 1977 and 99.3% in 1989. In both surveys more than 75% of commercial television viewers were adults, about one fifth were families, and the rest were children. More public television household viewers (98.6%) watched television after 6 p.m. than did non-viewers (94.9%), but the difference was not significant. The high number of viewers minimized and even eliminated the variations in viewing. The average viewing time for both groups was about three and one-half hours.

Viewers and non-viewers were similar in both surveys as to their choice of television programs. Regular public television viewers said they selected programs first by reading the television program listings, then followed either by habit or by flipping the dial. These results mean that we failed to reject the null hypothesis concerning commercial television use.

As for the importance of each mass medium, both viewers and non-viewers would give up magazines if required to give up one medium. Public television viewers ranked media importance to them in this order: books, commercial television and newspapers.

Non-viewers considered the same three as important, although in a different order: commercial television, books and newspapers. Viewers of public television would keep public television before books and radio, while non-viewers preferred movies.

Public Television Viewing. In 12 years, public television viewing in a northern Mississippi community changed drastically and supports the PBS viewership hypothesis. Results of the two surveys, as shown in Table 1, revealed that larger proportional differences existed between viewers and non-viewers. In the 1977 survey, a significantly higher percentage of respondents (71.5%) considered themselves as non-viewers, but that percentage significantly reversed in the 1989 survey. Viewers accounted for nearly 70%.

No viewership differences were found between respondents who lived in Oxford or outside the city limits. In the 1977 study, cable penetration was limited to the population (4,000) within Oxford, but in 1989, cable penetration extended into surrounding areas. That nearly doubled the population area and included all local telephone exchanges.

We also had hypothesized that PBS viewers and non-viewers would at first differ significantly along traditional demographic variables but would be similar the following decade. The patterns occurred for the demographic variables except for the income variable. Of the seven variables studied in 1977, income and marital status were not significant factors in PBS viewing, but 12 years later, both variables were. More importantly, we expected that cable service would have an impact on PBS viewership. That happened and in turn seemed to diminish some demographic differences.

Table 1
Characteristics by Percentages of Public Television Viewers and Non-Viewers for Two Time Periods by Selected Demographic Variables

	1977			1989		
	PTV	NPTV	Total	PTV	NPTV	Total
Gender						
Male	33.0	67.0	(103)	68.4	31.6	(114)
Female	25.2	74.8	(143)	68.0	32.0	(169)
	$X^2=1.81,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$	$X^2=.00,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$
Age						
18 to 35	32.8	67.2	(122)	67.1	32.9	(146)
Over 35	27.3	72.7	(110)	71.2	28.8	(125)
	$X^2=.84,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$	$X^2=.35,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$
Marital Status						
Single, Widowed or Divorced	27.3	72.7	(99)	60.4	39.6	(149)
Married	31.4	68.6	(137)	79.0	21.0	(119)
	$X^2=.48,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$	$X^2=9.78,$	$df=1,$	$p<.01$
Education						
Some High School or less	22.9	77.1	(35)	59.2	40.8	(49)
High School Graduate	21.8	78.2	(55)	70.0	30.0	(60)
Some College	20.0	80.0	(50)	69.9	30.1	(73)
College Graduate	42.9	65.2	(91)	75.6	24.4	(82)
	$X^2=12.13,$	$df=3,$	$p<.01$	$X^2=4.02,$	$df=3,$	$p=n.s.$
Income						
Less than \$20,000	27.8	73.2	(142)	63.0	37.0	(154)
\$20,000 or more	31.2	61.8	(137)	82.4	17.6	(108)
	$X^2=2.43,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$	$X^2=10.7,$	$df=1,$	$p<.001$
Occupation						
Professional	29.2	70.8	(72)	74.3	25.7	(109)
Blue Collar	37.1	62.9	(35)	65.9	34.1	(44)
Not Working	19.5	80.5	(128)	68.0	32.0	(103)
	$X^2=5.42,$	$df=2,$	$p=n.s.$	$X^2=1.51,$	$df=2,$	$p=n.s.$
Community Membership						
None	22.6	77.4	(84)	69.5	30.5	(95)
1 or 2 clubs	25.6	74.4	(82)	69.4	30.6	(101)
3 or 4 clubs	37.7	60.3	(73)	66.7	33.3	(85)
	$X^2=6.16,$	$df=2,$	$p<.05.$	$X^2=.11,$	$df=2,$	$p=n.s.$
Race						
Black	NA	NA	NA	60.5	39.5	(43)
White	NA	NA	NA	69.6	30.4	(240)
				$X^2=1.00,$	$df=1,$	$p=n.s.$
Cable						
No Cable	NA	NA	NA	59.0	41.0	(190)
Have Cable	NA	NA	NA	73.2	26.8	(78)
				$X^2=4.56,$	$df=1,$	$p<.05$

Gender. Public television viewers were not different from each other as to their gender. The viewership reported in both years was nearly

identical. Cable subscription in the second survey was the only difference, and it occurred only among the male respondents. Significantly, male respondents who had cable service were more likely to watch public television (76.3%) than males without cable ($X^2=6.73$, $df=1$, $p<.01$).

Age. The proportions of viewers and non-viewers in the age groups from the 1977 to the 1989 survey were reversed. The differences were not significant in either year. In 1977, 67.2% of the respondents between 18 and 35 years were the non-viewers, but in 1989, 67.1% were regular viewers. Age was not a viewing factor.

Marital Status. Viewers in 1989 were more likely to be married (79%) than single (60.4%), but in 1977, marital status did not significantly differ between viewers and non-viewers. Of the 104 single respondents in the second period, 85% were never married, and the other respondents (15%) were either widowed or separated. Only one-fourth in the 1977 survey classified themselves as either widowed or separated.

Other analyses of the 1989 data showed a significant difference among married respondents who were cable subscribers. They were more likely than single respondents without cable to watch public television, 85% to 15% ($X^2=5.09$, $df=1$, $p<.02$).

Education. Generally, public television is perceived as appealing to viewers of higher educational levels, and the 1977 results reaffirmed this usual finding. Yet, 12 years later, a vast departure occurred. A significantly higher proportion of public television viewers in 1977 attended college or were college graduates, but education alone in the 1989 sample was not significant.

Further results showed that in the second period a higher educational level and cable subscription were significantly related ($X^2=15.9$, $df=3$, $p<.001$). Respondents with a college background were the heavy cable subscribers and public television viewers.

Income. Only in the second survey did income become a significant factor. Of the 1989 viewers who reported a household income of \$20,000 or more a year, more than 82% were regular public television viewers. Respondents earning less than \$20,000 annually accounted for only 63% of the viewers. About one-fifth of the respondents from both viewer and non-viewer groups in 1977 had the higher incomes.

Occupation. A common assumption about public television viewing is that viewers have professional or technical positions. This was not the situation in either survey. Viewers in 1989 held more professional/technical positions, while in 1977 the higher proportion of respondents (37.1%) were blue-collar workers. In both years the differences were not significant. Only 29.2% of the professional group in 1977 were viewers. Twelve years later, there were more viewers with professional occupations (74.3%).

Community Membership. Community involvement is often defined as various activities in local clubs and associations with opinion leaders having memberships in many community groups. One perception of public television is that it attracts such an active group of people. This assumption was affirmed for only the early survey.

Data from the first Oxford sample revealed that 155 of the 239 respondents held membership in community groups. That group relationship was significant ($X^2= 6.16$, $df=2$, $p<.05$) in viewing public television. No significant difference was found for the second survey.

Next, we looked at the extent of participation in community groups. By eliminating the non-membership respondents, we looked at whether group memberships and participation in those groups made a difference. Public television viewers in 1977 were more likely to belong to more community groups and to attend more meetings within a month than non-viewers.

But in the second sample, neither group memberships nor meetings attended were significant factors. The data did not support the group relationships view.

Race. Although viewership of public television was lower for blacks than whites, 60.6% to 69.6%, this difference was not strong overall and was insignificant. To examine possible relationships between viewing and race, the eight demographic variables were entered into the analyses as various control variables. None of these was significantly different between black and white PBS viewers.

Further analysis among only the black respondents showed that not one of the eight demographic variables studied, including education, income and occupation, was significant. Data analysis of the white respondents showed only that 74.5% who were cable subscribers were more likely to watch PBS than non-cable subscribers ($X^2=4.49$, $df=1$, $p<.03$). No other differences were found.

Cable Service. Respondents who subscribed to a cable service or had a satellite dish were more apt to watch PBS programs. A significant difference ($X^2=4.56$, $df=1$, $p<.05$) was found between cable subscribers and non-subscribers. Nearly three-fourths of the cable subscribers were viewers compared with 59% of the non-subscribers.

Other results showed that public television viewers with cable service watched significantly more television ($X^2=4.85$, $df=1$, $p<.02$). Among cable viewers who were involved with four or more community groups, significantly more watched PBS, 86.2% to 13.8% ($X^2=4.56$, $df=1$, $p<.03$) than non-subscribers. The cable viewers also significantly attended ($X^2=4.69$, $df=1$, $p<.03$) more than half of their association meetings in the last month. We had hypothesized that cable service was a factor in PBS viewers' decisions and these results support this notion.

Appeal of Public Television Programs. Audience perceptions changed considerably from the first to the second study. Only in the first did both groups differ significantly ($X^2=11.36$, $df=1$, $p<.001$) as to the appeal of PBS, while in 1989 the two groups varied only slightly ($X^2=.95$, $df=1$, $p=n.s.$).

Nearly 63% of the 1977 public television viewers compared to 37.7% of the non-viewers felt that public television appealed to specialized groups. In the second survey, only 52% of the viewers to 60% of the non-viewers felt that way. Special-interest groups named in both surveys were the higher educated or children.

Other perceptions of the best programming topics also shifted. About 45% in 1977 and 31% in 1989 cited children's programs followed

by music and drama (23% in both years) and public affairs (2% in 1977 and 15% in 1989). Viewers in both time periods also thought that public television programs were watched mostly by people similar to themselves or their friends.

In both samples more adults watched public television programs than did children or families. Public television usually was watched by the 1977 respondents less than an hour. In 1989 viewership averaged more than an hour with more viewers. Viewers in both surveys said they selected public television mainly because of "appealing" or "specific" programming and because of children in the home. Movies and "specials" were named in the second survey as "specific" programming.

But educational value was the most important reason for viewers. It was listed by 34.4% in 1977 and 36.7% in 1989 as that aspect which they would miss most if they could no longer watch public television. Educational value was associated with "appealing" or "specific" programming.

In order of their preference, viewers from both surveys cited the best programs on public television as children's programs, music and drama, public affairs and "specific" Mississippi topics. As expected, nearly 90% of the 1977 viewers had significantly different opinions about the type of public television programs that were poorly done. Nearly half (48.8%) named music and drama programs, followed by public affairs (39%) and children's programs.

Twelve years later, nearly 70% of the viewers voiced no concerns with the programs. Most respondents felt that PBS in 1989 with its limited resources was meeting the needs of the Mississippi public.

Discussion

More than three out of every five respondents in the Oxford study were regular PBS viewers. This was a much higher viewership than that reported in other studies¹⁶ and a reversal of earlier research. Our study confirms the changes that we expected with PBS viewership.

Generally, Mississippi viewers and non-viewers of public television programs were alike on demographic variables. We had hypothesized that significant differences would occur, and that happened. Education and club membership were the only two variables that separated viewers from non-viewers in the earlier study, but they were not factors in the second one. Only marital status (married) and income (\$20,000) made a difference.

We also hypothesized that the two groups in the first period would differ significantly in their commercial television viewing but later would be similar. This happened for three possible reasons: first, there seemed to exist quality-oriented consumers who had assimilated commercial and public television programs into their viewing patterns; second, PBS gained acceptance with its specialized programs; and third, PBS shows presented as a part of the cable package became acceptable as television programming.

¹⁶See: Note 7.

It is interesting that PBS viewers in both surveys perceived themselves as typical PBS viewers but felt they were different from regular commercial television viewers. This was consistent with the opinion patterns found for non-viewers.

Oxford PBS viewers, including cable subscribers, watched more television, daytime and evening, than did non-viewers of public television. This viewing pattern changed only slightly when we looked at the amount of commercial television viewed by PBS viewers. In fact, this finding differs from early studies reporting that public television viewers watched less television in general than did non-viewers.¹⁷

One explanation for these findings is that PBS viewers found public television programming an essential part of their lives but were not "pure" in that they also found commercially oriented entertainment and specialized programs worth watching.¹⁸ In other words, viewing television became an integral part of their lives.

Second, a less clear-cut distinction existed today between non-commercial and commercial television programming. Public television, by offering a wider variety of programs, appeals to a broader and more heterogeneous audience than it did previously. Also, PBS programming today appeals to both general- and special-interest groups.

Third, because public television has existed in Mississippi for more than 25 years, television viewers are familiar with its programs by TV listings, advertising and program critiques. So they tend to watch at least some of its programs more frequently than television viewers did in earlier years.

Fourth, in 1972 when PBS programs in Mississippi were first aired, the Mississippi PBS stations were the undesirable UHF ones. The poor reception and technical problems associated with the UHF public television stations were eliminated for viewers with cable service. Reception problems in Oxford disappeared when PBS built a broadcasting tower there. It took time for viewers to become accustomed to the variety of choices on cable, and PBS obviously benefitted. An apparent increase in PBS viewership by cable subscribers seemed to diminish some demographic differences from the first to the second period.

Finally, commercial television is no longer disdained by persons who could be classified as public television viewers. More importantly, as television viewing became a primary activity for both viewers and non-viewers of public television, the differences between the groups are almost a blur. The future of public television viewership could depend on whether PBS programs are offered as part of the basic cable television package and whether PBS can continue to offer programs different from the other specialized cable channels.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸First evidence of this change was reported in a 1978 A.C. Nielsen Co. survey of television watching. It was reported that public television viewers generally watched a lot of regular, commercial television. See: *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Nov. 19, 1978, p. 13. Also See: Mitchell Evans Cohen, "The Public Television Audience: The Phantom Elite," *Journalism Abstracts*, 20:5 (1982); Richard Zoglin, "Goodbye to the Mass Audience," *Time*, Nov. 19, 1990, pp. 122-123.