

Shifting Perspectives in Studies of Alcohol in the Media

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The subtitle of this thematic issue might be "beyond counting sips and mentions". Research on representations of alcohol in the media, and particularly on television, in the last decade or so has included a number of ambitious studies, in various countries, coding well-designed samples of media material in terms of distributions of drinking acts and mentions of alcohol (see references in Hansen, 1988). These studies, several of them performed by authors represented in this issue, have contributed considerable information to policy discussions, and have also taught us something about the specification of drinking in media representations by such factors as demography, situation, and role. But when a conference on "cultural studies of drinking" in Helsinki in 1985 (Paakkanen and Sulkunen, 1987) brought together researchers from several countries who had performed such studies, it became apparent that they no longer found such studies enough. This impatience can also be seen in Howard Blane's paper (1988) in the preceding issue of this journal.

One source of dissatisfaction may well be that most of the content-analysis studies are of cross-sections of material in one medium, one time-frame, and one culture. In this circumstance, the main direction of quantitative analysis beyond the initial description of results has been a comparison of the frequency of alcohol drinking on the screen and in "real life". While such analyses have served as a means of public health consciousness-raising in Hollywood and elsewhere in the media industries, they tend to depend on the untenable assumption that television entertainment aims to represent real-time real life, in which much of our time is devoted to such mostly nondrinking and nondramatic pursuits as sleeping, child-minding and working. The analyses take on a more interesting depth when a comparative dimension is available. The comparison can take many forms. Montonen's paper (1988) in the present issue includes a comparison of the prevalence of alcohol mentions across program formats on Finnish television. A comparative content analysis of representations of drinking across media appeared already half a century ago (Hart, 1934). Comparisons can be made not only with mentions of illicit drugs but also with tobacco, coffee and psychotherapeutics (MacDonald and Estep, 1985). Another possible dimension of comparison is cross-cultural; for television, an immediate difficulty here is that programs are eventually so widely diffused, so that much of the drinking on Swedish television, for instance, may be in productions made and set in the U.S. Gajlewicz et al. (1986) point the way to turning this problem into an opportunity, in their comparison of drinking in programs of different national provenances shown on Polish television. There is an obvious caveat to such an analysis: what is seen on the Polish or any other TV network from any particular national corpus is filtered through the economics of the entertainment market and the sensibilities of those buying and scheduling the programs.

Perhaps the most interesting dimension of comparison is over time in a given cultural context. There have been several interesting comparative analyses of representations of drinking over time, although mostly not yet concerning television -- for instance, there is Linsky's pioneer study (1970) of the image of the alcoholic in American popular magazines 1900-1966, Paakkanen's study (1986) of alcohol in Finnish literature in the 1910s and 1970s, and Herd's study (1986) of alcohol problems in film plots of the 1920s and 1960s. With the 11-year sampling of

American prime-time television now available to Breed, De Foe and their coworkers, tracking of changes in time becomes possible, as is evident in some comments in their paper (1988) in this issue.

As can be seen in several of the papers in this issue, the dissatisfaction with quantitative content analyses has pushed researchers in new directions in studying representations of alcohol in what we might term "prepared communications" (Winick, 1983). One logical path forward, advocated particularly by Montonen (1988) and Hansen (1988) among the authors of the papers which follow, is to add the dimension of the audience's interpretation of the program, song or other "prepared communication". From this perspective, what has been a source of difficulty in the content analysis studies -- that interrater reliabilities are often quite low (see Montonen, 1988) -- becomes a source of data in its own right. The importance of the audience's interpretation is especially obvious in an international framework: clearly, we might expect that Texans, Poles and Kuwaitis, for instance, would make something different out of an episode of "Dallas".

In my view, studying audience interpretations of media materials is a direction which will prove rather difficult to follow. It is likely to involve data collection in one of two well-developed traditions -- either experimental social psychology or public opinion research -- both of which involve skills other than those used in content analyses. Furthermore, as Hansen's critique of experimental "effects" studies implies, a small-scale study of interpretations of an isolated scene in a laboratory environment will not be sufficient. While conventional content analysis studies can be carried out with limited resources (particularly in the age of the video recorder), studies of audience effects and audience interpretations are likely to involve relatively "big science". To study interpretations of a particular film or show may be a manageable proposition: a classic example is Winick's (1963) study of audience interpretations of a "drug problems" film, and market researchers do rough-and-ready studies of audience interpretations with "focus groups" and other methods every day. But it would be a far more complex proposition to add a dimension of audience interpretations to anything like the range of works included in the usual content analysis study -- e.g., an adequate sampling of a whole season of TV programming.

A second path, proposed by Blane (1988), is to focus more explicitly on studies of the effects of media materials. Like Hansen (1988), he is critical of the existing "effects" literature, and makes some suggestions for technological innovations in these studies. But he stresses, again like Hansen, the importance of paying attention to long-term effects and to the cumulation of influences over time. Blane thus calls for longitudinal studies to establish the long-term influence of media messages on alcohol in the individual lifecourse. Considering the multiplicity of messages to which we are exposed, and such complicating factors as historical change and subcultural variations, this may be setting a task which is beyond our analytical reach.

A third, more modest path, exemplified by several of the papers in this issue, is to pay more attention to qualitative dimensions in analysis. Of course, there is nothing new about the idea of an interpretative analysis of literary or other "prepared communications", nor about looking at alcohol in such communications (for examples, see the thematic issue on "Alcohol in Literature: Studies in Five Cultures", vol. 13, no. 2 of Contemporary Drug Problems). What is somewhat novel about papers like Heilbronn's (1988) and De Foe and Breed's (1988) in the present issue is that the material they draw on is broadly spread and not idiosyncratically selected; in their qualitative analyses they are drawing on a systematic sampling of a known population of TV programs.

To move beyond the constraints and conventions of the content analysis studies, however, invites an explicit attention to what the analysis is aiming to accomplish. Studies of alcohol in the media can approach the topic from several directions.

(1) One approach, quite common in literary studies, is to focus on the interplay of the author's life and work. Such studies may look in either direction: either at how the representation of alcohol in the work tells us something about the author's life, or at how the author's life experiences influence and inform the work. At a more aggregate level, we can study the place of drinking or of alcoholism in artistic movements or literary generations (e.g. Koski-Jännes, 1985; Room, 1984). More generally, representations of drinking in the works can be viewed as evidence on the drinking habits and problems of the special occupational subcultures of the arts.

(2) The interest may be in viewing the materials as cultural products which illuminate the place of alcohol in a particular culture at a particular time. Cruz's article (1988) in the present issue is a good example of this perspective -- although it remains an open question whether the unexpected vision of alcohol that he finds was a general property of black culture in the 1920s or was more specific to blues songwriters and singers. Some analyses consider materials extending over a period of substantial changes in a culture. Such analyses may be interested in the "deep structure" of the culture's understanding of drinking -- in what is constant despite the changes (e.g., Falk and Sulkunen, 1983). More commonly, the materials are analyzed for changes in the cultural understanding of drinking (e.g., Linsky, 1970; Paakkanen, 1986; Herd, 1986).

(3) The analysis may be more interested in the function and significance of drinking references in the construction of the artistic work. Heilbronn's paper (1988) in this issue, for instance, focuses on alcohol's use as a symbolic code in setting the scene, in building characterizations, and in the development of the plot. In the context of such materials as U.S. TV sitcoms, such analyses properly assume a sober, external perspective on the portrayals of drinking and drunkenness. For some materials, however, analysis is complicated by the fact that the perspective and even the structure of the work may be seeking to portray experiences of drunkenness from within (Cahannes, 1981).

(4) Studies may focus on the effects of the work on the audience. In their review papers in this issue, both Hansen (1988) and Partanen (1988) take this perspective, which has indeed been the primary interest of most work on alcohol in the media (e.g., Dorn and South, 1983; Smart, 1988).

It is often assumed that only this last perspective is relevant to those interested in public health policies on alcohol. In this perspective, content analyses are useful primarily to describe and to monitor what is being put before the audience. Given this focus, it is no accident that most studies are of what is seen as the most pervasive and popular medium -- for the 1960s-1980s, at least, television. Researchers' attention to other media has tended to be limited to advertising and counter-advertising, or to media with presumably vulnerable special audiences (comic books, college newspapers).

In fact, the other perspectives are also highly relevant to a public health interest. As Partanen (1988) notes, De Foe and Breed's "cooperative consultation" service has demonstrated the practical utility of someone with a detailed understanding of the third perspective -- of the way drinking references are casually used in the construction of a screenplay -- representing public health interests to those making TV shows. Studies in the first perspective may suggest approaches to intervention and prevention in an occupational subculture which is of special public health

significance not only because of the high toll of its drinking habits in some circumstances (Davis, 1986; Room, 1988b), but also because of its propensity to project its experiences and perspectives into the public forum (Room, 1989). Studies in the second perspective, particularly those with a historical dimension, offer one of our best windows for studying the question of how large changes in the cultural position of alcohol occur (e.g., Room, 1988a) -- a question of obvious significance to public health.

While none of the four perspectives is directly antithetical to the others, each of them acts as a disturbing influence on the others, putting in question straightforward analyses from the other perspective. To the extent a film's stance reflects only a narrow Hollywood circle (perspective 1), can we really take it as reflecting broader American culture (perspective 2)? Conversely, do writings for a mass market necessarily have much to do with the life-experiences of their creators? If going to get a drink often serves as a kind of punctuation point in the action -- a convenient way of marking the end of a scene (perspective 3), might the "wetness" of the material reflect conventions of the genre more than general cultural patterns (perspective 2)? Conversely, a television writer in Saudi Arabia would presumably pick another gesture to serve as the punctuation point for the action. If portrayals of drinking reflect general cultural patterns (perspective 2), then is the medium teaching anything about drinking (perspective 4) that the audience is not already picking up from other sources? Conversely, if the message the medium carries potentially reflects special "pedagogic" influences (perspective 4) -- whether advertisers, censors, or others -- then can the materials properly be interpreted as indicating general cultural patterns (perspective 2)?

Many studies of alcohol in the media acknowledge the existence of more than one of these perspectives. But in their design and their analytical framework, the studies are usually committed to only one perspective -- the other perspectives are referred to only in the caveats and nuances around the edges. Perhaps we are now at the point where a more synthetic effort can be made, with analyses that take into account and partial out the factors associated with the different perspectives. Concerning the second and fourth perspectives, for instance, it is commonly acknowledged that the influence of the media on society and of society on the media is likely to be reciprocal and dialectical. We can better understand such a process if we undertake careful studies of time-ordering, comparing changes in media presentations with changes in indicators of drinking patterns and problems in a given society. Do changes in media presentations tend to lag or to lead changes in behavior in particular segments of the population? Judging by the time ordering, do the media start new trends, or do they serve mostly as carriers of preexisting trends to new population segments? Do the media amplify trends in behavior in a given population segment? These are just some of the questions that can be approached with historical data, both qualitatively and quantitatively, as well as with contemporary content analysis data-series. Concerning the first perspective -- the influence of artistic subcultures -- comparisons across media in a given culture may offer some illumination; Hart's findings (1934) support the idea that the special "wetness" of the Hollywood community of the late 1920s that we know about from biographical sources carried over into the community's products. Of course, from the third perspective, the mechanics of movie screenplays may be what makes the movies an especially "wet" medium; here cross-cultural comparisons in the same medium would offer some evidence. Although the material at hand is presumably not adequate for a formal meta-analysis, we are at the point where we can begin to specify and test some models of influence and change which reach across the perspectives. It would be wise to pitch such models at a middle level of generality; we should not imagine that we

will find a single model of alcohol in the media and in society which reaches across all media, cultures and historical situations.

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