TELEVISION AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Edith-Hilde KAITER
"Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy, Constanța

Abstract: The present article is concerned with the shifting role of television as one factor contributing to the social changes which are taking place worldwide. Some of the factors which have produced changes in the influence of the television and in the kind of messages it transmits have resulted from a rapidly changing technology.
The emergence of television certainly contributed to the growth of the kind of messages which are now communicated to the world and their effect. These changes have had a profound impact upon the society we live in, in ways that are somehow beginning to become clear. The belief that its impact has been dramatic has been largely disputed.

Keywords: television, instrument of communication, commercial enterprise, youth, effect.

We like to believe that our society is more humane today and, in a number of areas, more sophisticated than it was fifty years ago. On the other hand, the contemporary liberal and cosmopolitan lifestyle of middle-class professionals depends on the orderly routine bourgeois behavior of millions of ordinary people. If they come to share the lifestyle of those who rely on their support, there is some question as to whether the foundations of the society will enable it to function in ways which permit the style to remain viable. Paradoxically, as Rousseau suggested about the impact of the philosophers of the French Enlightenment: those responsible for the creation and distribution of mass culture know enough to be skeptical, but not enough to seriously examine the possibility that skepticism can contribute to the decay of those very values and structures which enable them to live the lifestyle they enjoy so much.

Many of us say that television is to be blamed for it. Television became available in experimental forms in the late 1920s. After World War II, an improved form became popular in the United States and Britain, and television sets became commonplace in homes, businesses, and institutions. During the 1950s, television was the primary medium for influencing public opinion; television has changed the way countries are governed; the news we watch has changed the way people vote. And it even has changed the way we think. The power of television news astonishes everybody, even those who work for it. The impact of the media on the terms, in which we see the world, has a new valence and we can even speak of an ideological process. It concerns the formation of consciousness, even if those subjected to it tend to be unconscious of. It escapes our consciousness inasmuch as it constitutes the framework within which our consciousness is produced.

Television is a major business in a competitive capitalist society. Whatever the social and political views of those who make decisions are, the bottom line is capturing audience attention and increasing the size of audiences. This is what produces profits and insures solvency. By and large, therefore, commercial television entertainment will seek the lowest common denominator in order to capture mass audiences and the advertisements which accrue as a result. Within the limits set by societal control, this means emphasizing sexuality, comedy and violence of a sort. The emphasis of news programs is bound to center on the personal and the dramatic rather than upon the abstract and discursive.

It is hard to see how this emphasis can be escaped except in a society, such as the former Soviet Union, in which television was tightly controlled. Even in Russia, however, attempts have been made in recent years to follow just such a pattern in an effort to enlarge

audiences even as censorship has been reduced. Given the expense of producing programs, including news programs and television specials, local network affiliates in America depend upon the networks for both entertainment and news programs. While some things have changed, the decisions about the news and entertainment which blanket America are made by relatively few persons in a few key cities.

The charge made by writers such as Edward Epstein, David Altheide, Robert Snow and others that television news necessarily emphasizes entertainment may not be warranted on the conscious level. Herbert Gans argues, for example, that newsmen do not let questions of audience appeal determine coverage. However, as Av Westin notes, such concerns are bound to play some role. Anchors, producers, and directors want audiences to tune in, not out. Ratings are closely monitored and they affect news judgment, as do time and financial constraints and availability of staff.

Of course, decisions as to what, in fact, will capture the attention of audiences are often based on the instinctive readings of audiences by those in charge of production and, thus, the values of such people come into play in a hit-or-miss pattern of decision making. Producers have and exercise more discretion than they (at least publicly) realize. Audiences are not turned off or on as quickly or easily as they assume. Nevertheless, audience and audience appeal are always in the minds of those making program decisions, even when it comes to choosing one anchor over another.

It is difficult to separate the effects of television as an instrument of communication from the fact that it is a commercial enterprise. By its very nature television adds new dimensions to the communication of information, and radically changes the rules of the game. The consequences for certain aspects of life are clear. Far more than newspapers, radio, or movies, television provides its audience with a sense that what it sees is true and real. The audience sees events taking place in its living room. Stories, documentaries, even drama, take on a reality with which other media cannot compete. The written word and even the spoken word remain somewhat abstract to most readers and listeners, but moving pictures seen in the privacy of one's home are extremely compelling. Even if one knows that footage may have been spliced together and, conceivably, presents a somewhat distorted perspective (and few are aware of that fact), it is hard to escape the perception that one is viewing reality.

Television has broken down class and regional boundaries to a far greater extent than other media. Books and newspapers are segregated by area and readership. Only the well educated can read serious books, and the style of the New York Times only appeals to those with a certain level of education and affluence. Thus, to some extent, newspapers and books encourage the segregation of knowledge. Radio began to break down that segregation. Television goes much further. There are programs which cater to more elite audiences and are watched only by them, but insofar as television seeks the lowest common denominator and finds it, different people, seen as a group are introduced to the same themes in the same way. Roots and other “docudramas,” as well as the five o'clock news, are watched by millions of us of all educational and social backgrounds, and we see the same pictures and receive the same information.

Television breaks down regional boundaries as well. The same voices, the same accents, and the same lifestyles reach rural areas and urban ones. At one point in time young people from rural backgrounds or small towns experienced genuine culture shock when they enrolled in an elite college or even a major state university. They confronted new and different lifestyles for the first time. The cultural gap between rural places and urban metropolitan areas has been considerably narrowed, and the effects of new metropolitan styles spread far more rapidly than they once did.

The process begins early in childhood. As Meyrowitz points out, cultures in which knowledge is dependent on the ability to read require substantial preparation before one can

penetrate many of the secrets of adult life. Television has broken that barrier. Children can and do watch television programs which tell them about the off-stage behavior of parents, and introduce them to themes which they would not have encountered until much later in life in the past. Young children are exposed to the news almost every day along with their parents. Most so-called family programs deal with concerns with which children would not have been familiar even twenty-five years ago, and millions of children are still awake at hours when more "mature" television programs are shown because it is difficult for parents to control their children's viewing of television without limiting their own viewing as well. While a child has very limited access to the content of books and newspapers being read by adults in the same room, a television program being watched by adults is accessible to any child in the same space. Many children are exposed to adult news, for example, because their parents watch the news during dinner.

With book reading, a family can stay together in a single room and yet be divided into different households. In multiple-set television households, children and adults can be in different rooms and still be united into a single informational network. Series such as *MASH* or *Dallas* were seen by very large numbers of children under ten years old. All of this has played an important role in weakening traditional ties of church, ethnic group, and neighborhood. It has contributed to social and geographic mobility as much as the revolution in transportation, in part because it has enabled people to feel almost equally at home in some of the cities presented in the series mentioned above. Therefore it can be said that culture has been homogenized and nationalized.

Let's consider America: it is impossible to understand the revolution which took place in their values and attitudes during the 1960s and 1970s without taking into account the influence of television on the fabric of American life, including its breaking down of old barriers and its weakening of old ties. For the first time, metropolitan America was becoming all of America. In the 1920s, the new therapeutic ethic of self-realization had only permeated a small section of America's metropolitan upper middle-class. By the 1970s, as the authors of Habits of the Heart point out, it had spread far more widely. Not surprisingly, few realize how rapid the pace of change has been. The events of the 1960s, including the rapid loss of faith in American institutions, and the legitimation of lifestyles once considered to be deviant, could not have occurred in a pre-television age.

America has become, as Richard Merelman points out in Making Something of Ourselves, a "loose bounded culture." Americans' primordial ties to family, locality, church, and what is considered appropriate behavior have eroded, and Americans have lost their sense of place. They are not alone in this, of course. Their experience is increasingly shared by Europeans, Japanese and, perhaps, even Russians. Certainly mass television is not the only factor at work. The revolution is real, however, and the epoch we live in is quite new." The working-class may continue to identify with those they know and with whom they work and live; but public reality is now such that we also know and develop ersatz intimate and intense relationships with public figures of all kinds, from anchormen to rock performers to politicians.

The impact of television on the substance of politics has been at least as great as it has been on our personal lives. Seeing political events, the expressions on faces, and the use of hands or eyes during an interview adds a concrete dimension to political figures, even as it may reduce the discursive elements in the message conveyed. Politicians who sweat on television lose points as compared to those who do not. The camera can make a political figure look as if he or she is evading a question or stammering and confused, and materials which might never appear in print, or at least would not have the same impact, routinely appear on television.

Television has changed the very structure of political discourse. Political figures could once issue carefully written pronouncements to the newspapers. They now appear on television interviews with warts and stutters intact. Spoken communication, after all, is rarely as well structured as written discourse. We rely on all sorts of cues to get our message across, which work well in the lecture hall but not as part of a permanent television record. Politicians, and others, are caught exhibiting behavior on stage which in other epochs would have occurred only off stage, thus breaking down the barrier between the two realms. In print, for example, politicians and others can set their thoughts down carefully. They conceal their doubts, their boredom and their prejudices when they present public statements. In the age of television, however, this is far more difficult, especially in time of crisis. As television becomes more and more ubiquitous, we all have increasing access to backstage behavior.

Most of us could not easily survive the monitoring of our conversations with close friends about other colleagues and groups; nor would we be terribly proud of our diction. In this sense, Big Brother is not watching you; Big Brother is you, watching. Indeed we are all watching each other and we are all aware that we are being watched, especially if we are in any way public figures.

Generally speaking, the majority of peoples long for great leaders. Yet, such is their ambivalence toward authority that they also revel in their weaknesses. Television inevitably caters to that second wish. In so doing, however, it reduces our power to produce great leaders. Meyrowitz makes the point quite well: The current drive toward intimacy with our leaders involves a fundamental paradox. In pursuing our desire to be "close" to great people...we often destroy their ability to function as great people. "Greatness" manifests itself in the onstage performance and, by definition, in its isolation from backstage behaviors.... In intimate spheres, people are often very much alike: they eat, they get tired, they sleep and so on.

When we see our leaders in varieties of situations and locations, when we observe them as they respond to spontaneous interviews or as they grow weary from a day of work or campaigning, we do not simply learn more about them. By searching behind the fronts of performers, we also change the roles that can be performed and perceived – as well as the images that high status performers have of themselves.

The television revolution has affected newspapers and news magazines in a number of ways. It has forced them to turn to indepth reportage of the kind that television handles much less effectively. On the other hand, it has encouraged them – partly for competitive reasons, and partly because television has created a new atmosphere – to seek out the same dramatic off-stage exposure that television can achieve. Vietnam and Watergate certainly contributed to the development of an adversarial press, but the changing assumptions of media personnel as to what constitutes news and how one deals with political figures were more important in the long run.

However, we must admit, as much as we love to deny it, the fact that television is part of our lives! The question is how much we want the public opinion to influence us. The answer clearly depends on one's values. Most of us would presumably welcome consensuses that would help us to solve common problems and to nurture a more peaceful world. On the other hand, in such areas as culinary practices, architecture, and styles of dress, art and music, it is doubtful that consensuses crossing national borders would be universally welcomed. Hopefully, we can somehow find ways to enjoy the potential benefits of international public opinion without sacrificing the uniqueness of national character.

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