pediatric annals

Children's Television: A National Disgrace

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This article concentrates on five areas: what the age of television means; its main characteristics; highlights of our research of 18 years (an ongoing project attempting to analyze the symbolic environment into which our children are born and grow up); so-called children's television ("so-called" because only one-fifth of children's viewing goes into children's television—for the first time in human history, children are plunged into an accelerated version of the adult cultural environment); and the political situation that surrounds these issues.

You have heard the story about the teacher who asked, "Children, what does this century owe Thomas Edison?" One child raised his hand and said, "Teacher, without Edison we would still be watching television by candlelight!"

It is inconceivable to most of our children and grandchildren that there was an age before television. Television has become as much a fabric of our lives as pre-industrial religion and ritual must have been. Television has ushered in not just another medium but a new era. It has created a new symbolic environment into which our children are born.

The significance of that symbolic environment can be best reflected in the word that sums up the most distinctive element of human life, the most crucial distinction between humans and other creatures—

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storytelling. We experience the world through stories. Whomever tells stories of a culture defines the terms and the agenda of human discourse and the common issues we face.

There are three major ways in which human beings have told stories throughout history. The first and certainly most lasting, the pre-industrial, was a period of face-to-face storytelling. There was no way of saying "Well, I don't have to tell you about this, you can look it up." Stories about the origin of life, the nature of the universe, and the modes of right and wrong conduct had to be remembered, rehearsed and repeated in something we now call ritual mythology, even religion.

It was only relatively recently, with the coming of the industrial revolution, that the method of storytelling changed. The first mechanical device putting out standardized commodities was the printing press. The first manufactured commodity was the book. Indeed, that was necessary for all the rest of the upheavals of the industrial revolution to come.

With the book you record and mass-produce the stories of the culture. You make it possible for people to get off the land, to go into other countries and continents, and to take much of their culture, much of their world, much of their mythology, and much of

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their community with them. The book breaks up the ritual. It ushers in the Reformation. It makes it possible for people to go anywhere in the world and no longer be dependent on the local culture. The ministration of the chief or the priest is no longer necessary just to convey the word. The early Protestants could say, "Here is the Book, read it for yourself." Others could say, "Take it with you, develop your own interpretation, your own tastes." Different cultures and different religions could begin to live side by side.

The book made possible the plurality of storytelling, the plurality of "worlds" that storytelling builds for different people.

A modern mass public is a community that never meets face-to-face. It is created through publication. The notion of self-government itself is predicated on the ability to be reasonably free to cultivate competing and conflicting conceptions of life and of society side by side, competing for attention, competing for support, competing for votes.

In the last 40 years or so, the situation has fundamentally changed. The change is due to television. Television, unlike all other previous media, is not a selectively used medium. Most people use television relatively non-selectively. They watch not by the program but by the clock.

Television is turned on an average of 7 hours a day in the American home. In half of our homes, typically ones that cannot afford a great variety of cultural activities, it is turned on in the morning and turned off at night. It is used as a ritual. It has become the functional equivalent of a new religion. It reaches those whom no previous central authority could reach (such as children) and reaches them at home, quickly and continuously. It incorporates most of what we know in common as art, science, and government. It has replaced the Church in that historic nexus of power which used to be State and Church.

Television presents a common world to all our people, the only common denominator in an otherwise heterogeneous nation, the first true melting pot of our country. That common world is the largest single source of information. Most of it comes from entertainment: the education we choose for its immediate rewards.

We have studied the effects of television on our health habits, on images of science, on conceptions of medicine, on orientation to politics, on occupational choices, on educational and intelligence test scores, on violence, religion, and other issues.

What are some general features of the world of television? For the first time in history, children are born into a symbolic world that does not originate with parents, church, or school, and requires no literacy. Television has replaced most stories told by parents, and has either replaced or reorganized what we learn in schools or in church. It has become the norm, the standard to which we all have to relate. We use it as a measure of our own behavior and of the behavior of

"Don't you understand? This is life, this is what is happening. We can't switch to another channel."

people around us. We use it as a way of defining ourselves. Even if you do not watch television, you learn it through people who do.

The process of presenting a common world to an otherwise heterogeneous community has for many people enormous attraction. These are people who never read books, never participated in the riches of culture, never saw anyone who was famous or powerful or beautiful or infamous, who are isolated, parochial, removed from the centers of action. These people are now in the mainstream. That is the enormous attraction of television. No one is out in the sticks. You can be in the hospital or in a prison, you can be very young or very old, you can be anywhere and anybody—you are now part of the mainstream. You can be very poor and still many of the same famous and rich and beautiful and ugly people come into your own home as they come into the homes of rich people.

For many this is a tremendous enrichment of cultural horizons. They will not give it up. They will not turn it off. Even to ask them is an arrogance that does not respect the genuine attraction of being a part of the mainstream to people who have always been out of it. What we should do is ask about its dynamics, ask about its lessons, because that is not a private business. It has become a major, central, public issue and problem of our times.

A typical viewer of prime time sees a very stable cast of about 300 characters each week (we have been monitoring this for 18 years). What kind of cast is this? Well, about 41 characters a week are engaged in law enforcement. Protecting society is the main preoccupation of the largest single occupation on the air. Prime time is a time of power. That is why it has so much violence. (Daytime is a time of internal tur-

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bulence. For all its melodramatic qualities, it has much more relevance to things that are close to people than the feverish macho rituals of prime time.) While 41 characters enforce the social order, about 23 criminals threaten it each and every week. There are about 12 doctors, 6 lawyers and 3 judges engaged in enforcing the rules of the game.

Men outnumber women 3 to 1. The representation of young people (under 18) is one-third of their true population. The representation of old people (65 and above) is less than one-fifth. These are marginal markets and thus marginal people; television unwittingly favors the world of its best customers.

The question of representation is not just a question of numbers, like a census. It is a question of the range of opportunities about which people growing up in the culture learn. If you are white, male, in the prime of life, there are no limits. You can do almost anything. If you are a woman, non-white, young or old or in any sense some member of a minority, you are underrepresented not only in number but also in opportunities, save one: you are over-victimized.

Violence is a demonstration of power. On television it is a dramatic device to demonstrate what happens between different kinds of people in a conflict. Who tends to get away with what against whom? That is the principal lesson of violence. To reduce that to the question of aggression alone as an isolated behavior is sheer obfuscation. It is the favorite media question because, just as the programs themselves, it has a repressive control function. Although true on a low level, it is not the major lesson.

The more we are exposed to violence-laden television the more we exhibit what we call the "mean world syndrome." We absorb a sense of mistrust and insecurity, a sense of living in a mean and dangerous world in which we must protect ourselves and must depend on strong people and measures for protection. If anything, it is a device that tends to put people in their place according to their status. It makes those who are lower in status feel weaker, more vulnerable, and more easily controlled.

There is a direct correlation between amount of exposure and expressions of insecurity, vulnerability and dependence. The slight, if often tragic, relationship to actual imitated violence is the fallout from this vast social control exercise. I submit that we should be equally concerned with the kind of debilitation that increases feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, feeling of dependence, especially among those who are already more vulnerable, who are already lower on the scale of power, namely women, children, minorities. This is the mechanism that maintains and exacerbates the injustices and the inequities of our society. That is how violence really works.

One would think that in what has been called a wasteland (a term which does not give full justice to its rich dynamism) children's television would be an oasis. Unfortunately, the opposite is true. It is the real desert. It is called the "kidvid ghetto" in the industry. Like a ghetto or slum, it is the high-profit, quick turnover, most exploited sector of a market.

There is no civilized country that does not have at least a half-hour of high quality programming for children in good time. We do not have a single network that has any kind of regular children's programming even once a week. Public broadcasting used to provide most quality children's programs. But for the first time in our television history the fall schedule will be devoid of any original programming produced for the Public Broadcast System (PBS) by an American producer. Instead, the schedule will be composed of foreign acquisitions and repeats.

Where do quality children's programs come from? They come from PBS and from abroad. The BBC, the Italian, French, Scandinavians, Germans or Japanese TV systems have between 4 and 6 times the number of hours of new programming we have. Many of the highest quality programs that win international festival prizes of children's programming come from the Soviet Union and other countries of Eastern Europe. That is where you will find some of the most popular productions, the classics, the highest paid talents, and the most compelling stories of family, friendship, and cooperation on television. Unlike our situation of not having any decent programs, the Soviet Union has several major studios engaged only in producing children's films and programs.

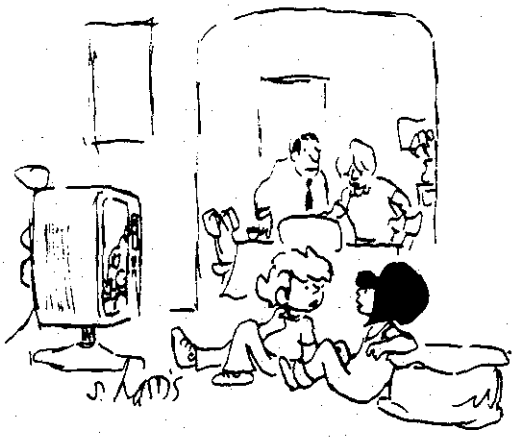
In the transfer of controls from partly public to mostly private hands, in the shift of controls from one set of large conglomerates to another set of even larger conglomerates, otherwise called deregulation, and under the impact of the "merger mania," the previously existing mechanisms of citizen participation and consumer protection are being dismantled. The first to suffer is always the weakest and most vulnerable. The situation is a national disgrace.

The Wirth-Lautenberg bill* would mandate at least 5 hours of programming for young children during the week. It is not censorship but is a step toward liberation

*The Children's Television Act of 1985 (H.R. #3216 and S. #1594) was introduced into the House of Representatives by T. Wirth (D-Col) and into the Senate by F. Lautenberg (D-NJ).

of television from the constraints of the marketplace selling children to the greediest and highest bidder.

We need a new environmental movement, addressed at the environment that is most crucial to our humanity: the environment of stories we tell our children, the environment that shapes so much of what we think and do in common. This environmental movement has to be a coalition of parents, health professionals, educators and citizens. It is designed not to censor but to *liberate* from the iron censorship of a market of manufactured daydreams that debilitate and hurt so many. That, at least, is a dream that heals.



"I understand they had a very deprived childhood. Everything was in black and white."