A QUESTION OF IMPACT

by Joel Swerdlow

Historian Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress, has called television "the next great crisis in human consciousness." Such crises attend the birth of every new form of mass communication. Even the written word did not emerge unchallenged. Plato warned that disciples of writing would "generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the shadow of wisdom without the reality." The printing press, too, had its critics. It bred heresy and dissent, some said, and gave common folk dangerous ideas.

Now television is under attack. Will its accusers someday seem quaint? Or is the "visual" culture of television a revolution to be feared and fought?

That some kind of revolution has occurred cannot be denied. Ninety-eight percent of all U.S. homes have at least one TV set; it is turned on for an average of more than six hours a day, although it may not always command the viewers' undivided attention. No other leisure activity has ever consumed such a big chunk of Americans' time. Watching television is what Americans do more than anything but work (if employed) and sleep. Appropriately enough, brain wave studies indicate that children and adults alike lapse into a "predominantly alpha wave state" (which usually precedes sleep) after only 30 seconds of television viewing.[1]

TV has also eclipsed rival media. In 1979, total revenues in the United States from all book sales were $6.3 billion; for commercial television, advertising revenues alone totaled $10.2 billion. Television reshaped radio content and listening patterns and cut per capita movie attendance from 29 in 1946 to 5 in 1979. It was an accessory to the deaths of big-city afternoon newspapers.

But what is television's impact on *people?* How does it affect the way we view the world, our neighbors, ourselves? How does it change our behavior?

Firm answers are hard to come by. Because television is so pervasive, researchers find it virtually impossible to form control groups for purposes of comparison. Anyone growing up without television is, by definition, "abnormal." Today, schol-

ars seeking to examine the effect of TV on learning, spending habits, voting patterns, perceptions, and a wide variety of behavior must generally be content to contrast "heavy viewers" with "light viewers" rather than viewers with nonviewers. This approach carries certain risks, because the heaviest TV viewers tend to be people at the lower end of the income/education ladder, a characteristic that may in itself account for certain of the behavioral traits commonly associated with heavy television watching.

Even so, research into the behavioral implications of television—using statistical modeling, content analysis, galvanic skin tests, brain wave studies, and other techniques—has become a glamor industry in academe. While the hundreds of published studies tend to shy from making explicit the relationship of cause to effect, most of the findings are strongly suggestive. The literature is virtually devoid of arguments that television is either powerless or harmless.

Learning: The difficulties in America's classrooms obviously stem from many causes. *Why Johnny Can't Read* appeared in 1955, well before many U.S. homes had TV sets. Family instability, lack of discipline at home and in the schools, and educational fads have all taken their toll. But not even the most sympathetic analyst absolves TV of a major share of the blame.

"This is my husband, Taylor," went the caption of this 1978 Weber cartoon. "His brain has turned to mush from too much television."

Ever since the first members of the TV generation began applying to colleges during the early 1960s, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores have shown a steady decline. ("Television," the authors of a 1977 SAT study concluded, "has become a surrogate parent, a substitute teacher.") Teachers complain about their pupils' passivity, short attention spans, and lack of imagination, characteristics attributable, at least in part, to TV viewing. Many young teachers, themselves raised on television, now arrive in the classroom without basic skills. TV has apparently fostered a new growth industry: the teaching of "remedial" reading and writing in the nation's colleges.

By about age 15, the average American child has spent more time (about 20,000 hours) in front of a television than in the classroom—or doing homework. During the school year, approximately 1.5 million children aged 2 to 11 are still watching TV at midnight on weekdays. Researchers generally agree that heavy viewers comprehend less of what they read than do light viewers. They also confirm that, other things being equal, the more television a child watches, the worse he does in school.[2] (The sole exception may be students with low IQs.) "Mentally gifted" grammar-school students show a marked drop in creative abilities after just three weeks of intense television viewing. In a real sense, then, TV watching acts as a major "drag" on learning in America.

In the classroom itself, some types of learning can be helped by TV. Educators seem to agree that certain televised lessons can eliminate the need for repetitious reading drills, can help improve reading skills, and can be useful in teaching vocabulary.[3] The use of scripts from popular TV shows as a teaching tool—a controversial practice known as "scripting"—has reportedly raised average reading levels in some Philadelphia schools by some 20 percent, although it may also, in the process, have legitimized the misinformation inherent in most TV programs.

The most publicized efforts to tap the educational potential of TV remain public television's *Sesame Street* and similar programs that provide instruction in reading and, it is claimed,

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help preschoolers learn "how to learn." Critics counter that parents are being tricked, that teaching children to read or count at so early an age has no lasting effect—except, perhaps, to get the child "hooked" on television. Educator John Holt worries that *Sesame Street* teaches children that a "right answer" always exists. Other researchers contend that *Sesame Street* has no demonstrable impact upon later school performance.[4] And, while second-graders in the lower half of their classes *do* benefit from another program, *The Electric Company,* two years of viewing do not seem to help more than one.*

Setting the Agenda

Much of the problem obviously lies with parents who regard TV as a convenient baby sitter or as a child's afterschool sedative; most parents, surveys show, have no idea how much television their children actually watch. Yet the high number of hours the average child (or teen-ager) devotes to watching TV means that an equivalent amount of time at home is *not* being given over to reading, hobbies, or socializing. The diversion of time from reading is critical. In a complex, technological society, reading becomes more rather than less important.

Politics: Television has transformed American politics, but its influence is like a *pointilist* painting: easy to trace from a distance, but less so the closer one gets. Television intrudes upon the political process chiefly through news broadcasts and paid political advertisements. Yet, to a certain degree, television is also an important force in U.S. electoral politics simply because it is *believed* to be important.

Researchers agree that TV's chief political role is as an "agenda-setter": It does not so much tell people what to think as it tells them what to think *about.* Studies of Watergate and the Vietnam War, for example, indicate that television identified each as a major problem long before the public did. This in no way makes television unique. Newspapers play the same role, and did so long before television existed. What makes television distinctive is its glamor and its reach. As the chief source of

*Whatever the impact of specific programs, some scholars speculate that by relying on the information coded in images, TV watchers may be developing hitherto unused portions of their brains. Harvard University researchers in 1979 showed similar groups of children the same story—one version on film with narration, and the other in a picture book. In response to questions afterward, both groups gave generally the same answers. Yet the film-viewers based their answers on visual content, while the readers relied more upon verbatim repetitions of the text. One thought process was neither more correct nor more desirable; they were merely different. Other research suggests that the average IQ may be rising because of children's increased capacity to handle spatial, visual problems.

news for most Americans, it has enhanced—and exaggerated—the power of the Fourth Estate.*

Television is far from all-powerful, and its exact effect on voter behavior and opinion has yet to be identified. While political commercials *do* inform voters of the issues, they seem to have "no effect on voters' images of candidates," according to the one in-depth study of such advertisements.[5] There is no demonstrable correlation between TV expenditures and election results, except when the race is close and one candidate heavily outspends the other.

Realism vs. Reality

Modest though its influence may be on voters, TV affects American political campaigns through its influence on candidates' behavior. Candidates now rely on media consultants as they fly from market to market, in search of free air time on the local or national evening news. During the 1980 general election, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan each spent about 60 percent of their $29.4 million campaign treasuries on advertising, and most of that went into television.

Why do they do it? Part of the reason is probably historical. Since 1952, when television made its political debut, there have been a handful of instances where TV apparently proved decisive. Richard Nixon's self-saving "Checkers" speech in 1952 and the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960 are usually cited as examples.† Television commercials have also proved to be an effective surrogate if one does not wish to get out on the campaign trail, as Jimmy Carter discovered during the 1980 primaries. Furthermore, television commercials, as California Governor Jerry Brown has observed, help "to convince people of the reality" of a campaign. In 1977, Madison, Wisconsin, Mayor Paul

*This can have international consequences. The vision of global TV publicity is a temptation to some terrorists and a tool in the hands of others. The 1979–80 story of the Americans taken hostage in Iran is a case in point. In Tehran, the colorful Islamic "student" militants adroitly exploited the American news teams' hunger for "good film." In the United States, the hostages' families and man-in-the-street reactions added a home-town angle. The TV news organizations saw the hostage story as a continuing melodrama and gave it almost unprecedented amounts of air time. On one occasion, the *CBS Evening News* devoted all but 3 minutes of its regular 22-minute broadcast to the crisis. President Carter, some analysts contend, felt impelled by the "saturation" TV coverage to react in dramatic ways—e.g., leaving the campaign trail, ordering a Navy task force to the Indian Ocean. He, too, discovered that the crisis could be exploited, as his poll ratings went up. The distinction between what was important and what was just theater was blurred from the day the American diplomats were taken hostage.

†It is interesting to note that people who heard the debates only on radio generally believed that Nixon had "won," while those who saw Nixon's poor make-up and Kennedy's relaxed manner on television inclined to JFK.

Soglin and his advisers insisted on airing TV commercials during his re-election campaign even though the candidate didn't need to. The reasoning: Not running commercials would erode morale among campaign workers and lead voters to think Soglin was unable to raise money.

"The President Said Today . . ."

The rise of televised politics has also coincided with—and contributed to—weakening party organization. Up to a point, politicians no longer need party backing to reach voters; with money for media time, they can blanket the territory. Only television allows a candidate to become a household face in, say, 35 states in a matter of three months. Presidential primaries themselves are the handmaidens of television, if not its creations. The national party conventions are likewise dependent on—and adapted to—network television; the delegates, outnumbered by network employees, complain that they don't know what's going on unless they have a television set to watch.

As often as not, there is nothing very important happening on the convention floor or out on the hustings, but it is worth any correspondent's job to say so. TV news shows compete for viewers just like other television programs. Hence, the correspondents' emphasis on campaign strategies and personalities over substance, on tactical errors and slips of the tongue. A study of CBS News's 1980 campaign coverage, for example, found it to be "extensive, nonpartisan, objective, and superficial."[6] Writing in 1893, Britain's Lord Bryce blamed political party leaders for the absence of "great" Presidents in America. Today, it is popular to blame the poor quality of broadcast journalism.

Campaigns aside, television has indisputably helped to center power in Washington and in the Presidency. Only the President may command free network air time almost at will—for press conferences, for major addresses, for brief announcements during a time of crisis, or for such special events as the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979. He is the focus of attention on the evening news: There is *always* a story filmed on the White House lawn. Political scientist Michael Cronin points out that television "serves to amplify the President's claim to be the only representative of all the people." Yet the advent of TV has not eliminated the long-term attrition in the opinion polls that all modern Presidents have experienced.

In sum, then, television's greatest impact on politics seems to be indirect. It has helped to reshape the process of American

politics—and the way politicians speak and act—because Presidents and politicians (and TV correspondents) *think* TV is important. Lyndon Johnson was extremely sensitive to TV news; he and his aides were shaken when CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite publicly turned against the administration's Vietnam policy in early 1968. Yet there is no evidence that the impact of TV news, as both its critics and champions contend, turned the American people against the Vietnam War. And, despite Richard Nixon's appreciation of television's supposed power—returning from Peking in 1972, he sat in Air Force One for nine hours in Anchorage, Alaska, so that he could triumpantly arrive home in prime time—there is no evidence that television pushed him out of office in 1974.

Parables and the Pill

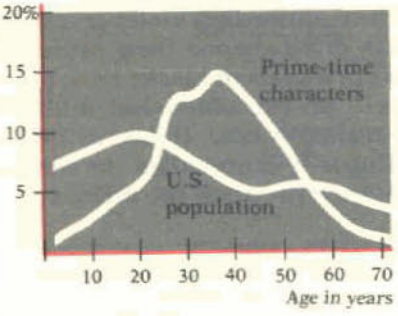
Behavior: Television affects all kinds of human behavior, but no aspect has been studied more than violence. (On TV, violent incidents occur, on average, 5 times per hour during prime time and 18 times per hour during weekend daytime children's shows.) The evidence here is compelling: Children who see a great deal of violence on television are more likely than children who see less to engage in aggressive play, to accept force as a problem-solver, to fear becoming a victim of violence, and to believe that an exaggerated proportion of the society is employed in law enforcement.[7] These conclusions remain true when held constant for IQ, social status, economic level, and other variables. The broadcast industry has itself invested millions of dollars in such research but, perhaps predictably, comes up with, at best, a "not proven." An exception was a six-year CBS study conducted in Great Britain during the 1970s that concluded that young men who are heavy TV viewers are 50 percent more likely to commit violent crimes.[8]

Television, of course, may also teach "pro-social" lessons. Significantly, a TV protagonist displaying positive behavior has more of an impact upon children's subsequent play than does a character encouraging violence. Michael Landon, star and executive director of *Little House on the Prairie,* admits to writing parables into his show in order to "teach America's families and children." Teaching and learning, of course, are not the same thing; it is a matter of scholarly conjecture whether children "generalize" the specific beneficial lessons they have learned—that is, whether it occurs to children to apply such lessons in real-life situations that may vary, in their details, from the episode portrayed on television.[9]

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO TELEVISION

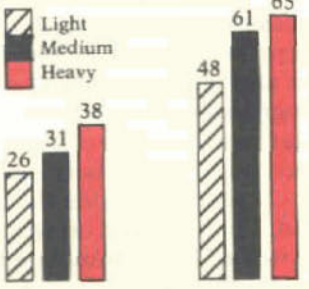
Television presents a peculiar picture of social reality, one that is as credible to many viewers as it is inaccurate. Owing to a high incidence of violent episodes on TV, heavy viewers tend to overestimate the prevalence of violent crime in U.S. society and are less trusting (right) of other people than are light viewers. Occupational breakdowns are markedly skewed on prime-time TV (below right), where 1 out of every 8 persons is a policeman (versus 1 out of 222 in real life), but only 1 out of 10 is a blue-collar worker (versus 1 out of 2 in the U.S. work force). Similarly, TV characters (below, left) tend to be in the prime of life, neither too young nor too old. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies show that heavy viewers under the age of 30 tend to believe, contrary to fact, that people do not live as long as they used to.

AGE DISTRIBUTION



ATTITUDES

Adult TV Watching



% answering *yes* to question: Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance?

% answering *yes* to question: Would you say you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

EMPLOYMENT

	Prime-time (% of all characters)	U.S. (% of all workers)
Policemen	12.8	.45
Private eyes	1.2	.02
Blue-collar workers	9.9	49.67
Doctors	3.0	.35
Lawyers	1.6	.33
Judges	0.5	.02

Source: George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli, *Women and Minorities in Television Drama*, 1979; George Gerbner, "Television's Influence on Values and Behavior," 1978.

Television provides the American child's most easily accessible—if not necessarily most accurate—data on sex. Indeed, sex has become television's chief dramatic device. Recent tabulations document a rapid increase in TV's sexual innuendoes and in TV portrayals of prostitution, incest, rape, infidelity, and other deviations from the so-called old morality. In 1978, references to premarital or extramarital sex occurred in 43 percent of all prime-time shows (versus 21 percent in 1977); a mixture of sex and violence could be found in 10 percent of all prime-time programs (versus zero in 1977).[10] On prime-time shows, sexual intercourse is seven times more likely to occur between unmarried couples than between husband and wife.

It seems reasonable to suppose that all of this has an impact, but how, and on whom? One study indicates a relationship between TV and unwanted teen-age pregnancies: Heavy viewers are more likely to believe that their favorite television heroine would not use birth control.[11] Another survey concludes that television raises adolescents' expectations of "what sex should be like." Heavy viewers seem to marry earlier and have more children. Such data, however, remain tentative and fragmentary.

We are on somewhat firmer ground with regard to "sexism." The more television most people watch, media scholar George Gerbner concludes, the more sexist their views are.[12] Other studies find that "children's perspectives of males and females generally correspond to the stereotypes found on TV."* Heavy viewers are more likely to prefer sexually stereotyped toys and activities.[13] On the positive side, girls who are shown women in "men's roles" on TV are more likely than other girls to endorse those roles as feasible and desirable.

Kicking the Habit

What about race? From sit-ins to antibusing violence, civil-rights activists and their foes have often shaped their protests with television in mind. Fictional portrayals of blacks have presumably had some impact as well. An estimated 130 million Americans watched ABC's up-from-slavery epic, *Roots*, in 1977. *New York Times* editorial writer Roger Wilkins called the series "the most significant civil rights event since the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965."

*Women on television are generally attractive, under age 40, use sexual guile, and hold primarily "traditional" female occupations. Women are warm, submissive, timid, and emotional—men are ambitious, intellectual, violent, and logical. In authoritative speaking roles, particularly in commercials, men outnumber women by more than three to one.

Yet precisely what effect the portrayal of blacks in *Roots* and other network offerings has had on white TV audiences is difficult to pin down. Young children, especially suburban whites who may have little contact with blacks, believe television *comedies* faithfully depict other races even when this contradicts what their parents have taught them.* Researchers also conclude that many children form stereotypical opinions about other groups during preschool years when they are most susceptible to TV's influence. Yet these children do not seem to believe that a television character's race is important.

One other behavioral note: Families that are asked by researchers to forego television for prolonged periods report that their lives are much improved, but nearly all resume watching as soon as the experiment ends. Some pyschiatrists now regard heavy TV viewing as an addiction.

As Advertised on TV

Selling: Television affects behavior on a crucial front—consumption. This is the economic basis of TV's existence. Advertising's share of the Gross National Product has held more or less steady for the past three decades at around 2 percent, but television's share of total ad expenditures—20.5 percent, or $10.2 billion in 1979—has grown year by year.

Businesses do not spend those billions for nothing. Long-distance telephone billings across the nation, for example, rose by 14 percent in 1979 (to $1.3 billion) following introduction of AT&T's "reach out and touch someone" campaign. Television commercials may create a demand for hitherto nonexistent products (e.g., feminine deodorant sprays) and permit manufacturers to by-pass retailers and appeal directly to consumers. Even print ads now make increasing use of the logo "as advertised on TV" as if to lend a certain legitimacy, even reality, to the product.†

Television advertisements do not *guarantee* sales success, however, and TV is not necessary for some commodities. Seventy percent of all cigarette advertising was on broadcast media in 1970 when the congressional ban went into effect, yet ciga-

*Findings about television and blacks also generally hold true for Hispanics, Native Americans, and other groups.

†The power of television is felt most acutely during childhood. The average child sees about 25,000 commercials a year. Studies show that the younger children are, the more likely they are to prefer playing with toys advertised on TV than with friends, and the more likely they are to ask parents to make a specific purchase. When asked "the kinds of goods you call snacks," 78 percent of the children in one survey named TV-advertised junk food.

TV NEWS: THAT'S THE WAY IT IS

When Vice President Spiro Agnew assailed the "liberal" TV networks in 1969 for their distortions of news, he had some truth on his side. But he missed the point. The strongest bias was, and is, commercial, not political. To survive, the news executives must get high audience ratings. Hence, they serve up news-as-entertainment: melodrama, pathos, violence, conflict, celebrity.

As a transmitter of "facts," television news is inherently inefficient, compared to print. A transcript of the typical 22-minute bits-and-pieces evening news program equals in wordage about two columns of the *New York Times*; any intelligent reader can take in—and ponder—more information in 22 minutes than the networks could provide in twice that time. Yet 75 percent of Americans report that they get most of their news from TV, a trend that even CBS's Walter Cronkite thinks is "ominous."

TV news's appeal, studies indicate, lies partly in its convenience; seeing is easier than reading. To grip audiences, one NBC man noted, the producers, film editors, and correspondents "make little movies": of Mt. St. Helens erupting, Iranian demonstrators shouting, John Anderson gesturing, Iraqi soldiers shooting. The film

rette consumption in America is now at an all-time high. The tobacco industry merely increased its advertising budget and pumped the money into other media.*

Perceptions: For innumerable TV viewers, "real life" is not as exciting or dramatic as it is "supposed" to be, and as it is on television. This aspect of television's impact is perhaps the most pervasive and least documented. It penetrates psychological rhythms in a way that the viewers involved may have difficulty recognizing—largely because they are not on guard against it. Novelists, such as Jerzy Kosinski, have lately begun exploring the phenomenon. (A *Journal of the American Medical Association* editorial on insanity recommended Kosinski's *Being There* as a "supplement to scientific study.") Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons* is written in part as a screenplay, while practitioners of the "new journalism" record their impressions in the manner of roving cameras.

Television projects an aura of authenticity. A significant number of people, for example, believe that what they see on TV is real. In 1967, the National Commission on the Causes and Pre-

*Tobacco executives resisted the broadcast ban only half-heartedly because earlier federal rulings guaranteed air time for antismoking TV commercials. Surveys indicated that these "counter-commercials" were hazardous to healthy cigarette sales.

snippet itself is often vivid but ambiguous; the TV reporter's brief comments, sometimes highly speculative, supply a simple theme and story line. Critic Michael Arlen once wrote, "The main thing is not the [filmed] event, and the need to describe it, but to describe it in such a way that [the viewers] will feel the way you want them to feel about it."

Thus, news is, as ABC producer Av Westin observed, a special branch of television "show biz." The three major network news shows in 1979–80 together averaged an audience of 30 million every night. That audience is disproportionately old (41 percent are 55 years of age or older) and female (47 percent of news viewers are *adult* women). Children aged 2 to 11 are far more likely to watch the evening news than are teen-agers. And the TV news audience is fickle. More than half of all U.S. households did not watch these shows even once a month. Of those who did watch, 68 percent saw fewer than six shows a month; only 6 percent watched the news at least four nights a week.

Do major events increase the TV news audience? A little. But the season matters much more. During the summer months, the U.S. network evening news audience is about 35 percent smaller than in winter, no matter what's going on in the world, or what Mr. Cronkite has to say about it.

vention of Violence discovered that 15 percent of middle-class white teen-agers and 40 percent of poor black teen-agers believed that TV programs "tell about life the way it really is." One recent study using a scale of 1 to 9 found that children in the third through sixth grades gave TV families an overall reality score of 5.97, and TV policemen a 6.89. Furthermore, the study concluded, "real life experience with parallel television content did not diminish the perceived reality of television."[14] In other words, TV images tended to be seen as "truer" than first-hand information.

Such distorted views of reality may affect reality itself. Physicians cite the "*Marcus Welby* syndrome"—patients expecting doctors to cure and comfort them quickly and at little cost or inconvenience. Owing to the predominance of police and crime programs on TV, surveys now show that many police officers try to act and look like they're "supposed" to. A recent Rand survey found that much of what real detectives do during a routine investigation—e.g., fingerprinting, lineups, showing mug shots—is usually not employed to capture criminals. Rather, in many cases, such techniques are intended to satisfy public expectations of how police *should* behave.[15]

Television also teaches that the police coerce witnesses,

bribe, plant illegal drugs, lock up suspects without filing charges, and otherwise subvert the Constitution. When a tape of such illegal practices was shown to a class of prelaw students at the University of Massachusetts, most failed to understand why it was worthy of note. The author of this study, Ethan Katsh, a professor of legal studies, further points out that law is based upon abstract principles that on TV "are replaced by a personification of law. The focus of television is invariably on the visual elements of law such as courts, judges, police, lawyers, and criminals. These elements, which are a part of the law, become identified as being all of law."[16]

Believing that their TV images affect both social status and political power, organizations variously representing Vietnam veterans, women, homosexuals, senior citizens, manual workers, racial minorities, the handicapped, and the mentally ill have started to gather proof. Surveys show, for example, that the more people, especially young people, watch television, the more they tend to perceive old people in generally negative and unfavorable terms. A Machinists Union study laments that on prime-time television shows, "prostitutes outnumber machinists . . . and unions are almost invisible." Such imbalances, the Machinists argue, "devalue and harm occupations of crucial need to the economy."[17]

To sum up, there is no longer much doubt that television may engender or reinforce certain perceptions. The big unanswered question is: How strongly do various TV audiences "offset" what they see on the TV screen with perceptions and values drawn from other sources—personal experience, parents, friends, reading, church, and school?

Time for Self-Control

Television, as a technology, is neither good or bad. It is a fact of life, and no Luddites will ever bring back pre-TV days. Indeed, with the advent of cable, satellite transmission, and home video equipment, Americans will probably be watching more television in the years ahead than ever before.

Yet, as Daniel Boorstin correctly warns, our uncritical embrace of television has created a crisis. Even the imprecise studies now available suggest TV's far-reaching impact, be it harmful or (occasionally) benign. In theory, public opinion could tilt television programs toward more constructive ends; the TV industry, after all, is a captive of audience taste. But even that would hardly lessen the sheer amount of time many people spend passively in front of the TV set. And there is no evidence,

in any event, that Americans are disposed to rise up, en masse, against those responsible for what appears on the air.

This is perhaps the most alarming aspect of television—not the medium itself, but the fact that most Americans refuse to acknowledge its influence, or to take steps to leash its content, or at the very least to take control over their own viewing habits and those of their children.

NOTES

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The audience data on page 97 in the "TV News" box was compiled by Lawrence W. Lichty.