TV's Changing Our Lives

Television is more than an electronic baby-sitter; seemingly, it goes everywhere and knows everything.

By George Gerbner

Parents often wonder what they did with their time before the children were born. Today's children (up to about 30) wonder what we did before television. It is difficult to realize that television is not just another in a long series of technological innovations in mass communications. Television marks a new style of life—a new cultural epoch, similar in magnitude to the first industrial revolution in communications, the coming of print.

Before rapid printing, communication was all face-to-face. The stories that illuminate the all-important invisible workings of life, that tell us what is, what is important and what is right, were related orally and ritualistically in every home and community. An organically connected body of narratives, later called religion, encompassed art, science, statecraft and the moral education of the child.

The industrial revolution broke up that ritual. Books, the first truly industrial products, could be sent and, if necessary, smuggled across previously almost impenetrable boundaries of time, place and status. Printing broke the central authority of the sacred storyteller, speeded up the Reformation and eventually shaped the new classes and publics who share collective consciousness but never meet face-to-face. Storytelling itself becomes relatively pluralistic and selective, with political and religious freedom, the school, the home, the library, the mass media all playing a part in the socialization process. Our basic assumptions about people and society are rooted in the era of print.

Television broke up that pattern of plurality and selectivity. Television is superimposed upon the era of print, reorganizing many of its functions and most of its assumptions about life, the family, the school, and the moral and social order.

Today, television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time. It is the first centralized, mass-produced and organically composed, common symbolic environment—a universal curriculum—into which children are born and in which people live from cradle to grave. No other medium or

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RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE PHOTO

Actor Jack Klugman, in a sequence from the NBC series "Quincy," is helped by Carol Trager, portrayed by actress Cassie Yates. "Quincy" was recommended for joint parent-child viewing and for older children by the annual "Parent's Guide for Children's Viewing," provided by the New York Roman Catholic Archdiocese.

institution since pre-industrial religion has reached into every home and had a comparable influence on what people of a tribe, community or nation have learned, thought or done in common.

Although television broadcasting in the United States is a private business, it is an officially licensed corporate enterprise operating in the public domain. Television thus becomes an organ of governance as well as of acculturation. The First Amendment, with its prohibition against "an establishment of religion," did not prevent (in fact, its press clause continues to shield) the establishment of its modern secular 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. Most people watch it not by the program but by the clock. People attend to television as they used to attend church except that they do it more often and more regularly.

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 common synthetic experience that nearly everyone lives and knows about. As pre-industrial religion, television is a total, organic, cultural mythology 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.

Viewing is a ritual governed by styles of life and time. Different kinds of programs serve the same basic formula, designed to assemble viewers at the least cost and to sell them at the highest price. 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.

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). My colleagues Drs. Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli and I have studied network dramatic programming and viewer's conceptions of social reality since 1967. Beyond the impressive but superficial changes in program style and format, we found remarkable consistency year after year in the world of television and its lessons.

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 (but age faster) than the men they meet. It is a world in which young people comprise one-third and old persons one-fifth of their true proportion in the population. Over two-thirds of all characters are "middle class." Nonwhites and Hispanics are under-represented. White male Americans and all characters in the prime of life—television's prime customers for the sponsors' products—number much 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.

Living with television means knowing more about a few select 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 a few occupations frequently portrayed on television than about 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 of 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 who are, are non-white) and even fewer are alcoholic.

The lessons? Our research shows that 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 slim, healthy, beautiful people do and don't worry; if something goes wrong, the doctor will cure it all. The stage is set for frustration, litigation, tragedy.

Living with television means growing up in a world in which crime is at least 10 times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five 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 for young women.

It means a world of commercials—22,000 a year, with about 5,000 for food.

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 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. Its hidden curriculum of power images and messages is well-suited to 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 of explosive sweep and power.

Those who would shape the institution more to the image of the basic moral values of justice, equity, productivity, welfare and community have urgent and difficult tasks to perform. Critical viewing curricula, citizens organizations and advice to parents all are 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 always has 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.

Second, the rigid imperatives of the medium 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.

Third, the churches must come to grips rather than only to terms with television. Every denomination must now decide how to position itself *vis-a-vis* the new television hierarchy (literally, the "sacred order"). If you can't lick them, join them? Try to pour new wine into old bottles? Bore from within? Present viewers with alternative viewpoints and values and hope that they will not re-interpret your message to fit in with the rest of the "messages from our sponsors?" Do you fight them from without, and how? Or do you just try to ignore them and carry on business as usual, risking increasing irrelevance to the everyday culture and concerns of the community? Fortunately, a broad research committee of church people uniting many religions—including the electronic churches—is supporting a major research project to help us establish a valid basis for answering these questions.

Understanding the dynamics of television helps to make some puzzling aspects of the current scene fall into place. Diverse ways of seeing reality converge through television's cradle-to-grave ritual into the cultural mainstream of common conceptions. Television is not only one influence among many but the distinguishing mark of a pervasive new style of life. Its lessons begin with infancy and shape basic assumptions about what things are and how they work. Designed to serve markets and to tap pocketbooks more than other values, its hidden curriculum cultivates its own standardized images of one's self and others, of different sex and age groups, of social types and occupational choices, of intellectual and professional tasks, of violence, power, sex, health and everything else that touches our lives. The new mythology pervades every home for an average of over six hours every day, confirming the fears, feeding the hopes and cultivating the assumptions television shaped in the first place. It is this new cultural climate in which political parties, schools, churches and other institutions must now find their way. ■

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