

Reading TV: Today's Basic



Don W. Brown

Television, with its undeniable impact, is here to stay. Educators should learn to use the medium to their advantage instead of constantly decrying its content.

Literacy that is limited to print reading is inadequate for today's world of basics. Although printed materials will not lose their prominent position in education, we must deal with the realities of present TV. Easy access to the printed page, which occurred following the introduction of the printing press, parallels today's TV, with its convenient and intimate access to 204 million Americans in 73 million households. As reading print is basic for successfully comprehending the printed page, so reading TV is a true basic for successfully utilizing the visual moving page of this medium.

Television today shapes human dreams and future life styles even more precisely for the masses than yesterday's fine written literature did for the affluent, educated few. We must develop a combined television literacy that makes

the most of the components of effective listening, seeing/observing, and reading. No other mode of communication can approach the present capacity of television to transmit—through colorful visual imagery—the precise, the logical, and sometimes the quite profound. When we combine appropriate sound to expressive visual messages, together with other supportive elements, we seem to have the best of all possible present communication worlds. A true distinction between viewing TV and reading TV can be made. TV must be *read* and not just viewed. Viewing and reading are two different activities for the individual. Viewing takes a lower level of hearing and looking performance. Hearing is a modest level exercise that requires little or no conscious individual effort. We all hear sound input, but few of us regularly listen with studied attention and true

discrimination. Listening is a much higher and more sophisticated operation involving conscious, organized discrimination of sound-produced information. Looking, in contrast to seeing, is another comparatively limited activity. We perform this function from infancy. Seeing is a more intricate experience. It requires a meaningful structuring of the comprehensive visual incoming stimuli. Both listening and seeing are appropriate for our modern-day communication and TV reading.

Viewing TV suggests a casual, recreational, and relatively passive low-level relationship with the medium and its product. We use television as a diversion, a time-filler, and as an inexpensive entertainment option. Programs are designed with these primary goals in mind. Viewing is passive; reading TV is active. Reading television demands a studied, calculated, integrated activity of the highest intellectual order. It requires content worthy of the important time invested by audiences.

Like it or not, television has become the only real and used reading-related form of communication of daily significance for wide segments of today's viewing public. With program platters, laser transmissions, two-way video, and more advanced and complex satellites, it doesn't take a prophet to predict the future unless something dramatically and systematically designed is undertaken by authorities and leaders in TV and educational fields. Why is it that small children know Big Bird before their own grandmothers? Why is it that they can recite and sing various soft drink jingles before they have learned the simplest nursery rhymes? Why do their older brothers and sisters go around imitating the Fonz in gesture and word? Daily exposure to TV rather than people has made Sesame Street's Big Bird their grandmothers and Coke jingles their nursery rhymes.

We talk around the hard core problem rather than to it. We treat TV as if it were a socially tolerable disease and our own modest patent brand of medicine remedy will cure or control it. We act as if it were a problem like cigarettes and smoking. Remedies like "cold turkey" are freely offered. We provide half clues with "smoke and lung" arguments suggesting the creation of mindless children, passive, dependent, and nonthink-

ing. We give out with "tar" statistics and warning labels on what we believe to be the debilitating effect of its uncontrolled use. We educators bemoan the condition that we don't get the cooperation of the TV industry, and we ourselves can't get a handle on it because its primary use lies outside the school domain. So we seem stuck with the button "on."

The impact of television is undeniable. The kind of influence and the permanent long range effects have yet to be determined. We do know what has occurred in comparable situations where there has been a gigantic intrusion on American life styles and everyday family activities.

Consider the automobile. As a nation we became dependent on it. We panicked when a threat to its use was raised with the suggestion of an oil shortage. We were paralyzed. The auto was allowed to grow without restraint or responsibility. Industry, education, and the general public ignored the warning signs. The modern way of mobile life brought along with it serious accidents, pollution, sprawling highways, and a multitude of vehicle-oriented laws, regulations, and new demanding industries. Only after dangerous and continuing failures to use the car properly did it even get the smallest bit of educational attention. It was not much. In fact about all the tangibles that easily came to the surface were driver education programs in the public schools and a few vocational/technical courses in other schools. Just as Ford and others are recalling models that function improperly and dangerously, the schools and the public are beginning to suggest a recall of students who fail to meet standards of performance equal to the needs of modern day living. A new literacy is required. A major portion of it is centered in and around TV and its use in American life.

TV Moderation

We need to turn from some of our enjoyable agonizing and seek more productively oriented solutions. These solutions cannot be as easy as "Turn the TV button to off." As H. L. Mencken so aptly put his 50-year-old axiom, "For every problem there is a solution, neat, simple—and wrong."

We need to sift the little grains of truth

about TV from all the chaff surrounding it and proceed with unified dispatch. Of course better TV materials need to be created. The need for better print materials has been the cry for some period of time. Let that not deter anyone. The comfortable inaction scapegoat has disappeared. And even if it were all the bad things we might feel or claim, it still wouldn't help. TV exists. TV will be used. The only present question of relevance is *How?*

There are a few obvious means of moderating the negative effect and stressing the positive in TV fare today. Intelligent parents who take themselves and their children to the library to choose appropriate reading materials can also be expected to utilize similar care in what they see at movies and on TV. As family units and individuals along with industry moderate television use, educators can begin to accelerate the productive features of current TV options. They can then stimulate or create better programs and more competent skills for TV reading achievement.

The television industry is showing some awareness and awakening responsibility to its obligations. Most everyone was impressed when it was discovered that 109 million persons watched *Holocaust*. Few would quarrel with the value of productions such as *Civilization*, *The Adams Chronicles*, and *The Ascent of Man*.

These offerings had high visibility and were popular sellers for commercial TV. Samples such as these have been too few for an industry as large and as powerful as commercial TV. The common complaint of overstressed sex, violence, and other equally disputable content is well documented. Continuing accelerated use of the human viewing resources could conceivably destroy its own commercial end and market in an ever increasing, escalated and competitive drawing of its viewers to products and aspirations that are unattainable. TV leaders must be encouraged to moderate use of the viewing audience resource in the same way we expect wise utilization of other treasured energy resources in today's shrinking world.

TV Reading Primer

What about the role of the teacher/educator? A TV reading primer could be helpful, but there

are a few initial starting points of promise that already exist. First, the audience is using TV actively. The depth of the TV experience may be on the level of paperback Western reading for escape, but it does exist. Some of this is equally permissible in television fare. Common sense, moderation, perspective, and some professional guidance are all needed. Only watching game shows or soaps daily requires some sensible modification in TV reading habits and content. Just as a balanced diet is appropriate with food intake, so it is with TV consumption. The schools have not been timid about getting actively engaged in all sorts of guiding and instructing in areas of health and good nutrition. It's about time to get into the "TV act."

Unguided, unstructured use of TV results in a confusing combination of complex circumstances and unresolved consequences. When more than 100,000 viewers write letters to a fictional doctor on TV for answers to real medical problems, that should be something of a signal for physicians to examine and answer what appears to be a serious need of some kind. Educators must help their sister profession in a joint endeavor. It is fairly easy to recognize that the "warm" Dr. Welby would appear more accessible and trustworthy than possibly the busy, harried practitioner in the local examining room.

Other viewers seem to have difficulty in separating the reality and fiction of the vivid portrayals. When legal questions bombard lawyer/court and law-oriented programs, that should be somewhat less than a subtle signal to the legal profession to activate themselves in a mature response with educators. Once again it is fairly easy to recognize some of the surface responding to humane and responsive big brother and fatherly character portrayals. Education, medicine, and law all must examine and seek solutions of mutual concern and in the public interest.

When educators discover the vocabularies, the mannerisms, the behaviors, the conversations, and the attitudes of their students resembling popular TV characters, it is *more* than a signal for unified action on the part of the professions, the TV industry, and the general public.

Certain survival type skills can be offered as a start for teachers so that they can make some constructive use of TV in the classroom now.

First aid helps currently appear in professional journals and publications with quick guides and suggested activities. Most are at a common and often even shallow level. Some teachers do consistently alert themselves to TV fare that relates to obvious portions of their subject area or level and unit of study. A few are experimenting with TV scripts to encourage improvement of basic skills, language development, and traditional reading. All of these are inadequate to the task that faces the learner.

A most observable first opportunity of experience in the public schools can occur in kindergarten as children formally enter the educational process. Even though children arrive with all kinds of experience in both reading print materials and TV, special readiness activities are needed. This similar readiness prerequisite in TV reading must be a foundation for all other and advanced levels of television reading.

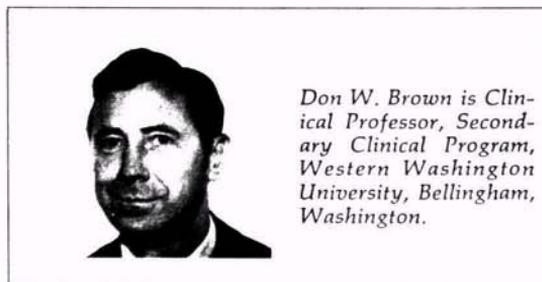
Guided reading lessons in other grades of elementary school serve as a kind of model or sample for guided TV reading activities both in and out of school. Children are prepared for the story they will read. Background is built for understanding the special nature surrounding the reading event. Concepts, vocabulary, and other particular skills needed to participate are stressed. The pupils read the print material; the pupils read TV material as well. The teacher monitors and supervises.

With the current advanced technology, group TV reading can be employed. TV tapes and similar materials can be momentarily stopped after a few moments as easily as after a traditional paragraph of reading in a book. They can be re-

played, discussed, questions asked and responded to, and otherwise instructionally directed under the control of the professional teacher.

In the secondary school, teachers who regularly assign good literature, good scientifically-based readings, and written recommendations pertinent to particular fields of endeavor, could assign and recommend appropriate TV reading in their everyday learning lessons. With the active support of the resources of the academic disciplines and their counterparts in business and other public domain pursuits, great progress can be anticipated in a wide range of areas related to adolescent needs and interests.

There have always been those who will decry the threat of the TV resource just as there are those who still complain about things like the computer component of our everyday lives. The old computer slogan "GI-GO" seems appropriate. "Garbage In, Garbage Out." So far as the educational field is concerned, little has been put in. Until we put something of substance in TV we cannot expect substance in return. A giant resource stands before us to be channeled for the mutual benefit and well being of all. Educators should and must lead the way. *Dr.*



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Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1979	March 3-7	Detroit	Cobo Hall
1980	March 29-April 2	Atlanta	Georgia World Congress Center
1981	March 7-11	St. Louis	Congress Center
1982	March 20-24	Anaheim	Convention Center

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