

Do our television choices effect what we say, do and think?

By Garry W. Johnson

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It's a fact: Americans watched a record amount of television during the 2005-06 TV season: the average household had a television on for eight hours, 11 minutes per day, according to Nielsen Media Research. Individual viewers watched a record four hours and 35 minutes of television each day. Many media observers and critics had predicted that television viewing time would be eroded by time spent on new media. Since 1995-96, however, average household television viewing is up by nearly an hour per day, from seven hours and 15 minutes" (*The World Almanac, 2007*).

Media experts believed that new media – personal computers, PDAs, cell phones, and iPods, for example – would cut into people's television time. If the average American is still consuming more and more TV each year, just imagine how high those numbers are for prisoners who have no "new media" options. More importantly still, what is the effect on our mentality?

VIOLENT REACTIONS

Not long after Principal Mike Smajda learned in November of 2004 that one of his first-grade pupils had watched "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," the little boy unexpectedly attacked a little girl. While playing in a leaf pile, the boy suddenly began kicking the girl in the head, and another little boy joined in. "They felt it was part of the game," said Smajda. "They both kicked her until her head was bleeding and she had to go to the hospital."

Of course, the principle could not prove the R-rated slasher movie provoked the child, but it did reinforce his commitment to an anti-violence program at his Escanaba, Michigan school. The program challenged students to do without TV and all other screen entertainment for 10 days, then limit themselves to just seven hours a week. Over the next year the district's other schools joined in. The short-term results were striking: Less ag-

gressive behavior and, in some cases, better standardized test scores (they call it the "boob-tube" for a reason).

Designed for third and fourth grade students by health specialists at Stanford University, the program has been retooled for kindergarten through eighth grade. "I don't know of any other school district that has gone as far with this," said Lt. Col. David Grossman, a former West Point psychology professor and youth violence expert, who introduced the program called Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television.

The American Academy of Pediatrics sights more than 1,000 studies establishing a connection between violent entertainment and youthful aggression, but notes that family breakdown and peer influence also play a role.

The Stanford researchers also ran a trial of their program in San Jose, California schools, with promising results. The research team leader, Dr. Thomas Robinson told The Associated Press by e-mail, "I can't speculate on every individual violent act, but we do know that exposure to violent content does cause more aggressive behavior overall and that reducing screen time does reduce aggression overall."

When Smajda announced the TV turnoff during an assembly at Lemmer Elementary, he thought they might chase him out of the gym, judging from the boos and hisses. Even so, approximately 90% of the 400 plus students took part to some extent.

Immediately before and after the program, observers charted aggressive playground incidents – shoving, hitting, obscene gestures, name calling – at eight elementary schools. The totals dropped at every school but one. The overall average decline was 52%!

The district also compared standardized test scores of fourth-graders before and during the turnoff. Writing and math scores made double-digit leaps.

U.S. Census data suggest that parents are beginning to catch on. A 2003 national sam-

ple of 9,925 parents and their 18,413 children show that in 2003, 67% of parents with children ages 3-5 had rules about when, for how long, and the types of programs their kids watch. That compares with 54% in 1994. Parents with kids 6-11 reported 68.2% had such rules, up from 60.3% in 1994. The 12-17 age group received the least parental guidance with 43.7% having rules, up from 40.2% in 1994.

In January the Parents Television Council, a Los Angeles-based advocacy group, said violence on prime-time broadcast television has increased 75% since 1998. According to the group, the television season that began in the fall of 2005 was one of the most violent they ever recorded.

SEXUAL CONTENT

It is no secret that sex sells, and one commercial break without a shot of cleavage is rare, if it exists at all.

Network television has started down a b a d road. Every major n e t - work today has a show, often in prime time, featuring a homosexual character and several more glamorizing extramarital sex. Partial nudity and graphically depicted sex scenes are also becoming more common place on non-paid channels (try watching FX after 10:00 p.m.).

Great Britain has already been where we are headed, and was recently labeled in the *Daily Mail* as, "the television porn capital of Europe." Britain now has 27 channels dedicated to pornography, compared to five in Germany, its closest rival. The channels air from 10:00 p.m. to 5:30 a.m., require a subscription and bring the total number of European porn stations to 84. Bel Mooney, a British commentator, lamented: "I'm tired of repellent, exploitative images being defended by privileged people who should know better – and who would sooner swallow razor blades than see their own daughters sell themselves for the gratification of strangers ... Now ask yourselves: 'What effect does it have on young boys to see women routinely treated like animals? What are the conse-

quences of young women being brainwashed into thinking of themselves as mere sex objects?"

The sad, joyless, demeaning display broadcast to millions is a far cry from the essential purpose of sex – to strengthen the marriage bond. Is it any wonder our divorce rate is 50%?

PROFUSE PROFANITY

Expletives are so common on television and in movies that many characters would have no lines at all if profanity was removed.

Since we know that TV influences life, it stands to reason that at some point life begins to reflect TV. An Associated Press-Ipsos poll last year showed 74% of Americans encounter profanity in public frequently or occasionally. I would guess the prison figure is closer to 100%.

Well over half of Americans (64%) said they use the "F - word" – ranging from several times a day (8%) to a few times a year (15%). It was especially a favorite among men, with 32% saying they use it at least a few times a week, compared to 23% of women.

Two-thirds believe more than they did 20 years ago. Women are more likely than men to encounter people swearing – 75%, compared to 60%. They are also more likely to be bothered by it – 74%, compared to 60% for men. Men, however, admitted to swearing more: 54%, at least a few times a week, compared to 39% for women.

The AP poll, which questioned 1,001 adults between March 20-22, 2006, found that younger people use more bad language and are less bothered by it. Of 18 to 34-year-olds, 62% acknowledge swearing in conversation at least a few times a week, compared to 39% of those 35 and older.

In an AP interview, 67-year-old Irene Kramer says she gets her ears singed when passing the high school near her home. "What we hear, it's gross."

Kramer understands a major culprit to be television. "Do I have to be insulted right there

Marketing the American dream

Television advertising expenditures in the United States, 2005

Network	\$23,635,000,000.00
Spot	\$17,115,000,000.00
Cable	\$16,453,000,000.00
Spanish Lang.	\$3,072,000,000.00
Syndicated	\$4,223,000,000.00
Total	\$64,498,000,000.00

Source: Reprinted in the *World Almanac, 2007*, with permission from Ad Age (www.adage.com) © 2006, Crain Communications Inc.

in my own home?" she asks. "I'm not going to pay \$54 a month for cable and listen to that garbage." Kramer's sentiments reflect a growing dissatisfaction with television among baby boomers.

DISSATISFACTION GROWING

More than 80% of people over 40 say they have a hard time finding TV shows that reflect their lives, according to a study conducted by Harris Interactive. A significant number of baby boomers – 37% – say they are dissatisfied with what is on television, and nearly two-thirds of Americans correctly believe most TV programs and advertising is targeted toward people under 40.

Advertisers target younger people with the hope of getting them hooked on certain products while their preferences are still forming, making them loyal customers for life. According to Nielsen Media Research, advertisers will pay \$335 for every million people in the 18-to-24 age group a network delivers. Viewers ages 55 to 64 are only worth \$119 for every million. That is why ABC and NBC conduct all of their business with advertisers in the 18-to-49 demographic. If you are 50 or older, you mean nothing to these network executives, at least from a financial standpoint. For FOX, the CW, MTV, BET, and countless others, even 40 is too old.

Surprisingly, even advertising itself has become alienating to boomers. The Harris Interactive study found half the group says they tune out commercials that are clearly aimed at young people. Another one-third said they go out of their way not to buy such products.

Still, a Schneider Associates/Stagnito survey of 1,001 consumers found TV commercials to be a major purchasing influence, with 67% of respondents watching the ads. The top five purchasing influences are: TV commercial (28%); store display (22%); product itself (15%); family or friend recommendation (13%); item needed (10%). (It is worth noting that people believe the TV over family and friends.)

It is the purpose of television to make money, not to build

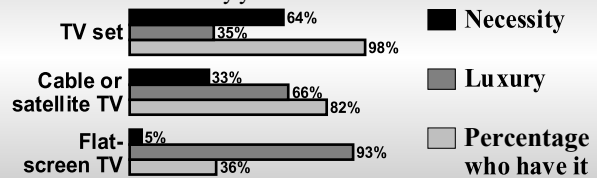
character. "Most television programming is insipid, illicit, and idiotic," said Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D., in a piece called *How the Bombarding Images of TV Culture Undermine the Power of Words*, in the January-February edition of *Modern Reformation*. And what about the power of words? In a 2002 survey conducted by the Census Bureau, only 38% of men said they read literature at least once in the previous 12 months (women reported 55%). Unfortunately, many newspapers and magazines use the same criteria as television networks, not to mention the ideological slant of the liberal media. If you are tired of killing brain cells on the television and would like to receive some quality, well-written media, there are several advertisement-free, no-cost publications you can receive on a monthly and bimonthly basis.

For quality world news coverage written from a Christian perspective, contact *World News and Prophecy*, P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH, 45254-1027 (12 issues per year) and/or *The Philadelphia Trumpet*, P.O. Box 3700, Edmond, OK 73083 (10 issues per year). For quality Christian living magazines with an eye for social issues, contact *The Good News*, P.O. Box 54179, Cincinnati, OH, 45254-0179 (six issues per year) and/or *Tomorrow's World*, P.O. Box 3810, Charlotte, NC, 28227-8010 (six issues per year). Each of these publications are provided absolutely free in the public interest. You may subscribe for as long as you would like and cancel at any time.

In *The Good News* March-April 2007 article, *Teaching Values to your Child: How to Make Wise Media Choices*, media analyst Marshall McLuhan remarked, "We become what we behold." The psalmist, addressing the Lord, says, "Turn away mine eye from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in the way" (Psalm 119:37). So stop feeding your mind on the toxic influence of the television and look for godly, enriching ways to fill your time. ☞

Do you really need it

Do you pretty much think of this as a necessity or pretty much think of this as a luxury you could do without?



Source: Pew Research Center phone survey of 2,000 U.S. adults 18 and over; margin of error +/-3.5 percentage points. Additional sources: American Housing Survey for the U.S., 2005; Statistical Abstract for the U.S., 2006; USA Today