# TELEVISION, THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

By
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Television comes to us as a combination of radio, movies, the pulps, games, circuses, comics and cartoons, and a dash of journalism, but it is none of these. It is the first mass-produced and organically composed symbolic environment--a universal curriculum--into which our children are born and in which they live from cradle to grave. No other medium or institution since pre-industrial religion has had a comparable influence on what people of a tribe, community, or nation have learned, thought, or done in common.

Although television broadcasting today is a private business, it is an officially licensed enterprise operating in the public domain. Television thus becomes an organ of governance as well as of acculturation. The First Amendment's prohibition against "an establishment of religion" did not prevent (in fact, continues to shield) the establishment of its modern functional equivalent. Television relates to the State as only the Church did in former times. Its nearly universal and ritualistic use fits its cyclical and repetitive programming. People attend to television as they used to attend church except that they do it much more often and more regularly.

Over 4 million hours of programming a year are discharged into the mainstream of common consciousness to claim the time and attention of 200 million Americans. Television demands no mobility, literacy, or concentrated attention. Its repetitive patterns come into the home and show, as well as tell about, people and society. Presidents, police officers, surgical operating rooms, courtrooms, spies, and celebrities are familiar parts of a selective and synthetic world that nearly everyone knows most about. Television is a total cultural system with its own art, science, statecraft, legendry, geography,

demography, character types, and action structure. The world of television encapsulates those selected features of the larger media culture that lend themselves best to its basic sales and socializing functions.

The television audience is not only the most heterogeneous public ever assembled but also the most non-selective. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program. Viewing is a ritual governed by styles of life and time. Different kinds of programs serve the same basic formula designed to assemble viewers for the most profit and sell them at the least cost. The classifications of the print era with their relatively sharp differentiations between news, drama, documentary, etc., do not apply as much to television. Regular viewers watch more of everything. Different time and program segments complement and reinforce each other as they present aspects of the same symbolic world.

Most regular viewers of television are immersed in a vivid and illuminating world which has certain repetitive and pervasive patterns. At the center of this coherently constructed world is network drama. Drama is where the bulk of audience viewing time is. Drama is where total human problems and situations, rather than abstracted topics and fragments, are illuminated.

We have conducted the longest-running and so far still only continuous and cumulative research on what it means to live with television at the national average of 30 viewing hours a week (slightly more for young children.) Since the bulk of viewing for all people occurs during prime-time dramatic programs (8:00 to 11:00 p.m.,) and about one-fifth of children's viewing takes place during children's program hours (weekend mornings and early afternoons,) we shall deal with these parts of the television world.

The world of prime-time and children's weekend daytime network dramatic programming is by and large a man's world of action, power, and danger. Our

analysis since 1967 of nearly 5,000 major and some 14,000 minor characters in over 1600 programs reveal patterns that change little from year to year despite shifts of format and genre.

Living with television means growing up in a vivid and compelling world in which men outnumber women at least three to one. Most women on television do not work outside the home and most of them are younger than the men they deal with. It is also a world in which young people comprise one-third and older persons one-fifth of their true proportion in the population. Nonwhites and especially Hispanics are also underrepresented, while white male Americans and all characters in the prime of life--television's prime customers for the sponsors' products--number more than their true share of the population.

The lessons? Having less than one's proportionate share of resources, including numbers and youth, means the cultivation of a sense of more limited life chances, fewer opportunities, restricted scope of activities, and more rigidly stereotyped portrayals. It means easier acceptance of minority status as natural, inevitable, even right or deserved. It means fitting into an inequitable structure of power.

Of course, television did not create and does not singly cultivate minority status. But viewing contributes to its daily cultivation. Our research shows that, except for the most traditional and bigoted, television viewing tends to strengthen certain prejudices about women and old people.

Living with television means knowing more about certain types of professionals (but not about their education or training), law-breakers, law-enforcers, entertainers and other celebrities, than about all other working people combined. The typical viewer sees about 12 television doctors, 30 policemen, 7 lawyers, and 3 judges every week, but only 1 scientist or engineer and hardly any workers. Doctors are omniscient and easily accessible and most lawyers provide selfless

service for needy clients but scientists present a relatively strange and forbidding image.

The lessons? Children know more about rare occupations frequently portrayed on television than common jobs rarely seen on the screen. Except for the poorest and least educated, heavy viewers score lower on IQ and other tests of scholarly aptitude and aspiration than light viewers in the same age and social groups. Viewing boosts the confidence rating of doctors but depresses that of scientists, especially among those who otherwise support science. Institutional values and occupational choices may be twisted to fit a pattern of sales and ratings.

Living with television means growing up in a world of about 22,000 commercials a year, 5,000 of them for food products, over half for low-nutrition sweets and snacks. The programs themselves contain reference to eating and drinking an average of 10 times per hour, largely junk food grabbed on the run and hard liquor gulped to cope with pressure, tension, crisis. Yet only few television characters are overweight (most of them nonwhite) and even fewer are alcoholic.

The lessons? Our research shows that except for the lowest income and education groups, television viewing cultivates complacency about health coupled with exaggerated belief in the miraculous healing powers of medical science. It is as if to suggest: eat and drink as all the beautiful people do, and don't worry; if something goes wrong, the doctor will cure it all. A situation set up for frustration, litigation, tragedy.

Living with television means growing up in a world in which crime is 10 times as rampant as in the real world. An average of 5 acts of violence per hour of prime time and 18 acts per hour in children's weekend-daytime programs victimize half of prime-time and two-thirds of children's-time major

characters. Yet pain, suffering, or medical help rarely follow this mayhem. Its function is not preventive or therapeutic but dramatic and social. Symbolic violence demonstrates power: who can get away with what against whom.

The structure of that demonstration also reveals television's distribution of powers. Adult white males are most likely to get involved in violence and, along with older males, the most likely to get away with it. Old, young adult, and minority women, and young boys are the most likely to be victims rather than victimizers in violent conflict. Children's programming increases these unfavorable ratios of risk, especially young women.

The lessons? Learning violence for the few, and an exaggerated sense of mistrust, vulnerability and insecurity for the many. Our research shows that heavy viewers are more likely to think they will encounter violence in real life than light viewers in the same age and social groups, exposed to the same real hazards. Living in television's relatively mean and dangerous macho world seems to contribute to making us anxious and alienated from democratic institutions, increasingly receptive to simple, strong, tough "solutions" and hard-line posturings--both political and religious.

All-in-all, television has become the cultural mainstream of our society. Its general level is not necessarily the lowest but certainly the cheapest common denominator. Its programming is predicated on viewer inertia and provides the least objectionable fare that can sell products to the largest number of the best customers at the least cost. If its hidden curriculum of images and messages sounds alarming, it must also be said that it is well-suited to the pragmatic specifications of the institution and is also useful and functional for an increasingly hard-sell, power-oriented, rigid and brittle society. On the more positive side, television has abolished provincialism and parochialism, reduced loneliness and isolation, enriched the cultural horizons

of the poorest segments of our society, and has given us a means for educating and governing masses of people, albeit through a ritual or almost religious sweep and power, that can be turned to whatever service citizens as institution-builders and shapers demand of it.

Those who would shape the institution more to the image of democratic values of justice, equity, productivity, health, and community than to those of pragmatic service to whoever pays the piper, should know what they are up against. Critical viewing curricula, citizens organizations, and advice to parents are all necessary but not sufficient. First, we need a fresh approach to liberal education. Liberal education was designed to liberate the growing person from unwitting dependence on the immediate cultural environment. That is why the "great" art, science, history, and literature of an age was the heart of a liberal education. But that has always involved only a small minority. Today's fresh approach to the liberal arts demands liberation from unwitting dependence on the mass-produced television environment that involves everyone every day. We need education for the age of television.

Secondly, the rigid imperatives of television as a cultural institution will have to give way to a freer market in television production. The resource base for television will have to be broadened to liberate the institution from total dependence on advertising monies and purposes. The potential riches of television and the willingness to pay for a more diversified fare through cable and other means show that consumers and citizens want a television system more responsive to their diverse needs.

Thirdly, a high-level national commission is needed to examine the ways in which democratic countries around the world manage their television systems in the interest of children and minorities, as well as in the interest of the

big middle-consumer majority. The commission should recommend a mechanism that will finance a freer system, one that can afford to present a fairer and more democratic world of television.

Finally, television should become at least as much a part of the process of self-government, overcoming its present policy insulation from the citizenry, as is energy, education, or health. A broad advisory group composed of prominent citizens representing the PTA and other major civic organizations concerned with culture, education, and health will have to come into being to offset the pressures of other interest groups and to protect the freedom of creative professionals from both governmental and corporate dictation. Only then will TV's professionals be free to produce the diversified and equitable as well as entertaining dramatic "curriculum" they know how to produce but cannot under existing constraints and controls.