

The Effects of Television Viewing

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To say that television programming has a negative effect on the people who view it is to say nothing new. You have probably heard your minister mention from the pulpit things about television and its evil influence many times. And I know from experience that your teachers have done the same. It appears, however, that these warnings have in many cases fallen on deaf ears. We say “Yea, yea” but do nothing about it. We think we have done enough if we recognize the problem.

The purpose of this article, you understand, is not to tell you or anyone else what to watch on television. I do not care to become involved in legislating that. What I wish to do, however, is to call attention to the nature of the problem and its seriousness and to suggest that this question has some urgency about it. Television has become worse, you see, not better. It is time, I think, that we see behind the apparent innocency of “Sesame Street” and “The Brady Bunch” and recognize that the majority of current television programming is unsuitable to the Christian.

It is interesting to note that we are not the only ones who are concerned about television programming. Television programming is presently getting quite a going over on the national scene by members of Congress and other concerned groups. Pressure is being applied to the networks to clean up their mess. And, I think that you will see that we do well to pay careful attention to what these groups and individuals have to say. While they do not correctly analyze the problem, there is research available that has been done as a result of the concern of these people.

One of the main concerns of these people is the violence — murders, beatings, rapes — which is so prevalent in current programming. That there are a tremendous number of acts of violence is difficult to deny. Recent research regarding the number of acts of violence on television makes one shudder. Here are some of the facts as quoted by Mr. Richard L. Tobin, “Communications” editor of *Saturday Review*, who has long been outspoken about this problem:

In a recent survey, *Christian Science Monitor* staff members recorded, in seventy-four hours of prime time viewing during one week, 217 incidents and threats of violence and 125 killings and murders in full view of the video audience. This is a slight increase over the number of violent incidents tabulated in a similar *Monitor* survey in 1968 despite the networks public promises without end that violence on television would be reduced.

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One could cite still more studies of this sort but all essentially say the same thing — the number of violent acts contained in current television programming is appalling. These facts in themselves are very disturbing but couple this with the fact that television viewing among children is increasing rather than decreasing and we have reason to be more disturbed still. According to Dr. Looney of the University of Arizona, the average prekindergarten child spends more than 60 per cent of his waking time before a television set. By the time he goes to kindergarten the child will have devoted more hours to watching television than a student spends in four years of college classes. As a matter of record, the Arizona TV studies have found that by

the age of fourteen a child has seen 18,000 human beings killed on television.

Now all of this viewing of violence has an effect and that is why these people are upset. Senator John Pastore of Rhode Island published in 1969 a report intimating that there may be a relationship between viewing of violent acts and the rising crime rate and more recently the U.S. Surgeon General released the findings of a group of psychologists whose research led them to the conclusion that the viewing of violent acts does result in violent behavior in aggression-prone people. We have referred above to Dr. Looney who in a recent speech to the American Academy of Pediatrics urged the medical profession to wake up to the fact that research into the effect of television viewing is long overdue.

As I mentioned above, we do well if we seriously consider this research. We would be foolish to think that somehow we are immune to similar effects. But I say this with some qualification. I submit that we, too, ought to be alarmed about the facts cited above. But, the reason for the concern of people like Senator Pastore and Dr. Looney and Richard Tobin is based upon psychological and sociological concerns. Our concern must go much deeper than that. The question for us becomes a moral-ethical one. Is it right for us to unnecessarily view all of this violence? What does this do to your spiritual character?

Because I view the question to be of this nature, I am concerned about violence on television. I am even concerned about the psychological and sociological effects which result from viewing this violence. But that is not my main concern. Television viewing, I believe, has made serious inroads into our spiritual lives — subtly, unconsciously almost, television has taken its toll. What then has really happened to us and continues to happen as long as we persist in viewing?

Certainly, one of the things that has happened is that we have become very insensitive to brutality and violence. They have become commonplace and the feelings of revulsion and shock are mostly gone. Richard Tobin in a March 14, 1970 editorial in *Saturday Review* draws a parallel to ancient Rome where little by little the most unspeakable torments that can be inflicted on the human body were gradually exposed to public view in the Coliseum and other public arenas to satisfy an ever increasing public appetite for sadistic spectacle. Television networks have simply taken the legwork out of it. We need only walk across the room to satisfy our appetite. One could argue very convincingly in this regard about professional athletics, particularly football and boxing.

A second effect — harmful, too, just like the first — which concerns me is that television has become a mental pacifier for us. One's intellect certainly is not stimulated or nourished by the fare delivered on television. In addition, television viewing has taken the place of reading. Now you may argue that television is a very effective teaching device and I would agree but you must remember that neither the Bible nor the great Christian books stand much chance of being televised. It is that about which I am concerned. Television viewing has deprived us of the time that we ought to be spending in serious reading and serious study. This, too, will eventually take its toll if we do not act to change the situation.

In the final analysis, I think that what we are seeing is that we are very subtly developing an insensitivity to sin. Certainly we cannot agree with the morality and the values which television provides. What we have to see in this regard is that every program presents to us a message; it says something to us; it does not enter our homes as a neutral nothingness which we can treat as we see fit.

There is still more, however. We have become desensitized in other areas as well. Take, for example, the whole drama question. Drama has suddenly become very proper as long as it

occurs in a half-hour family movie called “The Brady Bunch”. It is drama; is it not? It is acting, is it not? Have we been lulled to sleep by the seemingly innocent comedy of these productions? That makes us horribly inconsistent on the whole movie question, does it not? It ought not surprise us then that you as young people of the church wonder about the consistency of such a stand. Certainly the difference cannot be the place in which this drama occurs, whether at home or in the theatre.

Our homes, too, have felt the effect of television programming. Fathers and mothers have used the television set as a convenient babysitter. It keeps the kids quiet for a little while. We ought to consider, however, to whom we have entrusted their care and their attention. They are being instructed, they are being fed a message, while they quietly sit there.

You see, then, that I consider the problem to be serious because the nature of the problem is serious. I believe that it calls for some very serious soul-searching on our part. It is time to critically analyze what is being sent to us through television programming.

What do I propose to do about it? I suppose we could hold a Protestant Reformed garage sale advertising a couple hundred good used television sets. But you and I know that that is not the answer. Neither am I proposing that we create a Protestant Reformed “index” of television programs. What I do suggest, however, is that you exercise the sanctifying grace which God has given you so that some control can be exercised over this machine and what it presents. I guess what I am suggesting is that in this “turned on” age we ourselves ought to be a whole lot more “turned off” by what we see coming at us in current television programming.

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