

Prosocial Content in a Local Children's Television Program

A Case Study, 1972-2002

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify and evaluate prosocial content of a local children's television series News Six produced by WBGU-TV, Bowling Green, Ohio. A stratified random sample of 114 programs (228 news stories) broadcast between 1972-2002 was coded for story setting, theme, prosocial messages, and primary message attributes. Results of a nonfrequency content analysis indicate that portrayals of altruistic behaviors, such as helping, sharing, caring, and cooperation, composed the most prevalent group of story themes. Overall, results demonstrate that the News Six series is rich with community, school and family-oriented content. Analysis suggests that the three-decade success of News Six is based on a creative partnership between students, parents, teachers, community representatives, and television professionals

Keywords: Children, Prosocial, Television, Local, Content, Analysis

Introduction

THE AMERICAN MIDWEST is known as the nation's heartland, where values and mores are still intact—small towns and villages with Civil War cannons, Carnegie libraries, pioneer wagons, and covered bridges.¹ A native of Xenia, Ohio, Helen Santmyer created a moving and beautiful vision of the ideal midwestern community in her novel "Ohio Town," a chronicle of childhood memories and experiences. Santmyer's small town is characterized by a sense of community and is populated with caring adults. First printed in 1956, the novel went through several editions. This signaled the beginning of a reassessment of small-town values in cultural and public sentiments based on the disillusionment of life in big cities with their growing social disconnectedness and social anomie.

At the turn of the 20th century, life in the small towns of the Corn Belt was often portrayed by novelists with irony and even satire, as in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.² People were depicted as dull, dreary, narrow-minded, and helplessly rooted in the past; escape was seen in moving to a big city. Hollywood treated midwestern towns more kindly, skillfully juxtaposing small-town values and big-city vices in well-known classics like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Beginning with the 1960s and 1970s, public opinion polls registered a new trend toward the re-emergence of positive perceptions of pre-urban ways of life, due to a growing sense of social atomization in society.

Reviving the traditions of small-town communities began to be viewed as a possible solution. Thus, Santmyer's book became both a reflection and projection of an emerging trend.

At the start of the third millennium, a series of special reports about northwest Ohio communities in the regional newspaper *The Blade* showed that many people think about the closeness of small communities as something valuable and even priceless ("Small towns," 2002). The stories were based on interviews with a score of small-town citizens, along with letters and e-mails received from current and former Ohio residents. Most of the respondents talked and wrote with affection and love about a village or small-town environment where they were born and raised. However, post-war demographic and economic trends continue to be unfavorable to these places that are so dear to people's hearts. During the last decade, the population of small towns (under 500 people) in northwest Ohio decreased by 75%, and the entire demographic landscape of the area has undergone rapid changes.

In the 1970s, Margaret Tucker, a pioneer of community-oriented TV programming in northwest Ohio, saw a new way to use television to help the younger generation focus on the positive aspects and uniqueness of local communities. *News Six*, a children's television series for sixth graders, was produced in partnership with local communities by WBGU-TV, a public broadcasting station in Bowling

¹ See, for example, Noble, A. G., & Korsok, A. J. (1930). *Ohio, an American heartland*. Columbus, OH: State of Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

² Anderson, S. (1919). *Winesburg, Ohio: A group of tales of Ohio small town life*. New York: B. W. Huebsch; also see Lewis, S. (1920). *Main Street*. New York: Harcourt.



Green, Ohio. Many of the small towns and villages in this area of Ohio have no newspaper, radio or TV station and hardly receive any coverage by large media outlets. Tucker, director of the Northwest Ohio Educational Television Foundation (NWOET), brought together northwest Ohio students, teachers, parents, community leaders, and public television professionals to “focus on the unique and unusual attributes that made their communities special” (“News Six tradition,” p. 1). Broadcast since 1972, *News Six* has stayed on the air for thirty-five years and is one of the longest running locally produced and funded television broadcasts for children in the country. This case study examined a three-decade history of *News Six* and focused on the show’s unique prosocial content as well as the distribution of prosocial messages over time.

News Six Program

News Six is a school and community newscast aired in the Lima television market by WBGU-TV, Bowling Green—one of Ohio’s eight public television stations. WBGU programming can be viewed by approximately 270,000 households³ in the station’s coverage area.⁴ In *News Six*, students propose topics for their school’s episode of the program, research and write community news stories, videotape a short segment about their school, participate in the field production on-location, and host the show in the WBGU studio.

The format of *News Six* has changed with the times, reflecting the general trends in the development of television technologies. The show started as a simple newscast read in front of a camera and illustrated with color slides; later, short filmstrips and video segments were added; in the 1990s, the show was packaged into a magazine format and maintains this look today. Over the years, the program has included an array of different elements: “In Our Community,” “News Six Opinion,” “Our School,” “Kids View,” “Critic’s Corner,” “Trivia,” “Feedback,” “Pop Quiz,” and “Video Postcard.”

The applications of technology in *News Six* have evolved from taking still images with a 35 mm camera, to using mini-DV camcorders and the Media 100 digital nonlinear editing system. In addition to

a weekly 10-minute broadcast, *News Six* programs are currently webcast around the clock in real-time streaming video format at frame rates of up to 15 frames per second. The “Virtual *News Six*” website serves as a communication bridge between all *News Six* participants, teachers, schools, NWOET, WBGU, and northwest Ohio communities.⁵ This site contains additional stories with digital photos of student authors, story-related still pictures, story feedback, and digital video postcards submitted by students in high school.

Review of Literature

Defining Community

Since the end of the 19th century, American society had experienced a process of rapid urbanization. Industrial metropolises attracted thousands of workers and dramatically changed the way people lived.⁶ The current of migration to industry capitals from rural areas collided with waves of immigration from overseas, creating social turmoil in which traditional ways of living were frequently abandoned.⁷ Most importantly, people started to lose the ability to regulate their public behavior without the informal controls that in the past helped them live and bond together. In new urban settings, many old ties were broken and replaced with the impersonality and anonymity of urban life. With time, new city dwellers gradually moved from slums and tenements to apartment buildings and row houses, to ethnic and residential neighborhoods, and finally to suburbs. Along the way, after the wants and needs of economic and social survival were met, came the appreciation of community.⁸

Community has been defined in many ways. It can be viewed as a combination of two primary elements, namely, a “web of affect-laden relationships” between individuals and a “measure of commitment” (Etzioni, 1996, p. 127) to a set of shared values, norms, meanings, and a common past. This view of community as a rustic form of living is increasingly giving way to a new vision of communities as having

³ According to Nielsen Media Research (2002, p. 1), the Lima television market contains 268,000 TV households in the metropolitan and the surrounding area (16 counties) and is ranked 191 out of 210 television markets in the U.S.

⁴ The coverage area of WBGU includes a part of the Toledo television market reaching overall to approximately 1.3 million potential viewers.

⁵ The *News Six* website can be found at <http://www.nwoet.org/newsix>.

⁶ McKelvey, B. (1973). *American urbanization: A comparative history*. Glenview, IL: Scott & Foresman.

⁷ Keniston, K. (1965). *The uncommitted: Alienated youth in American society*. New York: Dell; Riesman, D., Glazer, N., & Reuel, D. (2001). *The lonely crowd: A study of the changing American character* (T. Gitlin, Foreword). New Haven, CT: Yale Nota Bene; Slater, P. E. (1990). *The pursuit of loneliness: American culture at the breaking point*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

⁸ See Greeley, A. M. (1977). *Neighborhood*. New York: Seabury Press; Jeffres, L. W. (2002). *Urban communication systems: Neighborhoods and the search for community*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press; Suarez, R. (1999). *The old neighborhood: What we lost in the great suburban migration, 1966-1999*. New York: Free Press; Young, F. W. (1999). *Small towns in multilevel society*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

a significant and distinctive place in modern social settings.⁹ Human communities of various kinds are being seen as something especially valuable that should be restored and preserved, and as something that could counterbalance social disorganization, personal alienation, and the moral isolation of people in post-industrial times.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is a growing understanding that community fulfills higher needs of belonging and social self-realization, introduces unconventional means of individual behavior regulation, and finally, creates a nurturing environment for the socialization of youth.¹¹

Community and Children's Socialization

Among the many virtues of small communities is a positive environment for raising and preparing children for life: helping them acquire knowledge of socially accepted rules, norms, and roles, as well as learning how to become valuable and effective members of society. Within communities, this process takes place under the close guidance of adults: parents, extended family, neighbors, teachers, religious and community leaders, and other members of social support networks. As one former small-town resident wrote, "Kids ran around town barefoot without a care in the world, but it wasn't just the parents who were watching them. The whole town was." ("Small towns," 2002)

Although this view of community may look idyllic, romanticized, and far from today's inner-city realities,¹² the concept of a nurturing neighborhood—urban or rural—where children can safely grow and develop has a profound meaning. In fact, the most successful attempts of community revival are based on the idea of creating a safe environment for families to nurture and raise children.¹³ It was not by accident that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a local TV program created to foster social and emotional growth of young children, grew into a national cultural phenomenon.

However, as indicated by a report from Bellbrook, Ohio in the *USA Today*, childhood is spent primarily indoors. Many parents fear the outdoors and prefer

the safety of their homes to the uncertainties of the neighborhood (Cauchon, 2005). The family, as an institution, is undergoing the difficult transition of attempting to adapt to the realities of two working parents and high divorce rates. With the changing nature of the traditional nuclear family and the declining role of other established socializing agents (i.e., parents, church), the community is challenged to step forward and invigorate its role as a source of constructive influence on younger generations, and renew its old function as a family support system.

Definition of Prosocial Television Content

Social scientists have considered prosocial beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors from varying focal points. Sociologists understand "prosocial" as pro-societal and contributing to general socialization; psychologists view "prosocial" more narrowly as a voluntary type of behavior that benefits individuals or groups (including altruism, helping, sharing, and cooperation) and often use "prosocial" and "altruism" interchangeably. Drawing on both sociological and psychological perspectives, communication scholars have adopted a broad approach that defined "prosocial" as "that which is socially desirable and which in some way benefits another person or society at large" (Rushton, 1982, p. 249). This study viewed prosocial content as content that performs a socialization function and promotes positive viewpoints and socially desirable dispositions in children and youth.

Previous Content Analyses of Prosocial Television

Most of the existing content analyses of prosocial examples on television¹⁴ have concentrated predominantly on determining frequencies of prosocial acts, for example, the average number of acts per hour of broadcasting (Smith et al., 2006). This approach developed under the impact of the Cultural Indicators Project, a systematic investigation of televised violence, which had been carried out for nearly three

⁹ Tam, H. B. (1998). *Communitarianism: A new agenda for politics and citizenship*. New York: New York University Press.

¹⁰ Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985/1996). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

¹¹ For example, Benson, P. L., Lefkowitz, N., Scales, P. C., & Blyth, D. A. (1998). Beyond the 'village' rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2 (3), 38-159; Booth, A., & Crouter, A. C. (2001). *Does it take a village? Community effects on children, adolescents, and families*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Christensen, P., & O'Brien, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Children in the city: Home, neighborhood and community*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

¹² Wilson, W. J. (1990). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Kemmis, D. (1995). *The good city and the good life: Renewing the sense of community*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

¹⁴ See, for example, Greenberg, B. S., Edison, N., Korzenny, F., Fernandez-Collado, C., & Atkin, C. K. (1980). Antisocial and prosocial behaviors on television. In B. S. Greenberg (Ed.), *Life on television: Content analysis of U.S. TV drama* (pp. 99-128). Norwood, NJ: Ablex; Poulos, R. W., Harvey, S. E., & Liebert, R. M. (1976). Saturday morning television: A profile of the 1974-75 children's season. *Psychological Reports*, 39, 1047-1057; Singer, D. G., & Singer, J. L. (1998). Barney & Friends as entertainment and education: Evaluating the quality and effectiveness of a television series for preschool children. In J. K. Asamen & G. L. Berry (Eds.), *Research paradigms, television, and social behavior* (pp. 305-367). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

decades by the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.¹⁵

While the majority of research in the area of prosocial television content focused on the “what” and “how many,” only few studies attempted to examine how prosocial content is actually presented. Lovelace and Huston (1983) suggested that the most effective way of transmitting a prosocial message is to present the prosocial behavior without any contrasting or antisocial behavior. Other methods such as prosocial conflict resolution and a dramatic story with a follow-up discussion or post-viewing activities can strengthen and reinforce the overall effect of viewing televised examples of good behavior. Stipp, Hill-Scott, and Dorr (1987) proposed to insert prosocial content in entertainment series in the form of positive character traits and prosocial themes embedded in the script. Jordan, Schmitt, and Woodard (2001) and Calvert and Kotler (2003) assessed the overall quality of television offerings for children by the prevalence of positive lessons as well as several other qualitative dimensions of prosocial messages, such as lesson clarity, consistency, integration, and applicability.

Overall, there is a lack of studies focused on the content, production, and distribution of community-based television programming for children.

Research Questions

Aimed to identify and evaluate prosocial content of a local children’s television series, the study raised the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the patterns of distribution of prosocial content in the series?

RQ2: What are the changes in the distribution of prosocial content over time?

Theoretical Framework

The social cognitive theory of mass communication (Bandura, 2002) provides a cornerstone for the explication of how televised messages are acknowledged and processed by the audience. Thus, a child can learn social skills and behaviors by consciously or unconsciously observing parents, peers, and teachers who serve as role models. However, children can learn not only from models in their immediate family and classroom environment

(parents, teachers, older siblings) but also from real-life models in the surrounding social environment (neighborhood, community). Electronic media also present a wide variety of role models with a range of both prosocial and antisocial modeling influences.

According to Bandura, “through symbols, people give meaning, form, and continuity to their experiences” (2002, p. 122). Symbolic modeling can occur at community and society-wide levels of environments created by modern communication technologies—including telecommunications.¹⁶ Bandura noted that televised influence could be best defined in terms of the content that people watch rather than the amount of time they spend with television. Among other factors that affect televised learning experiences, the theory identifies personal characteristics of the viewer, the social context, and the functional value of the models.

Method

Study Design

The study was organized in three phases: (a) defining the population and creating a digital archive of program master tapes; (b) nonfrequency content analysis¹⁷ of the series broadcast between 1972 and 2002; and (c) interpreting the results.

Study Population

The accessible population for the study consisted of all *News Six* shows produced and broadcast between 1972 and 2002 and recorded on videotape. Overall, 566 programs were located. Forty-one percent of all the programs were hosted by elementary and middle schools located in rural communities of northwest Ohio (2,500 people or less). Among those, 69% percent represented communities with a population less than 1,000.

Units of Analysis

In the present analysis, each story was viewed as a complete single unit in the context of a particular program. Therefore, while a single program was used as the study sampling unit, a news story was selected as the recording unit. A news story was defined as a single news item, feature story, or segment that was

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the Cultural Indicators Project, see Gerbner, G. (1972). Violence in television drama: Trends and symbolic functions. In G. A. Comstock & E. A. Rubinstein (Eds.), *Television and social behavior: Reports and papers: Vol. 1. Media content and control* (pp. 28-187). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., Signorielli, N., & Shanahan, J. (2002). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 43-67). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹⁶ Bandura, A. (2002). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (2nd ed., pp. 121-153). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

¹⁷ Analysis focused on the presence or absence of content attributes rather than their frequencies. See Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

introduced by a student anchor or reporter and contained information on a topic of interest.

Sample

The study applied a random sample of 114 programs (20%) stratified by decade. The located programs ($N = 566$) were first organized into an itemized list—a sampling frame, which was then subdivided into decades. Next, 20% of programs ($n = 114$) were randomly selected from each subgroup. Finally, because the number of stories in a program varied from decade to decade, two news stories from each show were randomly selected for analysis ($n = 228$).

Measures

Each news story was classified according to the following measures: story setting; story theme; prosocial message; primary message attributes and presentation strategy. Story setting reflected the social context in which the story was taking place, including family, school, workplace, and local or larger community. A theme was defined as a general subject matter introduced in a story and central to the unfolding of the story.¹⁸ Stories were also coded for whether the theme was implicit, (embedded, implied, subtle) or explicit (apparent, overt, obvious). A story was qualified as having a prosocial message if it contained a strong underlying idea that fosters socially valued attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. The classification of message content within other groups was based on the recommendations of the Concluding Report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development¹⁹ as well as the desired developmental outcomes for early adolescents identified by psychologists in specification of the goals of family, school, and community intervention programs.²⁰

Intercoder Reliability

The data collection for this study was performed by two trained coders. The reliability of coding was assessed on a pilot (20 stories) and a reliability subsample (50 stories) during the total data collection. Because nonfrequency measurements typically yield lower reliability, the acceptable level of intercoder reliability in this study was defined as

equal to or above .70. The percentage of agreement (Holsti, 1969) and Cohen's (1960) kappa were calculated using the SimStat version 2.04 statistical package (Péladeau, 1996). The percentage of agreement reached the 70% level for all variables. Although kappa reliability in several instances was lower than desired, it fell within the range of moderate agreement as defined by Landis and Koch (1977).

Results

Patterns of Distribution of Prosocial Content (RQ1)

Story Setting

More than one-third of all stories in the sample took place in the setting of a local community (37%), for example, at a fire department, local museum, library, or nature preserve. The workplace composed the second largest subcategory (29%); these stories depicted local farms, small businesses, and local industries. School was the context of the third large group (22%), while 8% of the stories happened at home, and 4% referred to a larger community.

Story Theme

Consistent with the findings from earlier content analyses of children's television programs,²¹ themes of altruistic behavior were found in the largest group of stories (23%). Thus, helping, sharing, cooperation, generosity and kindness composed the largest category of overall themes presented in *News Six* as noted in Table 1. The second largest group encompassed stories united by the theme of the social value of work (20%). As emphasized by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development report,²² children and adolescents have to develop an understanding of the importance of work as part of their general socialization. Among other prevalent story themes were personality development and character building (17%), preservation of the environment, cultural and historical traditions (11%), and the value of education and learning (9%). Further, the themes of social connectedness and involvement in socially valued activities, good citizenship, and cultural, ethnic, and religious

¹⁸ Adapted from Holtzman, L. (2000). *Media messages: What film, television, and popular music teach us about race, class, gender and sexual orientation*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

¹⁹ *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century* (Concluding report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development). (1995). Washington, DC: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

²⁰ Weissberg, R. P., & Greenberg, M. T. (1998). School and community competence-enhancement and prevention programs. In W. Damon (Ed.-in-Chief), I. E. Sigel, & K. A. Renninger (Vol. Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 4. Child psychology in practice* (5th ed., pp. 887-954). New York: Wiley.

²¹ For example, Greenberg, B. S., Edison, N., Korzeny, F., Fernandez-Collado, C., & Atkin, C. K. (1980). Antisocial and prosocial behaviors on television. In B. S. Greenberg (Ed.), *Life on television: Content analysis of U.S. TV drama* (pp. 99-128). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

²² *Great transitions*, 1995.

diversity were also found in sample stories. Story themes were predominantly explicit (77%), that is, apparent and understandable for young viewers.

Table 1: Distribution of Story Themes (n = 228)

Primary Theme	Percent of Stories
Helping, sharing, caring, and cooperation	23%
The social value of work	20%
Personality development and character building	17%
Preservation of environment, cultural and historical heritage	11%
The value of education and learning	9%
Social connectedness and involvement	8%
Good citizenship	6%
Cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity	6%
	100%

Prosocial Messages

Personality and Character

The examination of prosocial messages related to personality development and character building (n = 86) found that self-control, self-discipline, and self-reliance (36%) were portrayed more often than

other personality characteristics (see Table 2). None of the stories in the sample contained messages that emphasize courteous behavior, politeness, or good manners. These results corresponded with the values named as most desired for their children by 1,607 parents in a national opinion poll conducted by Public Agenda.²³

Table 2: Distribution of Messages Promoting Personality and Character (n = 86).

Story Message	Percent of Stories
Self-control, self-discipline, and self-reliance	36%
Thriftiness	8%
Moral soundness	11%
Academic achievement	3%
Physical fitness and good nutrition	4%
Civility	0%
Helping others	27%
Appreciation of arts and literature	11%
	100%
<i>Note.</i> The order of subcategories reflects parent’s preferences.	

Home and Family

A group of messages about home and family comprised the second category of prosocial messages included in the analysis (n = 38). More than half (59%) of the sample messages emphasized close family ties, 24% featured families working together, for example, in a family business or at a family farm, and 17% emphasized the importance of knowing family roots. However, the analysis revealed that

none of the stories underscored different roles of family members or children taking responsibilities at their homes.

Peers

The third group of prosocial messages examined in the study encompassed relationships with peers (n = 57). Engagement in constructive activities with peers (such as school-related or after school

²³ Farkas, S., Johnson, J., & Duffett, A. (2002). *A lot easier said than done: Parents talk about raising children in today’s America* (Report from Public Agenda). New York: Public Agenda. Retrieved November 25, 2002, from <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/parents.htm>.

activities) participation in community-based volunteer groups, and sports were highlighted in the majority of all peer-related stories (67%). Many stories depicted school programs aimed at gang resistance, drug abuse, and violence prevention (15%); other messages emphasized self-confidence (12%) and friendships (6%).

School

The results of the analysis demonstrate that school-related messages ($n = 83$) were distributed as follows: messages emphasizing team work (38%), initiative and creativity (25%), the importance of developing problem-solving and practical skills (24%), setting and achieving academic goals (11%), and assuming responsibility in learning (2%).

Work

Among work-related messages ($n = 95$), self-realization and pride in a job well done had the highest percentage (42%) of all messages highlighting the workplace. One-third of the messages (33%) promoted the viewers' awareness of various professional and vocational careers. The third largest subgroup included messages that stressed the importance of following safety rules at a job (14%). Other subgroups included messages about collaboration and teamwork (7%), and the critical role of education and knowledge at a workplace (4%).

Local Community

One-third of story messages related to local communities ($n = 164$) instigated interest in community traditions, history, and people (31%); another third encouraged the use of community resources, such as natural, economic, and intellectual (29%). The distribution of other subgroups included messages encouraging participation in community-based voluntary organizations and activities (10%); ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity awareness (9%); preserving nature and the environment (9%); helping the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged (5%); civic involvement (4%); and following rules and norms of behavior (3%).

Larger Community

Besides emphasis on local communities, the programs contained messages that linked to the larger community ($n = 41$). Among those, 45% were aimed

at the appreciation of national historical and cultural heritage; approximately the same number of messages emphasized that one's community is a part of a bigger world (26%). Nearly one-fifth (19%) promoted local landmarks of regional or national significance, such as the Rutherford B. Hayes presidential center in Fremont and the Air and Space Museum in Wapakoneta. Additionally, the sample identified messages directed at the recognition of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (7%) and understanding the value of freedom and democracy (3%).

Primary Message Attributes

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's criteria²⁴ comprised the initial basis for evaluating qualitative message attributes along five dimensions: clarity, salience, age appropriateness, involvement, and relevance. Many stories conveyed more than one message or layered messages, which made it difficult to make comparisons among stories and programs. For example, a story about a local farmer contained messages relating not only to the world of work but also to personality development and to the family. For the purpose of comparison, the study identified primary messages, which were given the greatest prominence in a story. An examination of the total sample revealed that 72% of the primary messages were clear and understandable, 53% were salient, that is, prominent and easily recognizable or standing out, 70% were presented in an engaging way, and that all were age appropriate and relevant to the students' lives.

Changes in the Distribution of Prosocial Content over Time (RQ2)

Distribution of Story Themes over Time

The results of a three-decade comparison of prosocial themes in the sample are presented in Table 3. Overall, the distribution of themes was balanced and consistent over time, with three most prevalent groups of themes: helping and caring, the social value of work, and preservation of the environment and culture. Perhaps, the biggest change in the distribution of themes across the decades can be found in the high percent of themes related to helping, sharing, and cooperation featured in the 1970s and the predominance of themes related to the world of work in the later years. During the 1980s and 1990s, the stories integrated more themes emphasizing the social value of work, and the

²⁴ See Jordan, A. B., Schmitt, K. L., & Woodard, E. H., IV. (2001). Developmental implications of commercial broadcasters' educational offerings. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 22, 87-101; Jordan, A. B., & Woodard, E. (1998, May). Growing pains: Children's television in the new regulatory environment. In A. B. Jordan & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *Children and television: The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557 (pp. 83-95). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

program focus shifted toward general socializing content.

Table 3: Distribution of Prosocial Themes by Decade (n = 228).

Story Theme	1970s	1980s	1990-2002
Good citizenship	17%	4%	6%
Social connectedness and involvement	8%	13%	12%
Helping, sharing, caring, and cooperation	25%	17%	19%
The value of education and learning	12%	8%	10%
Personality development and character building	8%	6%	9%
The social value of work	4%	34%	24%
Preservation of environment, cultural and historical heritage	23%	13%	14%
Cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity	3%	5%	6%
	100%	100%	100%
	n = 52	n = 92	n = 84

Distribution of Primary Messages over Time

Another trend relates to the general distribution of primary story messages over a period of three decades. While the overall percentage of school and peer related messages decreased, the proportion of community, personality, and work related messages

increased (see Figure 1). By depicting the world of work and demonstrating positive characters and role models involved in productive work at a local business, farm, or factory, *News Six* contributes to children’s socialization into the community and larger society.

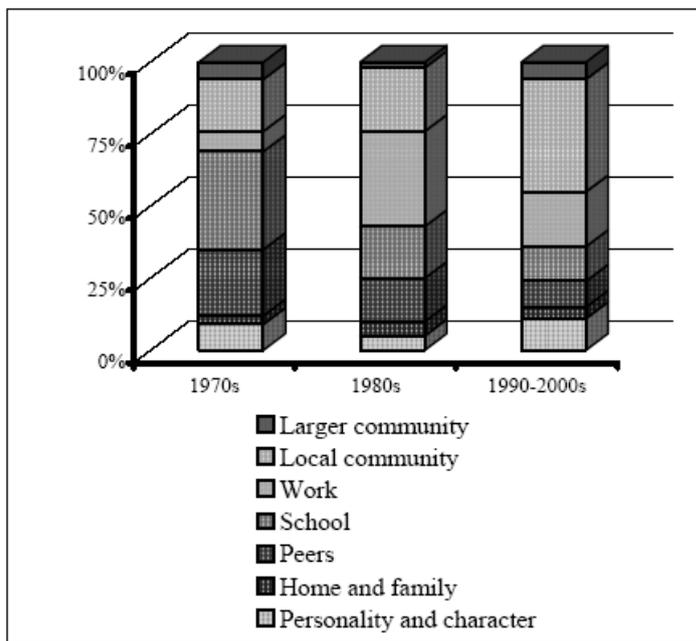


Figure 1: Distribution of Primary Messages by Decade

Overall, the results of this case study demonstrate that the *News Six* series is rich with community, school and family-oriented content. Between 1972 and 2002 the program depicted a variety of aspects of community life ranging from economic and social commitments, civic and voluntary participation, to sports and leisure. A cross-decade examination of prosocial themes and messages suggests that in 1972-2002, *News Six* evolved from a school and

community newscast to a community-oriented television program.

Discussion

It is widely acknowledged that local television programs chronicle neighborhood and community events, contribute to the understanding of area history, and act as catalysts for civil discourse on the

issues and problems that face local communities.²⁵ Even though public television is generally considered as a stronghold of the ethic of localism,²⁶ with its principles embedded into the bedrock of public television's community service, it exhibits a reduction trend in local production. The majority of public TV stations tend to rely on pre-packaged programming feeds from centralized distributors.²⁷ In competition with nationally and regionally distributed programming, the production of local public TV programs has continuously declined.²⁸ The fact that *News Six* has withstood three decades of a general decrease in local production suggests that it has found not only its niche in WBGU programming but also within the communities it serves.

If television is a mirror of society, *News Six* has reflected community life in a truly unique way. The *News Six* broadcasts between 1972 and 2002 compose valuable cultural and communication artifacts, and present a wealth of research material. Community-oriented programs such as *News Six* not only teach local history and traditions, but also portray characters who promote community values and serve as positive role models for young viewers. The success *News Six* has had in keeping children's interest in community traditions, landmarks, and events indicates a direction community-based children's television programming can take in the future.

In the first half of the 20th century, urban sociologists from the University of Chicago created a grand vision of the progressive future of urban metropolises as "great communities" made up of

pluralistic and diverse small entities.²⁹ Instead, the subsequent decades brought a concentration of poverty, unemployment, and crime to the inner cities; suburban sprawl to the metropolitan areas, and an overall high degree of social disconnectedness in society.³⁰ The reshaping of urban and metropolitan areas has therefore become an issue of national significance.³¹ Can close-knit, inter-reliant communities be planted and developed in urban neighborhoods? The question is still being debated with strong arguments on both sides. As Hummon (1990) indicated, discussions of small-town values and big-city attitudes reflect the ongoing societal discourse about individualism versus social solidarity, self-interest and collectivity, and the role of pleasure and social responsibilities in people's lives.

This study suggests that building sustainable and inclusive communities in big cities can be grounded in the small-town democratic and communal experiences that so fascinated Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited America in the 1830s. Community-based and community-oriented channels of communication can play a vital role in community revival.³² Social science researchers have accumulated convincing evidence of the media's importance in the communication system of a community.³³ Local media productions for youth can help communities pull together, rediscover their identity, as well as preserve social cohesiveness. Future research should focus more extensively on how community-oriented and locally produced programs can direct grassroots efforts to create a nurturing social environment where

²⁵ Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. (1967). *Public television: A program for action* (The report and recommendations of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television). New York: Harper and Row; Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting. (1978). *A public trust: The report of the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Public Broadcasting*. New York: Bantam Books.

²⁶ Witherspoon, J., & Kovitz, R. (with Avery, R. K., & Stavitsky, A. G.) (2000). *A history of public broadcasting*. Washington, DC: Current, p. 94.

²⁷ Somerset-Ward, R. (1998). American public television: Programs—now, and in the future. In E. M. Noam & J. Waltermann (Eds.), *Public television in America* (pp. 95-112). Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Foundation.

²⁸ See Katzman, N. (1974). *Public television program content: 1974*. Washington, DC: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, p. 23; Witherspoon, J., & Kovitz, R., 2000, p. 94.

²⁹ Baran, S. J., & Davis D. K. (1999). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

³⁰ For instance, Bellah et al., 1985/1996, *Habits of the heart*; Meyers, D. G. *The American paradox: Spiritual hunger in an age of plenty*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000; Putnam, R. D. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000; Skocpol, T. (2004). *Diminished democracy: From membership to management in American civic life*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

³¹ Jeffres, L. W. (2002). *Urban communication systems: Neighborhoods and the search for community*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press; Katz, B. (2002). *Smart growth: The future of the American metropolis?* London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics. Retrieved January 30, 2007, from <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/CASEpaper58.pdf>.

³² Hattemer, B., & Showers, R. (1995). Prosocial programming by the media can be effective. In C. Wekesser (Ed.), *Violence in the media* (pp. 86-93). San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press.

³³ See, e.g., Berelson, B. (1949). What missing the newspaper means. In P. F. Lazarsfeld & F. N. Stanton (Eds.), *Radio research 1948-49* (pp. 111-129). New York: Basic Books; Hollander, E., & Stappers, J. (1992). Community media and community communication. In N. Jankowski, O. Prehn, & J. Stappers (Eds.), *The people's voice: Local radio and television in Europe* (pp. 16-26). London: John Libbey; Howley, K. (2005). *Community media: People, places, and communication technologies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Jankowski, N. W. (2002). Creating community with media: History, theories and scientific investigations. In L. A. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *Handbook of new media: Social shaping and consequences of ICTs* (pp. 34-49). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Lundby, K. (1992). Community television as a tool of local culture. In N. Jankowski, O. Prehn, & J. Stappers (Eds.), *The people's voice: Local radio and television in Europe* (pp. 27-41). London: John Libbey.

children and adolescents can learn prosocial attitudes and beliefs.

By initiating the link between school, family, and community,³⁴ local media can facilitate a partnership that is beneficial for everyone involved. The old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child" can provide a helpful roadmap for community gathering

initiatives. Society obviously cannot recreate Helen Santmyer's and Norman Rockwell's small-town civilization. However, nothing prevents 21st century America from re-evaluating its past traditions and moving away from the "global village" rhetoric to creating healthy and safe social environments in rural communities and urban neighborhoods.

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³⁴ Bellah, R. N. (1996). Families in the context of community. In P. Voydanoff (Ed.), *Families and communities in partnership* (pp. 3-18). Lanham, MD: University Press of America; Gonzales-Mena, J. (2002). *The child in the family and the community* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill; Bertens, H., & D'haen, T. (Eds.). (1995). *The small town in America: A multidisciplinary revisit*. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

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