

TELEVISION WATCHING AND US....

Imagine you are a person from another planet, observing human beings on earth.

Observe a family on earth for one evening. What do you see?

The family gets together in the largest room of the house and sits together in front of a big black box. They gaze almost unblinkingly at the pictures that flicker on and off. They take breaks to eat. This can go on for two or three hours. What would you think the box was? A sort of God that the earthlings worshipped?

What do you notice that this box did to the family?

Does it help people to be with each other, relate, communicate, and understand each other?

Does it drive them apart?

In this passage we shall try to understand some of the effects of television watching.

First let us look at the programmes themselves. What are the different kinds of programmes on TV?

Some of them are educational and focus on documentaries on wildlife, history, geography or science.

Some of them are sports.

But most of them are Films or Soaps or Entertainment programmes. Most of these show a lot of violence and other material not suitable for children (Probably not suitable for anyone!). A lot of children watch wrestling on TV which is all about people being very violent with each other.

Before you switch on the TV today, think about the following things:

What do you think watching a lot of violence on TV does to people?

Do you think it might make them insensitive to other people's suffering and pain?

Do you think it might make them get "used" to violence?

Why do you think violence of this kind fascinates people and holds their interests?

If you are someone who watches WWF:

Why do you think you are attracted to it?

Do you think its because children or people feel powerless, and when they watch someone else being violent, they identify with that person and at least for a brief while, feel powerful?

What could be some other reasons?

What about cartoons? It is supposed to be suitable for children, even really small children. But think of how much violence is there in a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon. Also think how despite characters getting flattened by a bulldozer or flying off a cliff, they never seem to die or get seriously injured for very long.

What message do you think this gives small children who watch cartoons?

Do you think it gives them a good picture of reality?

Do also ask yourself why is violence equated with fun?

Have you realized that mostly TV is free? Of course you may pay a small amount to your cable operator. But think how much money goes into making programmes. For so many different channels. For 24 hrs a day. Where does this money come from?

Do you think they come from advertisements?

Today, watch 10 TV advertisements. Try and figure out what message each ad is trying to give you.

What do advertisements do?

Do they give you accurate and detailed information about their products?

Do they try to somehow get you to buy their products?

What promises does each advertisement make?

Do they give you a picture of what is normal?

Do they tell you what will make you happy or of what is "fun"?

Most TV programs are only a way of getting you to watch the advertisements. This is because it is the advertiser who pays for the programmes, in most cases.

What about the news channels? Isn't it important to know what's going on around the world?

Have you ever watched news on TV? What do you think about it?

Where do you think the money to run news programs comes from?

Mostly the same companies who run other programs also run news channels, so they get their money from the companies that run advertisements on the TV.

Do you think this might affect the kind of news that is shown on TV?

For example, if a company Y ran a lot of ads on channel X, would channel X's news program be able to cover a story that shows company Y violating pollution laws?

There are a few channels abroad that are not funded by advertisers. Ask some adults you know if they have seen these channels and what they are like.

So then is the problem only with the types of programs that are shown?

If you had good educational programs then would TV watching be really beneficial?

Jerry Manders, who wrote a book called "4 Arguments for the Elimination of Television" says NO.

He says whether the programmes are educational or not, there are 4 good reasons why TV watching is extremely harmful.

1. Some scientists studied brainwave patterns of people who were watching TV. They found that the brain wave patterns are very similar to that of people in a hypnotic trance. The flicker of the screen, the rapidly changing images and the fact that people gaze unblinkingly at the small screen, seems to put them in a trance like state. In this state one watches passively and one does not usually think about or question what one sees.

Is this true in your experience?

2. People often use TV to change their mood.

Have you noticed yourself switching on the TV when you are bored or feeling unhappy?

What is wrong with this you might ask? Well don't you think this makes you dependant on TV?

Maybe if you did not turn the TV on, you might discover that there are other creative ways of using your time, where you can do things instead of watching other people do things.

Also maybe learning to stay with your feeling of unhappiness would help you understand yourself and deal with the feelings.

Does TV really get rid of bad feelings or does it postpone your having to deal with them.

What do you think?

3. Jerry Manders says that we, like other animals, in a situation of danger, instinctively get ready to fight or run away. This is called "the fight or flight" response. Have you noticed what happens to you when you feel scared, your heartbeat goes up, you start breathing hard. ? This is actually the body getting ready to fight or run away.

Researchers have found that our bodies can't make out the difference between danger in real life and danger on TV. Our bodies react in the same way to both. Have you noticed yourself holding your breath while watching something scary on TV, or have you noticed your heart racing while watching a scene full of suspense?

So if this happens several times in an hour, the body keeps getting ready to fight or run, but doesn't do either. This seems to build up a lot of stress in our bodies.

This is why children who watch a lot of TV are hyperactive, because their bodies have to release all the stress that has got built up, once the TV is switched off.

4. But the scariest reason of them all is this. In real life things mostly happen very slowly. Watch the room you are in. You may see people walking in and out, curtains may flap in the breeze, the fan may be turning, the leaves you can see through the window may rustle in the wind and some times you may hear a bird calling or some traffic noise.

Now compare this with 5 minutes of TV. Pictures keep changing very fast (In ads the images change the fastest)

The people change, the places change, things are always happening.

Jerry Manders says TV makes real life boring in comparison. Does this ring a bell for you?

Where do we all have to live our lives - in reality or on TV?

So if TV makes real life boring for us we might value our real lives, the everyday life that we live, less than the entertainment on TV.

So in a way a half an hour documentary on a forest could make the actual forest a boring place. You would expect to see all the interesting things quickly and might not have learnt the patience to wait several hours to watch a deer or spot a particular bird.

Think about these things.

Do you think you have agreed without much independent thinking with the author?

Do you reject the author's view because you "feel" uncomfortable with them?

For Parents

Effects of too much TV violence on young children include:

Increasing their appetite for more violence in entertainment and in real life

Increasing aggressiveness and anti-social behavior.

Increasing their fear of becoming victims.

Making them less sensitive to violence and to victims of violence.

When children see characters on TV or in movies win by using physical force, they begin to see violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflict.

As a result, children use physical or verbal abuse toward others on the playground or at school.

Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.

Viewing violence encourages children to see other people as "enemies" rather than as individuals with thoughts and feelings like themselves. Children who cannot put themselves in others' shoes may become less desirable playmates.

Children may become more fearful of the world around them. Watching TV and movies in which the world is a dangerous place where violence triumphs over peace may magnify children's naturally anxieties.

Children who view too much media violence may have more difficulty getting along with others. If children do not see acts of kindness between other children and adults, they are less likely to be kind, or resolve their conflicts peacefully. This makes other children less eager to play with them.

Violent TV programs do not teach good language skills. Young children tend to repeat things they hear as they begin to develop their own vocabularies.

Violent movies and TV programs show children a very limited way to talk about their problems and to solve them.

Viewing TV violence limits children's imaginations. Make-believe play helps children learn about themselves and the world around them. Yet, many toys marketed today are associated with violent programs or movies. Children tend to act out scenes they have already viewed with the very same characters. If toys only encourage children to imitate scenes of violence, what kind of benefits are they getting from play?

Books about Children and Television:

Four Arguments For the Elimination of Television, Jerry Mander, (NY, William Morow)

The Plug-In Drug and Unplugging the Plug-In Drug, Marie Winn, (NY, Viking/Penguin)

Amusing Ourselves to Death, Neil Postman, (NY, Viking)

Who's Bringing Them Up? Martin Large, (Gloucester, UK, Hawthorn Press)

Useful Links

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/home/hand/tentip.htm>

<http://www.scattorneygeneral.org/public/unplug.html>

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/home/manmed/manages.htm>

<http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/hcpt.htm>

- Divya