



Dysfunctional Effects of Television Viewing on Children: A Need for Mediation

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ABSTRACT

The coming of television to mass media scene transformed a lot of things in the society due to its audio-visual quality. It affected the way people talked, walked, dressed, etc. Television, in this respect is seen as a socialization agent. People, especially children, copy a lot of behaviours from television including violent and aggressive ones. Violence and aggression are never programmed as such, but are portrayed, though unintentionally by television in the discharge of its basic functions like information, education and entertainment. Children as cognitively immature set of people seeking social relevance and integration copy these as acceptable social behaviour. Television has enormous influence on children and to reduce this requires mediation. This can take the form of restrictive, co-viewing and instructive methods. But on the contrary people do not mediate in their children's viewing habit due to social pressure on them and thereby living the future of their children and that of the society at mercy television programmers. Mediation will make them understand the interpretation of complex realities surrounding certain behaviours on the screen.

INTRODUCTION

As the world was basking in the services of prints, radio, movies and recording for news and entertainment, television made its debut in the 1930s? The coming of television affected the operation and patronage of other media. The reason being that as an audio-visual medium it appeals to everybody regardless of age, class, gender, geography, educational attainment, etc.

Biagi (2005:154) noted that television which technically means the transmission of pictures and sound signals by antennae through over-the-air

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signals now means a screen where people view different programmes. For the start, people view television for leisure, but gradually they get 'imprisoned' to the medium especially now that it carries high definition images due to digitalization. It is because of this that television is adjudged the most popular and powerful medium with large audience base. This informed the statement by the chairman of the Radio Corporation of America in 1931. He said that, "The potential audience of television in its ultimate development may reasonably be expected to be limited only by the population of the earth itself." (Awake, 2006:3)

At that time this statement not only sounded far-fetched but also utopian. It was not far from happening. Awake (2006), reported a research finding concerning television where Americans were asked:

If someone offered you a million dollars to give up television for the rest of your life, would you do so? Some years ago 1 in 4 Americans surveyed said that they would not. Another survey asked men what they wanted most? The majority said they desired peace and happiness. But this came second on their wish list. What they wanted first in life was a big-screen television!

A thing like this is not only found in America or in the developed world, it is a common denominator the world over. People- adults and children devote many hours glued to their television sets through which they consciously and unconsciously get influenced. "Television has changed the way teachers teach, governments govern, religious leaders preach, and the way we organize the furniture in our homes" (Baran, 2002:271). In a similar manner Vivian (2007:173) argued that television's huge audiences have made it a medium with profound effects on people, culture and other media. In the same vein, Michael Novak, a social critic, acknowledged that television is a molder of the soul's geography. It builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectations. It does so in much the same way that school lessons slowly, over the years tutor the uninformed mind and teaches it how to think (Vivian, 2007). The effect of television on people especially children is much, gradual and almost unnoticed.

It has extensively been debated that most of the things children do in real life situations are learned behaviour from television. Little wonder the medium has attracted much criticism, attentions and researches on its influence on people. Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fenandez-collado and Atkin (1980) alluded to this when they observed inter alia:

No other communication research issue has been studied so often, nor by so diverse a collection of social scientists, therapists, physicians, and lay groups. More federal dollars have supported research on the effects of televised violence than any other topic which bears on the social effects of the commercial media.... (Hetsroni, 2007:759)

Television influence on children: A theoretical base

Television generated a lot debate in the 1960s following the increase in violence in the United States. By 1961, Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and

Edwin Parker did a study titled, *Television in the Lives of Our Children*. They found out that children spend many hours watching television than any other medium. Children view television for –fantasy, diversion and instruction.

Children's exposure to television, some have observed, has much effect on the way they behave. It can be positive or negative. Catharsis school of thought sees its influence as positive. It states that watching television violence reduces people's penchant for aggression or violence in the real life. But critics of this theory would always ask, would hunger reduce by seeing another person eat? Or would sexual permissibility reduce by watching another engage in sexual behaviours?

Conversely, cultivation theory by Gerbner and his colleagues argued that television cultivates or constructs a reality of the world for heavy viewers like children mentioned above. As an agent of socialization, television has virtually monopolized and subsumes other sources of information, ideas and consciousness- teaching common world view, common roles and common values. According to Rodman (2006:459), this theory teaches that people learn how to behave by observing others including those portrayed in the media. This theory sees television as a socialization agent through whom children learn norms, values and expectations of the society. It, therefore, follows that the more time individuals spend watching television the more likely it is that their conceptions of social reality will reflect what they see on television (Severin and Tankerd, 1988; Saito, 2007). It is now clear that by viewing television for long hours children gradually imbibe the behaviour they are constantly exposed to as socially approved behaviour. This view is supported by social learning or modeling theory.

Albert Bandura did a laboratory experiment to find out the level of television influence on children. This experiment was obviously necessitated by confusion on the influence of television on children. Does television viewing lend itself to catharsis or cultivation schools of thought? He used nursery schools children and divided them into two groups to watch a film where an adult encountered Bobo, a three-foot-tall pop-up clown. One group saw a version of the film where the adult beat up Bobo and was then rewarded for being a champion. The second group watched a version where the adult who beat up Bobo was scolded (punished) for bullying and was spanked with a rolled up magazine.

After this exercise, the children were allowed to encounter the same Bobo. Bandura discovered that the children who had seen the adult being rewarded treated the Bobo doll more violently than those who saw the adult being punished (Rodman, 2006; Baran, 2002).

This exhibited behaviour is called stimulation by Bandura. This means that children are stimulated by what they watch on television. It is believed that watching violent scenes or programmes leads to imitation and reproduction of same in the society.

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Functions of television to the society

Television like any other medium of communication has certain cardinal functions it plays to the society. These functions are present even if the programme is adopted for children or adult members of the society. These functions include but not limited to the following.

Provision of information

This is about the first thing that comes to mind when we talk about mass media functions. Television as a mass medium performs this function mainly through news. Television brings current happenings and their implications to the people in most interesting and persuasive way. This is because of its audio-visual quality. In other words it carries an impact of immediacy and viewers feel that what they see is happening at the moment even though they may know that a great deal of it was recorded earlier on film or audiotape. The action of people could be seen on screen which gives more life to the message being put across to the viewers (Sambe, 2005:37).

The audio-visual power can also make television news to be graphic and dramatic enough to attract and retain attention for long hours. This gives the medium power to overcome the barrier of language, class, literacy, social status etc.

Entertainment

Most people, especially children, watch television for entertainment. For this reason television producers and proprietors devote over 80 per cent of its programmes to entertainment. Some times news stories are presented in an entertaining manner.

Not only this, dramas, jokes, musicals etc are many other ways through which television makes people feel relaxed. It is the particular role that distinguishes television as a medium for emotional release and relaxation. In most shops especially beer palours or cafeterias televisions are put there not for decoration but to provide additional relaxation to customers.

It is this function that attracts children to the medium. Children always like what will keep them happy for this they can spend a whole day watching film, drama or musical. Because they are interested in the actions and it interests them they always feel happy to narrate their experience to friends who may or may not have watched the same programme.

Education

Television has transformed the educational system by providing distance and in-the-studio teaching. Learning is no longer exclusively received in classrooms but also in the comfort of one's room. Schools are now equated with the media (television). Through this, most people who were, in one way

or the other, deprived of the opportunity of receiving formal education now get educated informally through television.

Sambe (2005) wrote that advancements in communication have led to the loss of monopoly of education by educational system. Formal schools are no longer the only avenue for learning. Broadcasting media especially television provide incidental and some times formal learning programmes designed for people who for one reason could not make it to class rooms because of distance. A typical example is distance learning by some institutions of higher learning for their part-time students.

Dysfunctional effects of television

Television programmes are designed to render these and other functions with the intention that the people benefit from these functions. Unfortunately most of these functions have behind them the unintended negative effects. This is why it is said that every television message has manifest and latent effects (function). The manifest effect being the one the communicator promotes and would want to influence the people positively while the latent is the one (usually negative) the receiver makes from the message. For example an advertisement of use of condom for safe sex can induce a person (children especially) to indulge in sex at all.

Cho and Salmon (2007) describe the first effect (manifest) as those objectives intended for the adjustment of specific unit (person, subgroup, social or cultural system) where as the latter is the unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order. One cardinal cause of this is exposure to messages intended for a different audience. When this happens it produces discrepancy in the meaning of message sent and received. Shannon and Weaver (1949) called this noise.

Thus far, it is evident that the unintended effect of exposure to television is usually undesirable. Cases abound where children have grossly misconstrued a particular programme, scene or camera effect for real life behaviour. For instance, a 7-year-old boy who broke his spine was reported shouted, "Look how superman flies!" before jumping out of a window (Okoro, 2008).

Writing on the unintended effect of television MacBride et al (1980:17) noted that television has on occasions given the public a vivid account of alternative lifestyles and aspirations, though not in every case with deliberate intent. The effect has been to legitimize dissent, counter-cultural values and various forms of protest (violence).

Lamenting this unintended effect of television, Gerbner in Watson (2003:320) noted inter alia:

Violence is not essential for programme profit, so why does it persist, why go on 'drenching' nearly every home in the rapidly expanding free world with graphic scenes of expertly choreographed brutality?

Violence and other related negative behaviours are the outcome of over exposure to television programmes. It is feared that if a child is over exposed

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to these negative effects, time will come when he/she will lose focus of what is good and positive. As a matter of fact, unintended effect of television viewing is not surmountable it can only be regulated by viewers. It is only the sender's end that can be controlled; the receiving end is open to individual interpretations and effects.

Rationale for mediation

It is no longer debatable if television has negative influence on children's behaviour. To save them and the future of human society requires mediating their exposure to television. It could be done in many ways either through legislation or parents intervention in children's viewing habit. In 2005, Senator Barack Obama as cited by Hetsroni (2007) meant the first type of mediation when he stated that:

Raising your children has become exceedingly difficult in a mass media culture that saturates our airwaves with steady stream of violence, and materialism.... If the industry fails to give parents advanced controls and new choices- Congress will....

Mediation, therefore, means mitigating or controlling children's viewing habit so as to reduce the influence of television on them. The reason for this is because there are few television programmes targeted at children.

It follows that children should not be allowed to view all television programmes especially ones that violent scenes.

The second type of mediation involves parents. This type allows parents or guardians to play the role of helping children to understand, interpret and reflect on the intended effect or meaning of a message. Warren (2005:p.848), outlined three strategies for mediating- restrictive, co viewing and instructive mediations.

Restrictive mediation

Includes parents' rules regarding the amount and /or time of viewing permissible for children. For instance, a parent or guardian may not allow the child to watch television once it is certain period of the day. That is, once it is past seven o'clock in the evening they should put off the television. Restrictive mediation may also include forbidding the children from viewing certain television programmes. This also warrants that every parent or guardian should have television guide to know the program schedules to allow them view ones that teach positive values. This one is made simpler now by V-chip technology, which every television manufacturer is compelled to (especially in America) add. With this technology, parents can block violent programmes from children in advance. To make this easier, The Telecommunication Act of 1996 requires every station to mark any programme which has abundant violence.

Co-viewing

Is a situation where a/or parent/s views or view television programmes with his or her child/ren. This method particularly offers the parent the opportunity to interpret and demystify some scenes, camera effects or advertisements on television. Parent-child co-viewing is very necessary and should be motivated for learning and not for fun. Nathanson (2004:321), said that research has shown that parents and adults can prevent children from experiencing unwanted effect of television by talking to them about the content of the programme. This he called evaluative mediation.

Instructive mediation

Is referred to as an effort to discuss television content in terms children can understand. Children ask questions and receiving answers bothering on the programme to make them grasp quicker the positive message or the consequences of the negative message in the programme. Over time this offers the children the opportunity of evaluating by themselves what they view. It reduces aggression and adoption of negative behaviour as normal.

The three strategies do not support keeping television in children's room but centrally positioned where every member of the family watches it. This is to enable parents and guardians pay a very close attention to children's television viewing habits. This action will minimize television effect on our children. This is supported by ecological theory which believes that shared social activities between children and knowledgeable adults drive child's development.

In Nigeria it is observed that many parents and guardians do not perform this all-important function because of socio-economic pressures. Warren (2005) rightly pointed out that socio-economic factors have direct effects on the domestic environment, physical condition of homes and time available for parent-child interaction which is a key component of child development. There is no gainsaying the fact that, parents especially in a depressed economy like ours spend little time at home and their children. They spend greater part of their time at their business or place work.

It is this negligence of duty by parents that informed the submission of the American Psychological Association (1993) and National Research Council (1993), that violence is caused by parental abuse, rejection and neglect accompanied by poverty (Watson,2003).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As people who are cognitively immature, children learn from older persons. Most often they lack the power to judge what is right or wrong and for that reason they view any behaviour they frequently get exposed to as an acceptable behaviour. This socialization does not only come from people

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around but also, television. Children imitate a lot even television characters; the reason being that they want to be socially accepted.

In view of this if left alone to watch television they are likely to copy or learn the good, the bad and the ugly from the screen. It, therefore, requires that their television viewing should be mediated by older people, preferably, parents. Mediation will make them understand the interpretation of complex realities surrounding certain behaviours on the screen.

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