



TV or Not TV: What Is the Question?

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ABOUT a decade ago the Ford Foundation suggested that educational television was a versatile instrument for grappling with major educational problems of the day. In a 1961 publication¹ it listed at least five problems to which it felt ETV held possible solutions: the shortage of teachers, the quality of teaching, geographic imbalances, the explosion of knowledge, and slow and fast students. In the days of ETV's infancy great promise was held for its potential in overcoming these problems. Great enthusiasm was generated both within and outside the educational community. What happened?

Informal observation suggests that many teachers and school systems have completely or almost completely "dropped out" of the ETV scene. Why is this? Some of the reasons are to be found in technical arrangements and organizational patterns, others may be inherent in the nature of the medium itself.

Any attempt to utilize television in the schools calls for an extensive initial investment in equipment. Yet, on a simple dollars and cents basis, a school system could easily equip many classrooms with receivers for

the price of one teacher for one year. Many made this investment—only to find the receivers gathering dust. Yet the informal observations suggest that ETV is used more often where receivers are readily available: one per classroom or one for every two or three classrooms. Apparently part of the decline may be attributed to limited availability of equipment. Yet, if this is the only problem, why have more receivers not been purchased?

Programming Problems

A more serious limitation relates to programming. This limitation is threefold, at least. Unless a school has multiple channels and video-tape equipment (and personnel to operate it) available, the teacher is locked into a schedule not of his own choosing and beyond his control. Few school systems have the resources available to provide the multiple channels, some on fixed program schedules and some available for teacher requests for specific programs. In this latter case, television programs could be used selectively

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¹ *ETV: A Ford Foundation Pictorial Report*. New York: Ford Foundation, 1961. Unpagged.

much as other media are used. This would undoubtedly be a more appropriate use than is commonly found. Combined with videotaping of both ETV programs and selected programs from commercial stations, a teacher could have access to up-to-the-minute information not generally available in other visual and audio-visual materials. This would unquestionably be a vast improvement and would have the potential for greater and more appropriate usage.

A second programming limitation relates to the sources of the programs. It takes little imagination to figure out the relatively high cost of producing even a single 20- to 30-minute program. On a continuing basis, this cost is certainly more than most school systems seem willing to pay. Few have elected to do this. The alternatives are either no ETV or the use of programs produced outside the local district or area. This is not without merit except that the school system finds itself with the same limitations now faced with texts, films, and other media.

Curriculum must be adapted to available resources rather than resources being adapted to the curriculum. In some instances this has a restraining effect upon curriculum improvement. Some schools have incorporated existing ETV program series into their curriculum and have used them as basic instruction. Given adequate availability of receivers and reasonably flexible time schedules, this is not significantly different from adoption of a given text.

In this regard, it would be unfair to expect television programs to meet more rigorous qualifications for appropriateness than are expected of other media, printed, audio, or visual. TV's major disadvantages would most likely be much higher cost, inability of the teacher to use the program when he wished, and unavailability for careful study prior to use and for replay of part or all of the program. Unfortunately, except for the factors of higher cost and flexibility of time, we have some evidence to suggest that our commonly used printed, audio, and visual materials are not employed under these optimal conditions by all teachers either.

The quality of educational television programs is quite varied. Since a careful analysis has not been made, specific comments on specific programs would be both unfair and unfounded. However, it is very likely that popular conceptions of quality would be changed if potential users had a clearer idea of the appropriate uses for various types of programs. Similarly, producers of programs could be more specific in identifying what might reasonably be expected from use of each program. This calls for a precision in production and use which, again unfortunately, is not commonly applied in education. So, perhaps, it is unfair to expect ETV to be subjected to qualifications and conditions not applied to other media and methods.

Conversations with elementary teachers new to the profession give little evidence of familiarity with ETV as a teaching tool. Except for occasional use of video tapes during practice teaching, few teacher candidates appear to have any experience with televised instruction. It is little wonder that they do not see ETV as a useful tool in their own teaching. This is not to suggest that they receive special course work in the use of ETV. Rather, appropriate use during their own educational experience might well serve as a model.

In-service education dealing with available equipment and programs would very likely stimulate more and more effective use of TV as a teaching tool.

The Real Question

When the above is considered, a curious pattern develops. To achieve the best that ETV has to offer requires considerable expense for equipment, channels, and personnel; and knowledgeable, imaginative teachers who are a cut or two above the average. Yet some of the initial problems with which ETV was thought to be able to deal related to the availability and quality of teachers. It would appear, in utilizing ETV, the old adage applies, "Them as has, gets."

All of the above is actually a prelude to the real question, "Can a mass communica-

tion medium be applied to individual needs in the process of education?" A subtle change has taken place over the past few years in the terminology referring to the use of television in the schools. ETV has become ITV, educational television has become instructional television. Does this mean that television is no longer viewed as an instrument for learning, but rather an instrument for teaching? If this is so, perhaps it is a sign that experience has made us more realistic.

We recognize television for what it is, an information giver. Obviously it has a potential for packaging the information in an attractive format. It can be dramatic, detailed, initially attention-getting, vivid. Yet what is its purpose? As a medium of mass communication, it is most easily used to instruct groups of children in a one-way deductive style using prepackaged content on a fixed time schedule at a fixed pace. This is diametrically opposed to what we know about how children learn. It is also at variance with the current concept of inquiry.

We recognize that interaction with teachers and other pupils is imperative in education, though not in instruction. Mutual feedback between pupil and teacher, pupil and pupil, is essential to improve understanding. We have recognized that both the cognitive and affective learnings are facilitated as children must personally and actively process information.

We recognize that prepackaging drastically reduces or eliminates the possibility and probability of feedback and processing. We know that, in spite of all our efforts, children are perversely so human that they learn at their own rates and in their own time. At best our efforts either bring focus, stimulate, or intimidate them into learning a little more or a little faster. The learner is still in control. His internal controls are quicker than and equally as effective as the on-off button on any TV set.

Individualizing instruction and inquiry are in vogue. We mouth them well and practice them some. Even at our present low level of this art and science it is hard to imagine television, as presently constituted, making a significant contribution for many pupils.

What Place for TV?

Has television in the schools a place in the education of today's children? Undoubtedly it will continue to be used by many teachers and school systems in its present format. This is so because many believe the primary function of education is the development of school-oriented skills and exposure to masses of predigested factual information dealt with at a relatively low cognitive level. For these purposes, it seems safe to say that many TV teachers are better prepared and make more skillful presentations than their classroom counterparts.

If TV is to become an effective adjunct to the learning process, it must somehow be available in different forms than we commonly know it today. Certainly more channels must be available with a greater variety of program segments from which to draw. How this can be accomplished is a technical and financial problem as well as an educational problem. Though it may be extremely pessimistic to say so, it is hard for us to believe that many school systems will be able to provide this level of service when they are still struggling with the problem of effective use of those old-fashioned instructional tools called library books, textbooks, films, and periodicals.

The problem is further compounded by recent interest in some type of cost-effectiveness accounting. According to Donald Mikes, former Staff Associate with NEA's Division of Educational Technology, there are no reliable research data available to support giving higher priority to ITV over other methods of instructional improvement. This puts television in the same category with much of the technology now available to schools.

We think ITV will do a better job but we are not really sure, partly because we are not certain of the purposes for which it will be used. We are not sure in our own minds, with any large measure of agreement, just exactly what education is, and, unfortunately, we in the field do not have a clear understanding of technology's limitations and potential. And so the dilemmas continue. □

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