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Television: The Mainstreaming of America

"Television has replaced, in an incredibly streamlined and powerful way, not print or film, but tribal religion."

When we analyze the role of television in influencing our life-styles and conceptions of social reality, we find that TV is the "flagship" of our popular culture. Television *is* the mainstream. It is not an elite-oriented medium. It is a lower-middle class and lower class oriented medium, and for the first time in history, there is a great common bond between the cultural elite and the vast middle majority. In fact, one reason the television industry seems to have such difficulty responding to the challenge of the Moral Majority is that the mentality of the Moral Majority is the same as the mentality of the heavy television viewer. To put it sharply and provocatively, television is the new religion.

My historical view of television suggests that it is the third of a series of transformations in human culture. Humans are different from other animals in that they live in a world of stories, constructing a fantasy which they call reality out of the stories they tell. Culture—the heart of which is storytelling—has been constructed in different ways in different historical epochs:

- In the preindustrial age, storytelling was conducted face to face, in a ritualistic manner that involved the entire community. The tribe, the family, various age groups, a few specialized styles of life all played an integral part in the centrally disseminated storytelling machine eventually called religion.
- The nonselective, ritualistically conducted storytelling mechanism was broken up by the industrial revolution. The first storytelling machine was the printing press, the first industrial product was the book—in many ways the prerequisite for all the uprooting and the differentiation of consciousness that followed the uprooting. The ability to package stories and disseminate them across almost impenetrable

boundaries made it possible to break up rituals. You didn't have to memorize them any more, and you didn't need a chief or priest to perform them; you could look them up yourself, interpret them, and take them with you to new lands.

The printing press led to the rise of class consciousness, differentiated interest groups and constituencies. The new print-based consciousness facilitated the rise of modern "mass publics": loose aggregations of people who never met face to face, and yet, had a sense of collective strength, weakness or direction. Almost all our assumptions about self-government, education and cultural life stem from this phenomenon and this era.

- Superimposed on—not supplanting—the era of print publics is the age of telecommunications, in which television has become the great storytelling machine. This era is divided into two parts: the first, and rather permanent cultural part, is over-the-air television, which I call "mass ritual." The second is the new telecommunications, which I consider to be the resurgence of print into the electronic era—an extension of what we associate with the selective habits of print, a differentiated rather than unitary consciousness by electronic means.

Today, we can see the mainstreaming effect of "mass ritual television" in fourteen years of research compiled by the Cultural Indicators Project at the Annenberg School of Communications. This research spans a great variety of issues and representations, as well as analyses of how television exposure to these representations contributes to—not decides, but contributes to—the shaping of attitudes about reality. We have found that television flattens the top and raises the bottom of almost every curve that measures social attitudes. It tends to absorb otherwise deviant groups into the mainstream. This is why both skeptical social scientists and the public are right: if you look at overall mean effects you find them slight and often nonexistent; but if you break them down into subgroups, you find that the effects are clearly delineated and highly significant, even though they may all merge into the mainstream, canceling each other out on the whole.

In many ways, mainstream, over-the-air television is the opposite of books and films. Its critical characteristic is that it is a ritual: most people watch TV by the clock, not the program. For the most part, it is nonselectively used by a total community, rather than by individual publics. And TV provides an overall socializing context, the most pervasive common basis for social interaction in an otherwise heterogeneous and diversified society. It is the common bond between the elites and the masses—never before have these divergent groups shared so much of a common culture with a common set of assumptions, images and messages. Television has replaced, in an incredibly streamlined and powerful way, not print or film, but tribal religion. It has presented all of us with a coherent storytelling context, a coherent fantasy about the way the world is.

This coherent TV world is now watched by two historically unprecedented groups of viewers: the very young and the previously parochial:

- For the very young, television is the symbolic environment, like wallpaper, into which they are born. It's not a medium, like print or movies. Nor is it an institution like church or school, which is injected into a child's life, usually four or five years after the child has had a chance to develop an image of

self in the home. No more; TV is there from the very beginning. The infant/child audience sees an average of 25,000 commercials and 15,000 longer stories a year.

- The other historically unprecedented group (40 to 50 million people) has always been parochial–culturally "in the sticks," inert politically, in prisons, in hospitals, either too young or too old. Today, there is no such thing as parochialism. A group that has had little experience in political life is now brought into the political and cultural mainstream by a commanding, demanding and attractive medium. This group is largely monopolized by that medium because it has no tradition of reading: 6½ hours a day the set is on.

The total world that television presents to these viewers is composed of a cast in which men outnumber women 3 or 4 to 1. So the TV world starts off with a peculiar, skewed impression of what life is like and what kinds of things can and cannot–and ought not–be done. Young people represent one-third their true proportion of the U.S. population; older people (65+) represent one-fifth of their true proportion. The average viewer of prime-time television sees 30 policemen, 12 doctors, 7 lawyers, 3 judges, 2 businessmen and 1 scientist every week. Television is by far the largest single source of information about these and other walks of life.

The dominance of men, particularly in prime-time dramatic storytelling, means that most of the action revolves around questions of power. Men demonstrate competition and conflict, deciding who can put over what on whom under what circumstances. This male-dominated exercise of power is what creates such a high incidence of violence–it is the quickest means of dramatic decision making. People who can exercise power over others are systematically more numerous in some groups than others. There is a social hierarchy of victimization: if you're a woman, nonwhite or an older person, your chances of victimization, provided you get into any kind of violent contest at all, go up. Crime on television is ten times as rampant as by any actual statistics. Violence occurs an average of five or six times every evening in prime time, 25 times during children's daytime programming.

The overall lesson from this exposure to violence is not that it incites aggression. The most systematically emerging relationship of exposure to television violence is a resulting sense of insecurity. While it differs by what group you are associated with and what risks are assigned to that group, it is essentially a sense of insecurity and anxiety, a mistrust of strangers and strange ideas–a "mean world syndrome." It is this mean world syndrome that creates the political and cultural need to strive for simple solutions and tough postures–those that appeal to groups like the Moral Majority. In fact, we may consider the Moral Majority as a symbol of the very large group of people newly introduced into the cultural mainstream with little historical or political experience and a great deal of exposure to that mean world–feeling very much out of control of their lives.

The whole area of health and nutrition commands a great deal of attention, with some kind of portrayal of eating or drinking about nine or ten times an hour. Most eating is grabbing a snack on the run. (It is interesting to note that more attention is devoted to nutrition in commercials than programming.) Most of the beverage consumed is hard liquor–any time you get into a conflict, an embarrassing situation or crisis, reaching for a gun or reaching

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for a drink is the easiest assembly-line solution. Nevertheless, obesity is very rare on television (6% of the men, 2% of the women are overweight) and only 1% of television characters suffer any ill effects from alcohol, despite the fact that most of them (good characters as much as bad) drink.

On the other hand, medical doctors are favorably presented professional characters. They're omnipotent: when not performing open-heart surgery, they're making romantic phone calls and house calls. The overall conclusion is that the more television people watch, the more complacent they are about nutrition, health, exercise and drinking; and yet, the more exaggerated their beliefs in the healing powers of medical science.

Businessmen make up about 8% of the television population. They are not exactly "crooks, clowns and con-men" (as a recent report by the Media Institute put it); from ten years of Cultural Indicators analysis, we have found that good businessmen outnumber bad by a 2 to 1 margin, while good doctors outnumber bad 12 to 1 and good policemen outnumber bad 28 to 1. Thus, TV businessmen do suffer from a relative sense of deprivation. But the TV viewer is surrounded by mostly stable commodities—commercials—which are essentially benign, if not favorable to business. Commercials have relatively low credibility, like any communication directly controlled by its source. It is through dramatic programming (as well as news) that the long-standing populist tradition of criticizing businessmen is maintained—and it is this critical view which restores the credibility of the medium to the viewers, helping to deliver the largest possible audience.

The business community has a choice, then, between the delivery of the audience and the flattery of itself. Put in that way, the choice is always clear. The critical, occasionally unflattering portrayal of businessmen on television is a necessary instrument of credibility within an otherwise anxious and insecure lower-middle class milieu.

In the area of politics, one can best see the dynamics of television's mainstreaming effect through the notions of "blurring," "blending," and "bending":

- **Blurring** is a process in which heavy viewers, in contrast to comparable groups of light viewers, tend to blur the political, social and cultural distinctions cultivated by the more diversified media.
- **Blending** is the absorbing of these differences into the educational mainstream; and
- **Bending** is the creation of a curious dichotomy—a "commercial populism," if you will—in which heavy viewers are more likely to call themselves moderates, whereas the positions they actually take tend to be more conservative in social and political issues and more liberal in economic issues.

This approach to analyzing television's effects on attitudes and social behavior is not designed to tell businessmen what to do. Its virtue is to tell business and the media what they're up against—a sense of climate and currents, the dynamics behind the facts of public opinion polls.