

Influence of Mass Media on Today's Young People

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"Educators are challenged more seriously than ever before to teach young people to evaluate media more critically and to grow in taste and discrimination as they use media in school and at home."

What is it like to grow up in today's world? How are children and young adults affected by the movies and television programs they see, the radio programs and recordings they hear, the newspapers, magazines, and books they read?

Modern technology has made possible a wealth of shared experience undreamed of even 50 years ago. This environment reflects fully, though sometimes in a warped fashion, life itself—including good and evil, beauty and ugliness, charity and violence. It is difficult or impossible to shield young people from experiences reflecting the adult world when communications systems infiltrate our homes and become so much a part of everyday living.

The concerns of thoughtful adults as to the possible effects of media on young and old citizens range from the more obvious ones to those more subtle. There are fears as to the content of media: violence, lawlessness, breakdown in moral values, and tawdry and explicit sex, for example. There are other fears as to the general effect of a television-dominated society in which viewers tend to be passive and nonassertive, young people have little time for other experiences, and parents use television as a "safe" baby-sitter.

A proper assessment of the influence of mass media on young people continues to be one of the significant challenges to educators and parents today. Research in this area invariably reveals the difficulties in arriving at sound conclusions due to the complexity of causal relationships. One critic has questioned the findings of all experimental research in this area because of the impossibility of ever having a defensible control group. The influence of mass media on adults is closely related to their influence on young people, and just as difficult to study.

The positive values in today's mass media are also significant. Young people today, without leaving home, can hear the world's best music and witness superb musical performances, see outstanding drama and dance programs, hear



political and governmental leaders of the nation and the world analyze major issues of the day, and learn of scientific advances and problems. Mass media bring information, inspiration, and enrichment that potentially improve the quality of our living.

Nicolas Johnson, formerly of the Federal Communications Commission, has studied the media environment for many years. In 1971, he concluded that television is "the single most powerful intellectual, social, cultural, and political force in history." He also found that most American families use television as "the major source of knowledge and values."

Dorothy Broderick, a library educator, has written that media do much more than provide information. She says, "... they do have an impact and influence upon behavior and attitude formation, even though it is still impossible to isolate in research the precise nature of such influence."

Access to Television Has Increased

While all forms of communication affect learning and living, the influence of television seems most challenging. Television most nearly represents real experience and is clearly a part of the environment of most young people in the United States.

Access to television has increased remarkably. Breslin and Marino reported that while less than one percent of all American families owned television sets in 1948, by 1976, 98 percent of American homes had at least one television set, and 25 percent had two or more.

The facts about usage of these sets encourage serious consideration of television's influence. The average child in this country will have used 22,000 hours in viewing television by the time he or she enters high school. Gerbner and Gross reported that nearly half of the 12-year-olds studied averaged six or more hours a day viewing television. Summarizing research on the impact of television, George Comstock wrote in 1975 that children typically view television for several years before entering first grade, that the time spent with television increases during elementary school years, and that young black people, those from lower socioeconomic levels, and those lower in



*"While all forms of communication affect learning and living, the influence of television seems most challenging."
Photo: Michael D. Sullivan*

academic achievement and I.Q. spend more time viewing television than do other young people.

In 1971, it was reported in *Broadcasting Yearbook* that the average TV set was on six hours a day in the United States. The number of viewers using each set during these hours was not determined.

Wilbur Schramm reported in 1965 that by the sixth grade children spend 79 percent of their viewing time watching adult programs. Many adults are known to spend time viewing cartoons and adventure programs intended for children. To determine the experience that children or young adults have through television, one must consider the whole range of television programs, including those intended chiefly for adults: news shows, comedies, variety shows, cartoons, motion pictures, documentaries, serious drama, sports events, music, advertisements, and other types shown on commercial, public, and political programs.

The current concern about effects of violence and crime as depicted on television was high-

lighted recently in the trial in Miami, Florida, of 15-year-old Ronney Zamora, accused of robbing and killing his 82-year-old neighbor. The defense attorney presented the unusual defense that the boy is innocent because his addiction to television violence has caused insanity.

How may violence on television affect young people? What should be done about it in a country that believes in freedom of communication and the rights of its citizens to the free flow of information and ideas?

Based on years of research, Albert Bandura has concluded that "children can and do acquire new response patterns through observation and imitation, without the need for external reinforcement or even rehearsal or practice." The Surgeon-General's Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior supported the view that ". . . a steady stream of brutality on television can have a powerful adverse effect on our society—and particularly on children." This report represents a significant effort to discover the effect television has on children today.

Thoughtful researchers have raised such questions as these: Are young people who are unusually attracted by the violence and aggression on television generally abnormally aggressive personalities themselves? Is it only those young people who are disordered themselves who tend to imitate or "act out" the violent acts depicted on television? Does the content of television seriously affect young people's perceptions of the world they live in, its challenges, satisfactions, problems, and values?

Citizens Demonstrate Concern

While research goes on, many citizens have recently demonstrated their concerns. The National P.T.A.'s Television Commission has held a series of eight regional "hearings" on "Television and Violence" that encouraged parents and teachers to consider seriously the content as well as usage of television. Based on these hearings, in which 505 persons testified, the Commission has warned that concerned citizens may propose economic boycott of TV products advertised on shows that feature violence. Other concerns were "stereotyping both by race and sex, inferior role models for youth, reduced discrimination between

reality and fantasy, use of violence to sell products, and censorship."

Dr. Richard E. Palmer, a president of the American Medical Association, has said that television violence is "a mental health problem and an environmental issue." He feels that large exposure to violent content may distort a child's perceptions of the real world and adversely affect his psychological development.

Action for Children's Television (ACT) is a national citizens' organization to upgrade the quality of children's T.V. In 1976, among their "Bent Antennae Awards" were the "Getting Away with Murder Award" to broadcasters who use violence to attract child viewers and the "Nero Fiddles While Rome Burns Award" to broadcasters who talk about the need to reduce TV violence while continuing to air brutal and sadistic programs.

While there is serious concern about the influence of television on young people, there is much controversy over what to do about it. One person with a plan for action is Richard E. Wiley, who, as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), spoke to the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 1976. Wiley rejected the idea that a high level of TV violence can be justified because it presents a realistic view of the world. He said, "Few, if any, of our citizens—in the real world—will be exposed to the levels of violence comparable to those which appear on television almost every week."

Wiley feels that specific governmental regulations in this "highly sensitive First Amendment Area" would not be desirable. Instead, he suggests that the FCC ". . . can play a constructive and more appropriate role at this point by focusing increased industry attention on the issue and by encouraging the consideration of self-regulatory reforms."

Family Viewing Plan

The "Family Viewing Plan" is an example of the type of self-regulation suggested. The three major networks and The Television Code Board of The National Association of Broadcasters adopted the plan to set aside the first three hours

(6 to 9 p.m.) of evening prime time for material suitable for the entire family to view together.

Wiley feels that his recommendation of such a plan, as Chairman of FCC, does not constitute governmental censorship, since he was only recommending voluntary action and making suggestions for program improvement. He feels the new policy encourages those involved in the industry to develop exciting and worthwhile programs "without the needless concomitant of violent and sexual excess."

Wiley's speech was criticized by many in his audience, among them Joseph F. Lagana, Superintendent of Northgate School District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and George Iannacone, Superintendent of Vernon Township Public Schools, Vernon, New Jersey. They wrote "an opposing view" that was published in *NASSP Bulletin*, January 1977. They felt that the position of the FCC and the Family Viewing Plan "are not compatible with the social conditions of our modern society, fragmented families and institutions, and the post-industrial youth culture." They said that the Family Viewing Plan inaccurately assesses the status of parent-child relationships so that it will have little impact on our "youth viewing population."

Lagana and Iannacone suggest that most parents are not aware that the Family Viewing Plan exists. They feel that it is erroneous to assume adults can or want to regulate or monitor television viewing for their children and that parent and youth viewing patterns are often incompatible because of different interests and schedules and the accessibility of several television sets in and outside the home.

More fundamentally, they challenge Wiley's concept of the role of the FCC as "socially irresponsible" because they feel the FCC "is the regulating arm of our government." It is their recommendation that the FCC develop "a television council composed of educators, legislators, and behavioral scientists to create programs that are compatible with healthy human growth and development." In monitoring television programs beyond the Family Viewing Plan, the FCC is seen as a facilitator and moderator and not as a controlling agency.

The National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting ranked programs according to content of

violence. As might be expected the "cops and robbers," "private eye," and action-packed shows ranked very high. But, surprisingly, "The Wonderful World of Disney" ranked fairly high (more violent than "The Blue Knight" series) and "Donny and Marie" was around the middle of the scale, more violent than "Happy Days," "Executive Suite," or "Maude."

A Gallup poll found that 71 percent of the public in the United States think television is too violent, yet many of the most violent programs continue to draw the largest number of viewers. *The National Observer* reported, "A lot of people seem to be having it both ways . . . deploring it to the pollsters and enjoying it at home. Most of them will have to turn off TV's gun-play before the networks will consider disarmament."

Meanwhile, back to the schools. Clearly, they cannot control the total environment of students. Educators are challenged more seriously than ever before to teach young people to evaluate media more critically and to grow in taste and discrimination as they use media in school and at home. The media specialists in the schools should be valuable partners in this endeavor. \overline{L}

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