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Televiewing and Children: A view from Pakistan

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Seminar
"Children and Television"
Television has become a formidable source of information and entertainment today. No other medium of mass communication can challenge it in attaining and maintaining a high degree of popularity, in so short a time. Radio, for example, could not remain as popular as it was before the advent of television. In less than half a century, it has become a sure success medium of cross-cultural influence, an imitation inducing effect and a thoroughly popular teacher for the young. Within a span of about twenty years (1948-68), it became a dire need of almost all the governments and all the peoples of the world. This need may be understood, either by the set-count which, by soaring rapidly had reached to 736 million sets in 1987, or by a matter-of-fact like comment by a Peruvian television executive who said "What we need is kerosene TV".

Whether a kerosene TV is developed or not, the fact remains that television is the most developed mass medium so far. Since 1948, development of its programmes and multiplication of its various uses has been rapid. Today, with its colour and cross-cultural transmissions via satellites, it is regarded a very powerful addicting agent. It is pervasive to the extent that TV news bulletins are fast restricting the newspaper circulation because newspapers need literacy and lots of free time. In countries like U.S.A. and Finland, research studies confirm that T.V. news are more credible than newspapers. In today's world, newspapers are liked by only the chosen few who might
appreciate the detail as well as the depth of analysis. Unlike these reader elites, the common man needs only brief and simple news and a heavy dose of entertainment in the form of films, plays, music and report of sport events. Television is the principal source of providing this kind of entertainment which may not reach the commoners otherwise.

As such, T.V. has fast become the mass medium which is adored by people in all the countries. It is yet to become pervasive and popular in the underdeveloped parts of the world where common people cannot buy a T.V. set because of poverty or where there is no electricity. Even in poor countries, anyone who has access to T.V. programmes and who can buy a set, is viewing it almost regularly.

Television is the most talked about and most researched about mass medium in the modern world. Since 1948, it has seen many phases and has braved many difficult storms. Competing with radio (about 70 years old) and newspaper (about 380 years old), television is like a giant adolescent who is fast outgrowing other media.

T.V. has also been the most cursed about mass medium because of its extraordinary power to influence the viewers. It has been termed the 'plug in drug' the "adulterer of young children" the 'chewing gum for the eyes' "a notorious breaker of the cultural barriers' and 'threat to cultural identity'. Yet its popularity is fast increasing throughout the world.
Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, has summarized a whole point of view by saying "I may be its slave but it is my lamp."  

TV REVOLUTION

According to Unesco Yearbook 1989, there were more than 736 million television sets in use in the world during 1987. The growth of TV sets in use has been as under:

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1965</td>
<td>192 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>290 million</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>414 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>547 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>736 million</td>
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These figures bear testimony, that number of sets in use has grown with a rapid speed. Keeping in view of the high price of TV set this speed is undoubtedly phenomenal.

Number of people watching television has also been doubled in about 22 years, from 1965 to 1987. There were 57 TV sets in use per 1000 in 1965. In 1987 the figure reached 147 per 1000 people. But things are different in Asia and Africa where 51 and 27 sets/1000 are in use respectively. Contrast of developed and developing world is also notable. While the pervasiveness of television is quite remarkable in
developed countries (482/1000), it is a paltry 41/1000 in
the developing countries.

This indicates a rather harsh side of the TV story. It has proved a medium of great value in the rich industrialized countries although rich people don't have much free time. In the poor countries of Asia and Africa, TV is worshipped by the masses but they don't have the financial resources and electricity to enjoy it as desired.

In the light of quoted statistics, it might be construed that people of rich countries are in the grip of a TV revolution, whereas the poor nations of the world are planning to increase transmission time which might increase the viewing time. Governments in poor or under-developed countries control the content of this medium with strict administrative policies and therefore the full realization of TV effects remains restricted.

In the developed world TV revolution has been visible in more than one ways. Governments in rich countries have been conscious of TV effects to the extent that a number of extensive official research studies have been carried out and are published, Surgeon General's Report in U.S.A. being only one example. Individual scholars like Marshall McLuhan have given television a serious thought. Remarks McLuhan "The "hard" sell and the "hot" line become more comedy in the TV age, and the death of all the salesmen at one stroke of the TV axe has turned the hot American culture into a
cool one that is quite unacquainted with itself. Throughout in his famous book "Understanding Media - the Extension of Man" Marshall McLuhan talks of a TV revolution which has blunted the reality and the power of imagination of the people. What is of obvious significance here is the revolution, caused by television as the most pervasive and effective medium of communication. There are many who strongly criticize the extreme view taken by the Luhanites but there is a general agreement that TV revolution is a reality and the process of this strange revolution is winning millions of new viewers in the undeveloped world.

Television & Children

In our times, TV has changed the nature of childhood because children are the most avid and most regular users of television. In developed countries, where TV is an essential item of every household, children watch it for about 30 hours every week. In underdeveloped countries like Pakistan and neighbouring India, average viewing time is about 16 hours per week. The world of child television viewer, whether he is a light or heavy user, is a popular area of research and debate. A fairly large number of studies all over the world, go on to show that TV in the lives of our children is a complex phenomenon which has far reaching effects.
The ever non-conclusive debate, mentioned above, is ample proof of the concern shared by researchers, parents and teachers about the possible TV effects on children. The many advantages attributed to TV are that ---

1. It provides unlimited opportunity for incidental learning.
2. It is a popular medium of current information.
3. It is a powerful source of socialization.
4. It is a favourite teacher who manages to receive almost complete and regular attention.
5. It is the most common source of relaxation, recreation and entertainment.
6. It is an agent of up-to-date consumer information.

The other side of television is also quite significant. The many disadvantages of television are that -

1. It is a nuisance which restricts a child's physical activity.
2. It is a distraction which subdues creativity and imagination.
3. It is a preoccupation which impoverishes the habit and ability of reading.
4. It is an agent of fantasy which carries children away from reality.
5. It is an overly attractive pass-time which reinforces the tendency of aggression and violence.
6. It is a falsifier which disguises the cunning consumer intent.
7. It is a permanent source of parent-child conflict.
8. It is a dethroner which makes the children forget the heroes of real life and supplants in their place the heroes belonging to show business.

The list may even be longer. But the fact of TV's popularity would remain as convincing as ever. Perhaps nobody can possibly rob the significance TV has acquired today. Children will go on watching more and more of it. They will also remain the non-critical acceptors of powerful television influence. Particularly in the underdeveloped countries of the world, use of TV by the children will increase as a result of development. In Asia for example, only 24 million television sets were in use during 1965. This figure rose about six times to 150 million sets in 1987. If this trend continues, there is every possibility that by the turn of the century television set usage in Asia would be doubled.

If it so happens, and there seems to be no likelihood that it would not, our children would be watching much more television in the year 2000. And if, the tally of positive-negative effects holds good for the next decade, Asian social scientists will have to think and work for a better, primarily more fruitful use of the television. This will require research and after research, perhaps, some governmental action. Without research and deep exploration, effective governmental action would not be advisable---it will be like an arrow in the dark.
Pakistan's Experience

Since Karachi is the largest cosmopolitan city of Pakistan, a study was conducted here with a view that findings might be generalized at least to urban Pakistan. A sample of 468 children (216 boys, 252 girls), belonging to grades III to VIII and ages 8-18 years, filled out a questionnaire with the help of trained teachers. These children were selected randomly from 20 schools located in high, middle and low income residential areas. Care was also taken to include children from almost all the ethnic components of the metropolitan population. Later on the parents of these sampled children filled a separate questionnaire.

More or less, this exploratory study is a replication of the work done by William Schramm et al during 1958-60 in the U.S.A. and Canada.

FINDINGS

1. Children in Karachi, watch television for 16 hours 7 minutes per week. Older children watch more than the younger ones and girls watch more than the boys.
2. Children belonging to smaller and somewhat isolated ethnic groups watch more.
3. Children from middle income families watch more television than the children of low and high income families.
4. About 29.03 per cent were found to be heavy users of television as they watch for three or more hours per day.
5. Majority of the children who scored ranks 1st to Vth in
the last school examination, were not found to be heavy television users.

6. What children watched almost daily are serialised plays in Urdu, imported fast thrillers in English and local Urdu programmes primarily meant for children.

7. Principal motives of televiewing were found to be seeking information (about the social environment) and entertainment.

8. Naming of products advertised on television was slightly better among the younger girls and older boys.

9. Recall of jingles and slogans was better among the girls of all age groups.

10. When and if the children go to buy something, they prefer the brands which are heavily advertised on television. They also suggest to the parents to buy products which are advertised on the small screen. Variables of age, income of the family and ethnicity have limited effect on the children's choice of brands.

11. A small number of children, mostly boys, believed that they could become Six Million Dollar Man, Airwolf or Bionic Woman, if they so desired.

They also mentioned that the quickest way to reach far away destinations is to use the flying carpet (shown in PTV programme AlfLaila - the thousand nights).
12. Television seems adversely to have affected involvement with hobbies and games etc. About 14 per cent children said they did not get enough time for these activities. Only 27.62 per cent mentions were made about games which need physical activity, whereas 38.95 per cent mentions came out in favour of reading story books etc.

13. Among the liked personalities, each child mentioned:

- 1.98 belonging to the TV
- 2.02 belonging to sports
- 2.51 belonging to Pakistani or Islamic history

14. In response to the question about one personality, they like most and would try to become like him or her themselves, 16. 23 per cent mentioned someone who belonged to the world of TV. About 24 per cent desired to become famous like Mohammad Ali Jinnah, father of the nation.

15. About 17 per cent children of the sample believed in organizing a gang or acquiring firearms to deal with an enemy. This percentage rose to 32 among the heavy television users. About 33 per cent said they would like to try their hand on a pistol or an automatic rifle.

16. In response to a question about the one programme they would like to watch again, 17 per cent mentioned an action thriller incorporating murder. About 66 per cent favoured a programme based on fantasy. Choice of the action thriller has been found quite pronounced among very young (8-10 years) and older (15-18 years) boys.
17. An average Karachi child will spend on TV watching about 566 entire days in his life of 4015 days (11 years) from 8-18 years of age. It means, about 14 per cent of his days will be spent in television viewing. During this period, he would spend 800 days (or 20 per cent of his days) in school.
18. An overwhelming majority (77 per cent) of the parents said they worry when their children watch TV for long hours. 71 per cent parents believed that their children might improve their grades if they watched less.

These findings, inspite of their preliminary nature, suggest rather obviously that each country might have a totally different televiewing pattern of the children. Complete and up-to-date knowledge about the peculiar viewing behaviour of children is required, if TV is to be used for certain specific objectives.

POINTS TO PONDER

Televiewing by children today is universally accepted to be participatory and the one which induces a good 'Amount of Invested Mental Effort'. The research carried out so far is, upto a very large extent, non-conclusive and perhaps it would remain so in future also, but the charge sheet against television has not been successful in keeping the children away from it, and it never would be. In the under-developed countries, there is every likelihood that
televiewing by the children would increase with the improving in the level of development. This phenomenon makes one think about how to enhance the level of benefit this medium might provide. It is some sort of a challenge to the Asian governments, researchers, programme producers, parents and teachers.

Undoubtedly, watching of television poses some complex problems like ----

1. Cultural alienation
2. Acceptance of violence and aggression
3. Curtailment of physical activity
4. Reduction of extra curricular reading
5. Limitation of recreation in the company of friends
6. Impoverishment of creativity and imagination
7. Consumption of grossly falsified advertising information

and 8. Regular Internalization of fictional violence

Yet, the strong likelihood that Asian children will be watching more television in the years to come, is a significant challenge. As in the West, the habit of televiewing will have to be channelled and, upto some
degree, monitored for some positive results. It would certainly require free discussion, marshalling of ideas and specifically the involvement of the governments. Any nation ready to harness the potential of television for children, would encourage research and involve social scientists, parents and teachers in the production of programmes. Panels of these experts would advise and collaborate with the TV producers so as to act as CTW and to make programmes like 'Sesame Street' and 'Electric Company' possible.

Another area which deserves emphasis is that of educational television. Except very few examples, from Asia, most of the countries of this region have not shown interest in using this high potential medium for educational purposes. In the U.S.A, on the other hand, not only the government but private organizations also provide funding for educational television. This interest on the part of the society has materialised in the growing audience of the educational TV which from 33 million in 1974 rose to about 65 million in 1984. The U.S. federal budget for educational television which was only 5 million dollars in 1969, soared to 159.5 million dollars in 1986. Increase in the budget allocation indicates the sense of responsibility of the government; growth in the size of audience tells something about the quality of programmes.
No doubt, most of the Asian countries are not rich like the U.S.A. Neither most of the Asian societies are adequately educated. Even then a beginning, however modest, will have to be made. The realization that television may be used to improve the level of incidental and formal learning, is overdue for long.

Due to increasing use of satellites and dish antennas, television in future, will become more powerful medium of far reaching effect. This poses a formidable challenge to the Asian societies to rise to the occasion and plan the use of television for their progress and development.
References and Notes


8. As quoted by Timothy Green "The Universal Eye", p.10.


10. Ibid


