

# **DOES TELEVISION RULE YOUR LIFE?**

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You will agree with me that most of us spend a lot of time before the television and we are not happy about. In front of the captivating television programmes, children lose their study time and miss much needed games or other forms of physical exercises.

Glued to the television after their office hours the elders have no time to look after the education and character building of their children or for socializing or for doing community activities and services.

We have no doubt that television has changed our life-style and culture. It has tremendously affected our lives, especially our family lives. Our values and attitudes have been affected. Our opinions and the patterns of life-style have changed.

In many ways television has done tremendous good to people. The entertainments have become cheaper and easily available at home through television and video programmes. Television is the primary source for news and information.

People have become aware of the world beyond their neighbourhood, beyond their state and the country. Television has widened our horizons that we can claim to be world citizens.

On the other hand, television has also done much harm to many people and their homes. So the question is not should we or should we not watch television but the question is how to get the best out of the television while avoiding its harmful effects?

It is a question of media education for all of us: children and elders alike. You may ask: After watching television for umpteen years, do I still need to be educated about watching television? My clear cut answer is 'yes sir or 'yes madam' as the case may be.

The first thing to understand about television is that it does not present real and authentic life. With television we are often in a make-believe world.

Recently I read in EDUCOMMUNICATION NEWS (January 1994) that a teacher showed several video programmes to his city students on animals. After viewing programmes, he took his students to a zoo to show them the real animals. He was taken aback with the comments and remarks of his students.

In the television all the animals were 'beautiful' and 'nice' for the students. But in the real life situation the students found some animals were smaller or some bigger than that they have seen on the small screen. Some animals were muddy and dirty. Others were ugly. Some animals were smelling foully and were repugnant.

After the tour it was easy for the teacher to explain that there is a world of difference between the make-believe world of television and the real life of every day experience.

Television is often misleading. A child who sees mosquitoes or lizards or cockroaches filmed from close quarters may think of them as very big and dangerous animals. The adults, who know these insects from real life experience, are aware of the real size of these insects and can easily make the adjustment on seeing them in their magnified size on the screen.

All the same, we must not under-estimate the critical eye of children. Researchers have proved that children have an over-whelming sense of judgment.

Media researchers have also shown that television programmes can enrich the lives of the children only if they have meaning for them. So in order to profit from television programmes it is important that they watch well prepared and meaningful programmes on the television instead of any trash or cheap entertainment programmes or gimmicks.

It is recognizing the power of television and other audio-visual electronic media that Pope John Paul II has chosen “Television and the Family: Guidelines for Good Viewing” as the theme for the 28th world Communication Day 1994.

Announcing this theme chosen by the Pope, Archbishop John P Foley, President of Pontifical Council for Social Communications said that ‘Parents have special responsibility to help their children to form good viewing habits..... Television can enrich family life, can contribute to the education of children and can stimulate fruitful family discussions or it can be used as an escape or as a parental surrogate. And unsupervised viewing by children can sometimes undermine sound moral values’.

Researchers around the world on television viewers have proved that of all people it is children who are the most influenced by television. So there is a great need to educate children on how, when and what to watch on television.

The parents are the primary educators of their children on watching the television. This function cannot be delegated to anybody else, not even the school teachers. For one thing, the children watch television in the family more than anywhere else.

Researchers in some foreign countries show that children spend more hours before television than they spend in class room lectures by the time they pass out from high schools. This study or the finding may not be completely true of India. We do not yet have country wide multi-channels broadcasting with a variety of programmes for twenty-four hours a day.

But the situation would not be different in India by the time cables and multi-channel satellite television programmes catch the entire country within a few years.

In educating ourselves and our children about television we have to understand that there are three groups at work in television. First, the viewers and consumers, second, producers and broadcasters and third, the regulatory bodies like Censor Board, television policy makers, etc.

These three groups are supposed to work together harmoniously for the benefit of all especially

the consumers and viewers. But the fact is that the three groups do not work together. Many a time they ignore each other and even clash with each other, often at the cost of the consumers and viewers.

Hence there is great need to be watchful. For instance, in Sweden and Norway there are regulations and rules about advertising before, during and after programmes specially meant for children. Besides, the national television channels in the two countries are also directed that there should be no advertisement aimed at children below 12 years of age.

But most countries including India have no such rules and regulations. So it is left to the parents to watch and monitor what all programmes are seen by their children on the television and guide them to see what is beneficial and avoid what is harmful.

The parents can educate themselves in this by reading reviews of children's programmes, watching previews and above all discussing such matters with knowledgeable people.

In educating the children to watch television meaningfully it is also important that the parents also watch children's programmes. Then they will be able to discuss with their children what they – the children – watch. In discussing the television programmes the parents can help their children to catch the meaning and the message of the programme while guiding them to avoid the harmful effects and messages.

But often what happens in our families is that we leave the children to themselves to choose and watch whatever programmes they want to watch without any direction or guidelines. In some homes the television are the surrogate parents of the children. For, the parents have no hesitation often to make use of television as their baby sitter.

Parents fool only themselves if they perceive the children as adults and expect them not to be influenced by the harmful and misleading effects of television. Such parents leave their children to watch any and every kind of television programmes without any guidelines or proper media education.

Such a situation only goes to prove that not only the children but also the parents themselves as media illiterate needing media education.

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