

The Trouble with Television

Robert MacNeil



It is difficult to escape the influence of television. If you fit the statistical averages, by the age of 20 you will have been exposed to at least 20,000 hours of television. You can add 10,000 hours for each decade you have lived after the age of 20. The only things Americans do more than watch television are work and sleep.

Calculate for a moment what could be done with even a part of those hours. Five thousand hours, I am told, are what a typical college undergraduate spends working on a bachelor's degree. In 10,000 hours you could have learned enough to become an astronomer or engineer. You could have learned several languages fluently. If it appealed to you, you could be reading Homer¹ in the original Greek or Dostoevski² in Russian. If it didn't, you could have walked around the world and written a book about it.

The trouble with television is that it discourages concentration. Almost anything interesting and rewarding in life requires some constructive, consistently applied effort. The dullest, the least gifted of us can achieve things that seem miraculous to those who never concentrate on anything. But television encourages us to apply no effort. It sells us instant gratification. It diverts us only to divert, to make the time pass without pain.

Television's variety becomes a narcotic,³ not a stimulus.⁴ Its serial, kaleidoscopic⁵ exposures force us to follow its lead. The viewer is on a perpetual guided tour: thirty minutes at the museum, thirty at the cathedral, then back on the bus to the next attraction—except on television, typically, the spans allotted are on the order of minutes or seconds, and the chosen delights are more often car crashes and people killing one another. In short, a lot of television usurps one of the most precious of all human gifts, the ability to focus your attention yourself, rather than just passively surrender it.

Capturing your attention—and holding it—is the prime motive of most television programming and enhances its role as a profitable advertising vehicle. Programmers live in constant fear of losing anyone's attention—anyone's. The surest way to avoid doing so is to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone but instead to provide constant stimulation through variety, novelty, action and movement. Quite simply, television operates on the appeal to the short attention span.

It is simply the easiest way out. But it has come to be regarded as a given, as inherent⁶ in the medium⁷ itself: as an imperative, as

1. **Homer** (hō' mēr) Greek epic poet of the eighth century B.C.
2. **Dostoevski** (dōs' tō yef' skē) Fyodor (fyō' dōr) Dostoevski (1821–1881) Russian novelist.
3. **narcotic** (nār kät' ik) *n.* something that has a soothing effect.
4. **stimulus** (stim' yə ləs) *n.* something that rouses to action.
5. **kaleidoscopic** (kə lī' də skāp' ik) *adj.* constantly changing.
6. **inherent** (in hir' ənt) *adj.* natural.
7. **medium** (mē' dē əm) *n.* means of communication.

◀ **Critical Viewing** What effect does watching television seem to be having on this girl? [Make a Judgment]

Literary Analysis Persuasive Techniques

What support does MacNeil cite before he ever states the point of his argument?

diverts (dī vɜrts') *v.*
distracts

usurps (yū sɜrps') *v.* takes over

✓ Reading Check

What is MacNeil's attitude toward television?

though General Sarnoff, or one of the other august pioneers of video, had bequeathed to us tablets of stone commanding that nothing in television shall ever require more than a few moments' concentration.

In its place that is fine. Who can quarrel with a medium that so brilliantly packages escapist entertainment as a mass-marketing tool? But I see its values now pervading this nation and its life. It has become fashionable to think that, like fast food, fast ideas are the way to get to a fast-moving, impatient public.

In the case of news, this practice, in my view, results in inefficient communication. I question how much of television's nightly news effort is really absorbable and understandable. Much of it is what has been aptly described as "machine gunning with scraps." I think its technique fights coherence.⁸ I think it tends to make things ultimately boring and dismissable (unless they are accompanied by horrifying pictures) because almost anything is boring and dismissable if you know almost nothing about it.

I believe that TV's appeal to the short attention span is not only inefficient communication but decivilizing as well. Consider the casual assumptions that television tends to cultivate: that complexity must be avoided, that visual stimulation is a substitute for thought, that verbal precision is an anachronism.⁹ It may be old-fashioned, but I was taught that thought is words, arranged in grammatically precise ways.

There is a crisis of literacy in this country. One study estimates that some 30 million adult Americans are "functionally illiterate" and cannot read or write well enough to answer a want ad or understand the instructions on a medicine bottle.

Literacy may not be an inalienable human right, but it is one that the highly literate Founding Fathers might not have found unreasonable or even unattainable. We are not only not attaining it as a nation, statistically speaking, but we are falling further and further short of attaining it. And, while I would not be so simplistic as to suggest that television is the cause, I believe it contributes and is an influence.



▲ Critical Viewing

What does this photograph suggest about the process of watching television?

august (ô gust') *adj.*
honored

pervading (për vād' in) *v.*
spreading throughout

Literary Analysis Persuasive Techniques

What persuasive techniques does MacNeil use in this paragraph?

8. **coherence** (kô hir' ens) *n.* the quality of being connected in an intelligible way.

9. **anachronism** (ə nak' rē niz' em) *n.* anything that seems to be out of its proper place in history.

Everything about this nation—the structure of the society, its forms of family organization, its economy, its place in the world—has become more complex, not less. Yet its dominating communications instrument, its principal form of national linkage, is one that sells neat resolutions to human problems that usually have no neat resolutions. It is all symbolized in my mind by the hugely successful art form that television has made central to the culture, the thirty-second commercial: the tiny drama of the earnest housewife who finds happiness in choosing the right toothpaste.

When before in human history has so much humanity collectively surrendered so much of its leisure to one toy, one mass diversion? When before has virtually an entire nation surrendered itself wholesale to a medium for selling?

Some years ago Yale University law professor Charles L. Black, Jr. wrote: “. . . forced feeding on trivial fare is not itself a trivial matter.” I think this society is being force fed with trivial fare, and I fear that the effects on our habits of mind, our language, our tolerance for effort, and our appetite for complexity are only dimly perceived. If I am wrong, we will have done no harm to look at the issue skeptically and critically, to consider how we should be resisting it. I hope you will join with me in doing so.

Reading Strategy

Evaluating Logic Does this paragraph seem logical to you? Why or why not?

Robert MacNeil



(b. 1931)

Born in Montreal, Canada, Robert MacNeil worked on a children's show for the Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation early in his career. After becoming a broadcast journalist, MacNeil went to public television to host his own news analysis program, which grew into the highly regarded *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*. The show differed from other news programs by offering more in-depth reports.

MacNeil retired as co-anchor of the PBS *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* in 1995. An acclaimed author, he has published two memoirs, *The Right Place at the Right Time* and *Wordstruck*, and has drawn on his years of experience in the field of broadcast journalism to write the novel *Breaking News*.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Literature

1. **Respond:** Is television a waste of time or a valuable source of information? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** According to MacNeil, what is the biggest trouble with television? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** How might everyday life be different if people watched less television? Explain.
3. (a) **Recall:** To what growing crisis in the United States does MacNeil believe television contributes? (b) **Evaluate:** Are MacNeil's arguments justified? Explain.
4. (a) **Recall:** What positive aspects of the medium of television does MacNeil mention? (b) **Speculate:** If MacNeil were the president of a television network, what changes in the programming might he make?
5. (a) **Recall:** What three “decivilizing” assumptions does MacNeil say that television programs encourage in the viewer? (b) **Apply:** Do you think television could be improved? How? (c) **Make a Judgment:** To what degree is television a valuable or a destructive element in society? Explain.