

The Touch of a Button

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After sunset, the blue glare of the television screen can be seen in just about any home all across the world. Millions of people a day will be caught idly sitting, watching their favorite program and slowly letting their lives pass away. Television has become a pivotal and massive part of everyday life. News, music, entertainment everything there is can be found by simply pressing a button. The world is at our fingertips. Or is it? With the television generation growing up before our very eyes, we are becoming aware of some unforeseen social consequences. The far-reaching influences of television are quickly turning into a monster of a social problem.

The controversy surrounding this issue is fueled mainly by the public's desire to keep what they see as a valuable tool in their lives. It is generally believed that television can be a great educational tool. Many also argue that television doesn't promote violence as critics so often claim, but it might actually prevent it. While these concerns are certainly valid, the public must also acknowledge the unrealistic social standards television establishes. Moreover, how is television affecting society as a whole, and what is its relationship to the decline of social capital?

How often do we, as media consumers, crave a good action movie? Our society considers itself above the raging mobs of the coluseum, but more often than not we find ourselves devouring movies like *Gladiator*. In recent study researchers found, "80% of all television programs contain some violence. A typical program contains about five violent acts" (Demers 37). Another study asserts, "By the time your child reaches the age of 14, it is estimated that he

or she has watched 13,000 killings and thousands of other violent acts on television" (Demers 36). While we stand agape at the social horrors of the past, we pull out the easy chair and comfortably allow the same violence to flow into our homes. The effect of violence on children is undeniable. A team of psychologists in the 1960's did a test to demonstrate the short-term effects of violent programs on children. They had one group of kids watch a film of adults behaving violently towards a doll. This group was placed in a playroom with another group of children who had been shown a film where the adults were not violent to the doll. The study concluded that the group who viewed the violent film was not only aggressive to the doll in the playroom, but to their playmates as well. This study is an excellent example of how children learn through observation. Children are constantly imitating people they interact with such as parents, teachers, and siblings (Demers 2022). What is unfortunate about this is that children have extended this imitation to their favorite television characters. Who hasn't seen a child run through the house with a towel draped over their shoulders for a cape? What children watch on television can easily corrupt this innocent form of social learning.

Television does not market violence for the fun of it—people want it. So, what does this say about humanity as a whole? Society has not progressed from the raging mobs of the coliseum; we have only found a more humane way to sate our blood lust. This is the basis of the Catharsis theory. This theory states, "Aggression is a fundamental drive or motive that can be partially or fully satisfied through vicarious experience, like watching adventure shows or athletic contests" (Demers 23). One writer states, "Young males enjoy these films [...] because they allow audiences to vicariously experience violence without engaging in it themselves" (Troy 128). While this theory is appealing, there is no major proof supporting it. For example, there should be a decrease in aggressive acts for people who watch violence, but it is evident that

violent movies inspire aggressive acts. Also while this theory may apply to the average adult, it doesn't parallel with the average adolescent and certainly not children. The Nation Institute of Mental Health has proven overwhelmingly that, "Television violence increases aggressive behavior in many children" (Demers 20).

Another reason television can be negative is because of the unrealistic social standards it institutes. A study about television and its relationship to body image states, "Television's constant portrayal of certain values, types of people, and themes (as well as the omission of others) leads viewers to adopt these as social reality. Such effects can be subtle in that they occur over time without necessary awareness" (Tiggemann 363). In essence, as television grows more corrupt, society slowly becomes tolerant of such corruption. What is disturbing is that adolescents in particular aren't watching television for pure entertainment anymore. They now are watching for social learning. This study points out, "Television is a potent source of self-socialization for adolescents. In particular the use of television is a source of behavioral and appearance standards (social learning) parallels young women's use of fashion magazines at least in part to gain information" (Tiggemann 375). The problem with this type of social learning is it's based on a fictional society. Television is slowly defining beauty and behavior standards and it's affecting many parts of everyday life. Our children are basing their opinions about the world on what they see on television. Social learning should be something gathered from real life, such as peers and family, not some fictitious reality designed only to entertain.

The main argument supporting television is its educational qualities, and although it is educational, it's no longer being used for that purpose. What fascinated our grandparents was the lightening fast availability of the news and the amazing connections established by television across the world. Our society is no longer enthralled by the opportunities television presents.

Television was once used in more moderation than it is now, and people did not watch primarily for entertainment. Television is now watched on a more regular basis, and only occasionally is viewing time used for educational purposes. Educational shows aren't what children prefer.

According to a recent poll from Mass Media in the North American Life Cycle, "By the time they reach first grade these programs [educational shows] begin to lose appeal. And by the time kids reach third grade they actually prefer adult programs more than children's" (Demers 33).

The beneficial learning opportunities are tossed aside in favor of entertainment shows.

The great irony of it all is that television, a device created for communicating, is successfully isolating society. It is not coincidental that the decline of social capital and the rise of television began at the same time. Social capital is defined as, "Features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 664-665) Only recently have sociologists connected the decline of social capital with television, but once the connection was made the evidence began to pile up. The social activities that once filled up our leisure time (such as clubs, bowling leagues, simple conversation, etc.) have been replaced by television. It has been found that, "Television is [...] the only leisure activity that seems to inhibit participation outside the home. TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home, especially social gatherings and informal conversation. TV viewers are homebodies" (Putnam 679). Television is taking up large chunks of our time, and with multiple sets in every home it is a very isolated activity. So, why is this bad? Families are isolating themselves by spending more time with the television than each other. People need to spend time with other people. Interaction with one another establishes tangible connections that cannot be substituted. Television gives a false sense of connection with characters that aren't real. People find themselves relating to real life situations not by their own

experiences, but what they have seen on television.

Television is our world's automatic easy button—easy entertainment, easy education, easy socialization, and even easy cooking ideas. The possibilities are limitless. The experiences of life are passed up for a better, easier second hand experience. Life isn't easy and it's impossible to learn about life by simply watching it. Television has become an unnecessary distraction from the real world. The world is out there waiting for people to quit wasting their precious time. Turn off the television and make time for what's important.

Works Cited

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