

## What TV Is Doing to America (1955)

Television emerged as the most popular form of entertainment after World War II. In the process it transformed leisure time, and, some critics argued, degraded the quality of life. In 1955 U. S. News and World Report magazine assessed the impact of the television industry.

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The biggest of the new forces in American life today is television. There has been nothing like it in the postwar decade, or in many decades before that—perhaps not since the invention of the printing press. Even radio, by contrast, was a placid experience.

The impact of TV on this country has been so massive that Americans are still wondering what hit them. Has the effect been good or bad? What permanent effects on the American way of life may be expected? These and other questions are considered in this survey.

Probably there are some people in the U.S. who have never seen a television program, but you would have to go into the hills to find them. Two out of three U.S. families now own their own sets, or are paying for them. In 32 million homes, TV dials are flicked on and off, from channel to channel, at least 100 million times between 8 a.m. and midnight.

Everywhere, children sit with eyes glued to screens—for three to four hours a day on the average. Their parents use up even more time mesmerized by this new marvel—or monster. They have spent 15 billion dollars to look since 1946.

Now, after nearly 10 years of TV, people are j asking: "What hath TV wrought? What is this thing doing to us?"

Solid answers to this question are very hard to get. Pollsters, sociologists, doctors, teachers, the TV people themselves come up with more contradictions than conclusions whenever they start asking.

But almost everybody has an opinion and wants to air it.

What do these opinions add up to? People have strong views. Here are some widely held convictions, both against and for television:

That TV has kept people from going places and doing things, from reading, from thinking for themselves. Yet it is said also that TV has taken viewers vicariously into strange and fascinating spots and situations, brought distinguished and enchanting people into their living rooms, given them a new perspective.

That TV has interfered with schooling, kept children from learning to read and write, weakened their eyesight and softened their muscles. But there are those who hold that TV has made America's youngsters more "knowing" about life, more curious, given them a bigger vocabulary. Teaching by TV, educators say, is going to be a big thing in the future.

That TV arouses morbid emotions in children, glorifies violence, causes juvenile crime—that it starts domestic quarrels, tends to loosen morals and make people lazy and sodden. However, it keeps families together at home, provides a realm of cheap entertainment never before available, stimulates new lines of conversation.

That TV is giving the U.S. an almost primitive language, made up of grunts, whistles, standardized wisecracks and clichés—that it is turning the average American into a stereotype. Yet it is breaking down regional barriers and prejudices, ironing out accents, giving people in one part of the country a better understanding of people in other parts. That TV is milking politics "a rich man's game," turning statesmanship into a circus, handing demagogues a new weapon. But it is giving Americans their first good look at the inside of their Government, letting them judge the people they elect by sight as well as by sound and fury.

That TV has distorted and debased Salesmanship, haunting people with singing "commercials" and slogans. However, because or in spite of TV, people are buying more and more things they never before thought they needed or wanted.

These are just some of the comments that people keep on making about TV. The experts say that it probably will be another generation before there is a firm basis of knowledge about television's impact on America.

Today's TV child, the boy or girl who was born with a TV set in his home, is too young to analyze his feelings. Older people, despite their frequent vehemence about TV, are still far from sure whether they have all Aladdin's lamp or hold a bear by the tail,

*Goliath with tubes.* One thing you can be sure about. TV, a giant at 10, continues to grow like nobody's business. Here are some figures and comparisons: The 15 billion dollars that the U.S. people have invested in TV sets and repairs since the war is 15 per cent more than the country spent for new school and college buildings. About a billion more has gone into TV stations and equipment.

TV-viewing time is going up, not down, latest surveys show. This explodes the theory that people would taper off on television "once they got used to it." "Pull" of popular TV programs is believed to be very effective. Pollsters report that three times as many people will leave a meal to answer questions at the door as will get up to abandon "Dragnet."

The number of families holding out against TV is declining to a small fraction. There still are 16 million families without sets, but most of these families either can't pay for sets or else live out of range of TV signals.

On an average evening, twice as many set owners will be watching TV as are engaged in any other form of entertainment or leisure activity, such as movie-going, card playing, or reading. Seven out of 10 American children watch TV between 6 and 8 o'clock most evenings.

Analysts are intrigued by the evidence that adults, not children, are the real television fans. The newest trend in viewing habits is a rise in the number of housewives who watch TV in the morning. One out of five with a set now watches a morning show with regularity.

*What is it?* Why do people want TV? A \$67.50-per-week shoe repairman in San Francisco, puts it about as plainly as anyone can. "TV," he says, "is the only amusement I can afford." That was the reason he gave for paying four weeks' wages for his set.

The cobbler's comment explains TV's basic lure. It is free entertainment except for the cost of set, and repairs and electricity. It becomes so absorbing that a broken set is a family catastrophe. People will pay to have the set fixed before they will pay the milk bill, if necessary.

What does TV do to people? What do people do with TV? The researchers are digging into these questions all the time. In general, they come to theories, rather than conclusions. There are three main theories:

THEORY "A": This is widely held by people whose professions bring them into close contact with juveniles—judges, district attorneys, police officers, ministers. It assumes that TV is bound to be affecting the American mind and character because it soaks up one to five hours a day or more that used to be spent in outdoor play, in games requiring reasoning and imagination, or in reading, talking, radio listening, or movie-going.

Even the more passive of these pursuits, the theory runs, required more exercise of brain than does TV watching. Then, too, many TV programs, the theorists say, are violent or in questionable taste.

Net effect, according to these people, is a wasting away or steady decline in certain basic skills among American youngsters. Children lose the ability to read, forfeit their physical dexterity, strength and initiative.

Some see a definite connection between TV and juvenile delinquency. The Kefauver Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee has just explored this aspect. It stated:

"Members of the subcommittee share the concern of a large segment of the thinking public for the implications of the impact of this medium [television]. . . upon the ethical and cultural standards of the youth of America. It has been unable to gather proof of a direct casual relationship between the viewing of acts of crime and violence and the actual performance of criminal deeds. It has not, however, found irrefutable evidence that young people may not be negatively influenced in their present-day behavior by the saturated exposure they now receive to pictures and drama based on an underlying theme of lawlessness and crime which depict human violence."

THEORY "B": Mainly held by sociologists, communications economists, pollsters. This is that television is changing the American mind and character, although nobody knows for sure just how. The evidence is too fragmentary. The analysts are disturbed by some aspects of TV's effect on viewers. Some think TV is conditioning Americans to be "other directed," that is, getting their ideas from someone else. The early American, by contrast, is supposed to have been "inner directed," a man who thought things out for himself on the basis of his own reasoning.

A fancy name for this suspected effect of TV is "narcotic dysfunction." This means that more and more men come home in the evening, drop into a chair in front of the TV set after supper and slip into a dream world of unreality.

However, the same researchers confess that TV can have a broadening influence, bringing to the masses a taste of the arts and sciences, a peek into government that they couldn't get any other way.

THEORY "C": This is what the TV people themselves like to think. It is that television is rapidly becoming "one more service" to the U.S. public, another medium such as newspapers, magazines, radio. Some people watch TV a lot, others very little. Most people want a set around, but some don't lean on it.

The TV people minimize the idea that TV is dominating American life. It is almost as if they were afraid their own baby is getting too big. What they usually say is

that the people who allow their lives to be controlled by television were similarly dominated by radio and the movies—and that they are only a small minority.

*The TV habit.* What do the theorists base their theories on? What have they found out about the place of the TV set in American life?

Many studies have been made of the "TV habit." Latest of these indicates that TV viewing reaches a peak just after a set enters a home, then falls off rather sharply. Next, viewing begins to rise again in the average home, building up, evidently, toward a new peak that is not yet measured.

The A. C. Nielsen Company, a market research organization that attaches mechanical recorders to sets in private homes, finds this: During the 12 months ended in April, 1955, average use per day of TV sets was 4 hours and 50 minutes. That was up 4 per cent over the year before. . . .

Other studies indicate that women watch TV more than men do. Children, contrary to general impression, watch TV less than adults in the average home. Persons low in income, education or job status as a rule spend more time in front of TV sets than those with more money and education.

*What's on TV.* What do people get on TV? What do they want? Three out of every four TV programs are entertainment shows.... In a typical week of the peak TV season, in January of last year, crime, comedy, variety and Western shows accounted for 42.7 per cent of all TV program time on New York City screens. News accounted for 6.1 per cent of TV time—about the same share of time as was taken by quiz, stunt and contest shows. Other informational types of TV shows, such as interviews, weather reports, travelogues, children's instructional programs and cooking classes, got 16.2 per cent of the time.

Rating figures tend to show that people are getting just about what they want, in the opinion of the broadcasting industry. According to the "popularity" ratings of top shows, comedy and drama and straight entertainment are outpulling everything else.

*What about information?* The popularity cards seem to indicate the reaction is a stifled yawn. In a two-week period last June, when two comedy programs, the "George Gobel Show" and "I Love Lucy," were at the top of the list, each reaching more than 13 million homes, the top-ranking informational programs were way down the line. The "March of Medicine," for example, was No. 62, reaching 6.57 million homes; "Meet the Press" was No. 150, getting to 1.14 million families.

Studies also have been made of how long various programs hold their audiences. Love and adventure performances, it develops, will keep about 85 per cent of the audience to the end. By contrast, the most gripping historical sketches hold only 65 per cent, and many hold less than one third of their starting viewers. Informational programs, again, rank near the bottom in "holding power."

Television critics, who write about TV programs in newspapers and magazines, are frequently harsh in their remarks about violence, sadism, bad taste on the screen. However, Dallas W. Smythe, a professor of communications economics at the University of Illinois, analyzed New York City programs for 1955 and concludes that programs which critics liked best seldom drew the biggest audiences.

The public is fickle. Top rating is hard to hold. The viewers tire rapidly of a particular show unless the producers manage to come up with fresh material, new appeals.

## **REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Summarize the supposedly negative effects of watching television.
2. What were the benefits of television?
3. Which concerns about television strike you as being equally relevant today?