

Reversing the Literacy Decline by Controlling the Electronic Demons



Computer games, rock video, television, and movies are robbing teenagers of time they should be using to develop their minds.

Young people today grow up in a culture overwhelmed by electronic stimuli. TV, radio, video rock, microcomputers, films, and video games blare and flash their enticements, often filling a void left by the demise of the traditional family structure. In contemporary homes where change is frequent and parent contact greatly diminished, conditions are ripe for the invasion of the electronic media (Packard, 1983).

At the same time, the national spotlight is focused on our fall from educational excellence and the declining literacy of our students. Proposed remedies and reforms are based on the premise that the cause of this declining literacy is inadequate schooling. In my view, the influence of the electronic culture is a major factor.

Proficiency in reading and writing skills, beyond the level of learning to decode or encode, is dependent on prior knowledge, cognitive and linguistic strategies, and critical thinking abilities. Examination of a sample paragraph from an introductory college history text reveals that a reader would have to have prior knowledge of at least ten sophisticated concepts to fully comprehend it. Linking conceptual knowledge already stored in memory with information on the printed page is crucial for comprehension.

We also bring to the symbols on the page expectations about cultural contexts, places, relationships, feelings, and attitudes. Stored experiences together with linguistic and analytic strategies enable us to transform symbols into meaning and go beyond meaning to evaluation and application. Neither the act of reading nor the act of writing can transcend the total intellectual competence of the individual reader or writer. Competence is developed by using linguistic and cognitive strategies in a variety of reading and writing contexts and through opportunities to attain worldly knowledge on

increasingly sophisticated levels. Consequently, the environment that shapes the intellectual world of our students is critical for literacy development.

The Electronic Bombardment

Harper's Index (1984) recently reported that Americans watched 213 billion hours of TV in 1983. A 1980 Nielson study found that preschool children watched TV more than four hours a day and grade school children managed an average of 26 hours a week. Nearly 40 percent of preschoolers and 75 percent of gradeschoolers were watching TV after 9 p.m. when adult programming was shown (Packard, 1983).

If involvement in the video medium is so great, then we need to scrutinize what youngsters are watching. Generally, the programs available to American youth fall under the categories of ridiculous soaps, mindless comedies, violent adventures, manic cartoons, and video rock. Cable TV has contributed pornography to this selection. These programs stimulate neither reasoning nor the imagination and, at best, portray a slick, superficial, and frantic picture of the world. Quality programs are overshadowed by the dazzling array of instantaneous entertainment.

New technology has wedded music and video in the most popular and frightening of these entertainment genres: video rock. Many rock video scenes are blatantly sadomasochistic, flashing images of sex and power in a kaleidoscope of color and sound. Others display an odd form of what might be called robotic slapstick. One cable network devoted solely to this kind of programming reaches more than 17.5

million households through 2,000 cable affiliates. Even the honors English student spends hours being confronted by such video classics as "Maniac." The latest teenage film genre, the sex comedy, is no better.

When allured by these electronic delights, how much time can youngsters find for reading a modern novel, visiting a museum, or analyzing a sociopolitical issue? The answer is not much, especially if video games and microcomputers are available. Video arcade games are close to an \$8 billion a year business and are said by some critics to promote addictive behavior. Computer programming, on the other hand, can be a fascinating and challenging experience. But both activities detract from valuable time that could be used to foster skills and knowledge necessary for traditional literacy. Students who spend four hours a day playing "Donkey Kong" or "Necromancer" are not learning the skills that will help them understand the nuances of Henry James or the complexities of geopolitics.

Research studies on the effect of the electronic media on literacy have been varied and inconclusive. Nevertheless, several trends have emerged. A March 1984 study found two trends in the relationship between reading scores and the combined attention to music and TV of 4th, 8th, and 11th graders. Students who spent more time involved with media tended to have lower reading achievement scores, and students who spent more time reading for pleasure tended to have higher reading achievement scores (Teifer and Kann, 1984). Another study of over 7,500 4th, 8th, and 11th graders confirmed a positive relationship between reading for pleasure and reading performance and found a negative relationship between excessive viewing and reading performance (Neuman and Prowda, 1982).

In a third study, the scripts of the 15 favorite programs of teenagers identi-

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fied in a 1979 Gallup survey were analyzed for syntactic and semantic complexity. Not surprisingly, the author concluded that these popular programs were not good language models (Lieberman, 1983).

One need not be bombarded with experimental evidence to conclude that the electronic culture greatly influences the intellectual development of our students. The video experience itself has been characterized by Neil Postman (1979) as attention-centered, affect-centered, nonanalytical, discontinuous, and immediately gratifying. In short, it is a quick fix, pleasant, stimulating for the moment, and superficial.

Unfortunately, the burst of technological advances in the last several years promises even greater electronic dominance over our lives. Two-way cube, fiber optics, teletext, and videotex are examples of innovations we can expect.

Futurists in the field of neuroscience are even predicting an instantaneous way of reading via electronics. They envision the replacement of words by something like the bar codes used for pricing in supermarkets, which the brain would automatically encode and decode, circumventing the use of eyes (Fortier, 1983).

In summary, the electronic media fails to develop the knowledge and strategies necessary for traditional literacy and successfully competes with activities that do. An array of electronic stimulants mesmerizes, captivates, and controls our young people, yet there is no accountability. There are no prestigious national task forces proposing to compensate the rock industry or the video industry based on the merits of their productions. These are the demons we must confront if we value traditional literacy.

Negative Effects vs. Positive Potential

The onslaught of electronic technology cannot be stopped, but it can be monitored and controlled. Patricia Marks Greenfield (1984) extensively documents the negative effects of the electronic media but also emphasizes its positive potential. She maintains that the electronic media give new cognitive possibilities to disadvantaged groups and can provide enrichment for all viewers. She urges schools to offer curriculums in home program selection, critical TV viewing, and media study; and she cites two resources, Logan's *Television Awareness Training* and Masterman's *Teaching about Television*, as models for media study programs.

In addition to teaching youngsters to be critical, advocates of multimedia education believe that the electronic media can be used in conjunction with print to enhance traditional modes of teaching. An interesting experiment in multimedia education, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, is "The Voyage of the Mimi," a series of 15-minute television programs broadcast by PBS that teach math and science supplemented by specially designed books and computer simulation exercises. The project, which is being conducted by Bank Street College of Education in conjunction with Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., attempts to integrate the best features of each medium (Fiske, 1984).

Political action has not been effective to date. Recently, however, Senator Frank R. Lautenberg of New Jersey and Representative Timothy E. Wirth of Colorado introduced bills that would require commercial television stations to broadcast daily at least one hour of programming "designed to

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enhance the education" of children (Kaplan, 1984).

Educators must take on responsibilities in media education as well as help bring pressure to bear on the political and educational establishment. Only when adults, including those of us involved in education, perceive a connection between popular culture and the decline in educational excellence, can we begin to marshal forces against the electronic demons that are having a damaging effect on the literacy of our students. □

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New! EDUCATORS, CHILDREN AND THE LAW edited by Lynn Sametz and Caven S. McLoughlin. This book addresses a variety of legal topics related to children and their education. The contributors analyze children's, teachers' and parents' rights; special education and the law; multicultural legal issues; juvenile justice; and educators' knowledge of the law as it affects children. Concluding chapters provide information that will prove invaluable to the reader who becomes involved in the legal system as advocate, witness, defendant or plaintiff. March '85, about \$28.50

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