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MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIETY DIVISION  
ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATION IN JOURNALISM  
AND MASS COMMUNICATION

# **Perceptions of "Amerika"**

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A persistent theme in the popular and scholarly literature on mass communication is the conviction that mass media exert powerful, even dangerous, effects on the public at large. In the aftermath of World War I, grave concerns were expressed about the impact that political propaganda and new techniques of psychological warfare might have on the citizens of modern democracies (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986). Recent concerns have frequently presaged the introduction of new communications technologies (Wartella and Reeves, 1985).

For years the existence of such perceptions were duly noted by mass communication researchers, but they were not regarded as worthy of study in and of themselves. Today this has changed. A growing number of researchers have begun to explore the nature and content of people's beliefs about the media and their perceptions of mass media effects.

The emphasis on perceptions of media effects can be seen in a number of recent studies. One group of studies has focused on understanding how citizens and professional communicators conceptualize mass media. McLeod, Kosicki, Amor, Allen and Philips (1986) explored dimen-

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sions of media images, while Fredin and Kosicki (1989) investigated the relationship between media images and attitudes toward the media. Other studies have focused on how professional communicators, notably consultants, perceive political advertising effects (Kaid and Davidson, 1986; Kern, 1989; Nesbit, 1988; Perloff and Kinsey, 1992).

A second group of studies has been guided by Davison's (1983) third-person effect hypothesis. The third-person effect suggests that individuals perceive that they will be influenced by mass media less strongly than will others who attend to the same media message. In Davison's words, people believe that mass media's "greatest impact will not be on 'me' or on 'you' but on 'them'—the third persons" (Davison, 1983, p. 3).

In recent years, a number of studies have examined various aspects of the third-person effect hypothesis (Cohen, Mutz, Price and Gunther, 1988; Gunther, 1991; Mutz, 1989). These studies have reported evidence consistent with Davison's hypothesis that an individual will assume mediated messages exert a greater impact on others than on the self. Unfortunately, these investigations do not provide much evidence of how the third-person effect operates in the real world: The majority of the studies used college students as subjects and failed to employ a real-life media stimulus to study perceptions of media effects. Furthermore, the preponderance of investigations focused on perceptions of news, which is only one of many dimensions of mass media programming.

The present study was designed to extend research on the third-person effect and on perceptions of media effects in general. The authors focused on an actual mass media dramatic series that was shown on network television to allow them to extend third-person effect studies into the domain of television entertainment. They focused on ABC's "Amerika," which ran for seven days beginning on February 15, 1987 and depicted the fictional portrayal of a bloodless Soviet takeover of the United States.

"Amerika" was noteworthy because it stimulated controversy long before it began its seven-day showing in living rooms across the country. Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union George Kennan lambasted the program in a letter to *The New York Times*. The Soviet and Pol-

ish governments condemned the series, and the Chrysler Corporation withdrew \$6 million in advertising spots. The most vociferous protests came from American peace activists who believed that the series constituted "dangerous propaganda" that could have a negative impact on U.S.-Soviet relations (Zoglin, 1987).

Concerns and perceptions of massive media effects have accompanied other special television dramatic series, such as "Roots," "Holocaust" and "The Day After." Inevitably, researchers discovered that the effects of these programs were more limited and more complex than observers anticipated (Adams and Webber, 1984; Cantor, Wilson and Hoffner, 1986; Hur and Robinson, 1978; Surlin, 1978). Indeed, a study of one of the most famous media extravaganzas – Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" – found that although the radio program exerted significant effects on affect and behavior, the effects were qualified in important ways by listeners' perceptions, religious beliefs and by personality factors (Cantril, 1940). Given that the impact of these special media programs are frequently overshadowed by people's fears and expectations, the authors believed that it would be more useful to approach "Amerika" from the standpoint of perceptions of its impact than from a media effects perspective.

**Third-Person Effect.** Based on the evidence supporting the third-person effect hypothesis, the authors expected that respondents would perceive that "Amerika" would exert a stronger negative impact on the average person's attitudes toward the Soviet Union and Communism than on their own attitudes. They also predicted that respondents would believe that "Amerika" would have a greater positive impact on the average person's feelings of patriotism than on their own. Studies of the third-person effect inevitably run up against the question of the accuracy of respondents' perceptions of media effects on others versus the self. While accuracy has historically proved to be a difficult variable to study in communication research (McLeod and Chaffee, 1973), it is nonetheless an interesting one and it has particular relevance to the present investigation of beliefs about "Amerika"'s effects. To probe the accuracy of respondents' beliefs, the researchers compared respondents' perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects and its

actual impact on their beliefs. They also examined whether "Amerika" altered the perceived salience of U.S.-Soviet relations as a problem facing the United States.

**Involvement.** In his 1983 article, Davison observed that people may be particularly inclined to overestimate the impact that mediated messages exert on other people when they have strong partisan views. Interfacing the third-person notion with theories of ego-involvement, Perloff (1989) reported that pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian partisans perceived that televised news coverage of the Middle East would sway non-partisans against their side and in favor of their antagonists. The "Amerika" controversy allowed the authors to explore whether these results could be extended to TV entertainment programs. The focus is on the perceptions of peace activists who had become ego-involved in the "Amerika" series. The authors predicted that activists' biased perceptions of the program's content, coupled with the general tendency to overestimate media effects on others, would make them more prone than other members of the public to assume that "Amerika" would influence attitudes toward the Soviet Union, Communism and patriotism.

Ego-involvement is not the only dimension of the involvement construct (Salmon, 1986). Individuals can also become involved in mediated messages because the messages are personally relevant (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981). In the case of "Amerika," viewers might find the series relevant personally because it tapped into their cultural identity as Eastern European immigrants who had suffered under Communist rule (see Korzenny, Armstrong and Neuendorf, 1979; Neuendorf, 1984; Neuendorf, Korzenny and Armstrong, 1980). Although the available research does not suggest a hypothesis regarding the impact that ethnic identity (such as identification with Eastern European countries) would exert on perceptions of "Amerika," it seemed a highly relevant variable to consider in the present investigation (see Korzenny, Neuendorf, Burgoon, Burgoon and Greenberg, 1983). Those who identify with Eastern European countries should possess a stronger personal connectedness with the fictional events of "Amerika," which should in turn influence their beliefs about its impact.

## Method

**Sample.** The sample was selected using random digit dialing techniques. Telephone interviews were conducted with 151 residents of Cleveland, Ohio for 10 days, beginning on February 18, 1987 (the fourth day of the broadcast). Interviews were conducted only with respondents who watched at least one episode of the series. The response rate was 51%. In addition, two other purposive samples were generated.

Peace activists involved in general protest activities against U.S. nuclear arms build-ups were obtained through "snowball sampling" techniques (N=30). One of the investigators personally contacted activists before they viewed the first episode of the series at a local nightclub. These individuals were later interviewed by telephone, and other activists were subsequently contacted upon nomination by their friends and colleagues.

Additionally, a sample of ethnic respondents (N=45) was assembled from the results of prior snowball sampling for a series of studies on ethnic communication patterns (Jeffres and Hur, 1978). These individuals included Eastern European and Russian immigrants (N=10), Asian immigrants (N=22) and others.

For most analyses, these samples were analyzed separately. For certain analyses for which the relevance of an individual's ethnic identity to the "Amerika" experience was deemed vital, the samples were reconfigured such that "relevant ethnics" (those of Russian or Eastern European origins) were extracted from both the general sample and the ethnic sample. This contributed 34 and 10, respectively, for a total of 44 "relevant ethnics"; others from the ethnic sample were dubbed "nonrelevant ethnics.")

**Questionnaire.** Respondents were asked to indicate how they thought the average person and the self would evaluate the three attitude objects (Soviet Union, Communism, patriotism) after watching the "Amerika" series. For example, in the case of an average person question regarding the Soviet Union, respondents were asked how they thought "the average person in this country will feel toward the Soviet Union after watching the TV series? Would you say they'll feel more positive, about the same or

more negative?" A follow-up question asked individuals who replied "more positive" or "more negative" to scale their answers on a 10-point continuum. The same question format was used to tap perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects on the self; order of self and average person questions was counterbalanced.

To explore the manner in which relevant ethnic affiliation affected the reading of a film text, two open-ended questions from the "Amerika" survey were broken down by ethnic status:

1. "I'd like you to complete the following sentence for me: I think watching the 'Amerika' series would make the average American think that Soviet citizens are:"

2. "Now this sentence: Assuming the average Soviet citizen had a chance to watch it, viewing the 'Amerika' series would make them think that Americans are:"

Open-ended responses to these questions were coded into discrete categories. The Soviet-image question generated six categories of responses (in addition to "unable to answer"), and the American-image question generated nine categories. Reliability coding by a second coder resulted in a percent-agreement score of 94% and a Scott's pi of .93 for question 1, and 78% and .74 for question 2.

To examine the effects the program exerted on perceived saliences, open-ended and closed-ended measures were used (Schuman, Ludwig and Krosnick, 1986). The open-ended question asked the respondent: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" The closed-ended question asked: "Which of the following do you think is the most important problem facing this country today—the high cost of living, unemployment, U.S.-Soviet relations, or government budget cuts—or if you prefer, you may name a different problem as most important." In addition to the four problems on the list, three more categories were created after the survey to accommodate a variety of other problems mentioned by respondents. These categories, derived from Schuman et al (1986), were social issues, complacency and various miscellaneous issues mentioned. The seven categories were then used as a coding scheme for the classification of responses to the open-ended question. The Scott reliability coefficient was .81.

## Results

**Third-Person Effect.** A 2 (general sample vs. peace activists) X 2 (average person vs. self) analysis of variance was performed on each of the three dependent variables. The sample variable was treated as a between-subjects variable, while the average person variable was a within-subjects factor. There were significant interactions ( $p < .01$ ) between the sample and average person factors for each of the three dependent variables. To clarify these findings, tests of the simple main effects were subsequently performed (Winer, 1971).

A third-person effect emerged for both sample groups on all three dependent variables. Respondents in the general sample,  $F(1, 173) = 30.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the peace sample,  $F(1, 173) = 33.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , believed that the average person would evaluate the Soviet Union more negatively after watching "Amerika" than they would. In a similar fashion, general sample respondents,  $F(1, 173) = 14.37$ ,  $p < .001$ , and peace activists,  $F(1, 173) = 28.35$ ,  $p < .001$ , also perceived that "Amerika" would exert a more negative impact on the average person's attitudes toward Communism than on their own opinions. Finally, members of the general sample,  $F(1, 172) = 5.48$ ,  $p < .02$ , and peace sample,  $F(1, 172) = 22.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , also believed that the average viewer would become more patriotic toward the United States than would they.

**Group differences.** Peace activists were significantly more likely than respondents in the general sample to believe that the average viewer would evaluate the Soviet Union more negatively after watching the series  $F(1, 175) = 4.57$ ,  $p < .03$ . However, peace activists did not significantly differ from general sample respondents in their perceptions of how "Amerika" would influence the average person's attitudes toward Communism or feelings of patriotism. At the same time, general sample respondents believed that "Amerika" would exert a significantly more negative impact on their attitudes toward Communism  $F(1, 177) = 6.40$ ,  $p < .01$  and a more positive impact on their feelings of patriotism  $F(1, 175) = 14.35$ ,  $p < .001$  than did members of our peace sample.

**Ethnic Group Perceptions.** Although small cell sizes prohibited a test of statistical signifi-

cance, the authors observed interesting differences among the three sample groups—"non-relevant ethnics," those in the ethnic sample but not of Russian or Eastern European extraction; "relevant ethnics," those of Russian or Eastern European extraction; and the "general sample" of all others. In terms of American impression of Soviets, the relevant ethnic group was most likely to give a qualitative assessment to this question. Only 9% of the relevant ethnic group was unable to answer this first question, compared to 31% of non-relevant ethnics and 15% of the general sample. In addition, relevant ethnic respondents were most likely to say that watching the "Amerika" series would make the average American think that Soviet citizens are "the same as we are."

In terms of perceived Soviet impressions of Americans, relevant ethnics were again unlikely to be at a loss for comments (only 14% were unable to answer); they were also more likely to give various "other" responses. Across both questions, relevant ethnics were most likely to infer impressions of cross-cultural similarity (i.e., "same as we/they are"). Interestingly, relevant ethnics were most likely to think that Soviet citizens who watched the series would think that Americans were rebellious and brave.

**Agenda-Setting Effect.** To determine whether watching "Amerika" had any effect on the perceived salience of U.S.-Soviet relations, the authors performed a 2 (viewers vs. non-viewers) X 2 (U.S.-Soviet vs. other categories) chi square, controlling for questionnaire format. No significant effects emerged from this analysis. Thus, those who watched "Amerika" were not more likely than those who did not see the program to perceive that U.S.-Soviet relations was the most important problem facing the country.

The authors also sought to determine whether an open versus a closed-ended questionnaire format exerted an impact on the salience of the various issues (see Schuman, Ludwig and Krosnick, 1983). To explore this question, a 2 X 7 chi square was performed, with questionnaire format (open versus closed-ended) and response categories (e.g., high cost of living, unemployment, U.S.-Soviet relations) serving as the independent variables. The analysis controlled for exposure to "Amerika." The results were signifi-

cant among both viewers,  $X^2(6)=15.34$ ,  $p<.05$ , and among non-viewers,  $X^2(6)=20.85$ ,  $p<.001$ . The high cost of living, unemployment and government budget cuts were more likely to be chosen as the most important problems facing the country on the closed-ended than on the open-ended questionnaire.

## Discussion

Two caveats should be noted at the outset. First, a limitation of the present study was the inability to determine whether perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects stemmed from the extensive media coverage—the "media hype"—that preceded the series or whether perceptions had their roots in exposure to the actual episodes themselves. It is certainly possible that respondents' beliefs that "Amerika" exerted significant effects on the average person were at least in part an effect of the news coverage that appeared in the broadcast and print media rather than a conclusion viewers came to independently. These beliefs also may have been strengthened with exposure to more episodes of "Amerika," although the study did not address this possibility. A second caveat concerns the samples. Caution should be exercised in interpreting the results since the randomly drawn sample was small (151), since the response rate was only 51% and since two small, separate purposive samples were used for comparative purposes.

Nevertheless, the results support the third-person effect hypothesis and they extend other studies by demonstrating that a third-person effect can be obtained in a sample of adults exposed to an entertainment television series (see Lasorsa, 1989). Consistent with Davison's hypothesis, the study found that respondents perceived that "Amerika" would influence the average person's attitudes more than their own. Although these results are consistent with the third-person effect, they are open to an alternative explanation. It is possible that respondents did not overestimate the impact that "Amerika" exerted on others, but instead, for ego-defensive reasons, underestimated its effects on their own attitudes. Although this cannot be ruled out, the authors are inclined to doubt its validity inasmuch as they found no evidence that "Amerika" exerted any effects on perceived saliences.

Contrary to initial expectations, personally involved peace activists were generally not more likely than general sample respondents to perceive that the series would exert a significant impact on the average viewer. Perhaps the controversy surrounding the series was so salient that it created a ceiling effect on perceptions of media effects (see also Schofield and Pavelchak, 1989).

Ethnic identification also influenced individuals' interpretations of the "Amerika" series; however, this conclusion needs to be accepted with caution because of the small cell sizes. Relevant ethnics were least likely of all respondent groups to have difficulty giving an open-ended assessment of how American and Soviet viewers would perceive the series. Apparently, ethnic identification made it easier to mentally access reactions to the "Amerika" series (Fazio and Zanna, 1981).

On a more general level, the third-person effect findings, coupled with the failure to find agenda-setting effects, indicate that perceptions of "Amerika" far overshadowed evidence of actual effects. These results suggest that viewers' expectations, perceptions of media effects and cultural frames set important limits on the impact that this highly-touted series exerted on the public's beliefs and attitudes.

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